

Last Rights

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Two men and a woman huddled in the wet bushes surrounding the GenTech Engineering facility in Los Lobos, California. Across the darkened expanse of expensive GenTech Grasite lay their goal; the GenTech Large Animal Development Project. It was "Grasite," not "grass"; this first product of GenTech's researches was a plant that was drought-resistant, seldom needed mowing, and remained green even when dry; perfect for Southern California. Sadly, it also attracted grasshoppers who seemed to be fooled by its verdant appearance; they would remain on a Grasite lawn, hordes of them, trying valiantly to extract nourishment from something the texture and consistency of AstroTurf, all during the worst droughts. Anyone holding a garden party in Hollywood had better plan on scheduling CritterVac to come in and sweep the premises clean or his guests would find every step they took crunching into a dozen insects, lending the soiree all the elegance of the wrath of Moses.

But Grasite was not the target tonight; these three had no argument with gene-tailored plantlife. In fact, they strongly supported many of GenTech's products—RealSkin, which reacted to allergens and irritants exactly the way human skin did, or Steak'N'Taters, a tuber with the consistency and taste of a cross between beef and baked potato. But all three of them were outraged by this assault upon helpless animals that GenTech was perpetrating in their new development lab—

Mary Lang, Howard Emory, and Ken Jacobs were self-styled "guerrillas" in defense of helpless beasties everywhere, charter members of Persons In Defense of Animo-beings; P.I.D.A. for short. There was nothing they would not do to secure the rights of exploited and abused animals. This year alone they, personally, had already chalked up the release of several hundred prisoner-rats from a lab in Lisle, Illinois. It was too bad about the mutated bubonic plague spreading through Chicago afterwards, but as Ken said, people had choices, the rats didn't. Tonight, they were after bigger game.

DinoSaurians. Patent Pending.

Real, living, breathing dinosaurs—slated to become P.O.Z.s (Prisoners of Zoos) the world over. And all because some corporate MBA on the Board of the San Diego Zoo had seen the attendance numbers soar when the Dunn traveling animated dinosaur exhibit had been booked there for a month. He had put that together with the discovery that common chickens and other creatures could be regressed to their saurian ancestors—the pioneering work had already been done on the eohippus and aurochs—and had seen a goldmine waiting for both the zoos and GenTech.

"How could they do this to me?" Mary whined. "They had such a promising record! I was going to ask them for a corporate donation! And now—this—"

"Money," Ken hissed. "They're all money-grubbing bastards, who don't care if they sell poor animals into a life of penal servitude. Just wait; next thing you'll be seeing is DinoBurgers."

Howard winced, and pulled the collar of his unbleached cotton jacket higher. "So, what have we got?" he asked. "What's the plan?"

Ken consulted the layout of the facility and the outdoor pens. It had been ridiculously easy to get them; for all the furor over the DinoSaurians, there was remarkably little security on this facility. Only signs, hundreds of them, warning of "DANGEROUS ANIMALS." Ridiculous. As if members of P.I.D.A. would be taken in by such blatant nonsense! There was no such thing as a dangerous

animal; only an animal forced to act outside of its peaceful nature. "There are only three dino-animopersons at the moment, and if we can release all three of them, it will represent such a huge loss to GenTech that I doubt they'll ever want to create more. There's a BrontoSaurian here—" He pointed at a tiny pen on the far northern corner of the map. "It's inside a special pen with heavy-duty electric fences and alarms around it, so that will be your target, Howard. You're the alarms expert."

Howard looked over Ken's shoulder, and winced again. "That pen isn't even big enough for a horse to move around in!" he exclaimed. "This is inhuman! It's veal calves all over again!"

Ken tilted the map towards Mary. "There's something here called a `Dinonychus' that's supposed to be going to the San Diego Zoo. It looks like they've put it in some kind of a bare corral. You worked with turning loose the rodeo horses and bulls last year, so you take this one, Mary."

Mary Lang nodded, and tried not to show her relief. The corral didn't look too difficult to get into, and from the plans, all she'd have to do would be to open the corral gate and the animal would run for freedom. "Very active" was the note photocopied along with the map. That was fine; the rodeo horses hadn't wanted to leave their pens, and it had taken forever to get them to move. And she'd gotten horsecrap all over her expensive synthetic suede pants.

"That leaves the Tricerotops in the big pasture to me." Ken folded the map once they had all memorized the way in. "Meet you here in an hour. Those poor exploited victims of corporate humanocentrism are already halfway to freedom. We'll show the corporate fat cats that they can't live off the misery of tortured, helpless animals!"

Howard had never seen so many alarms and electric shock devices in his life. He thought at first that they were meant to keep people out—but all the detectors pointed inward, not outward, so they had all been intended to keep this pathetic BrontoSaurian trapped inside his little box.

Howard's blood pressure rose by at least ten points when he saw the victim; they were keeping it inside a bare concrete pen, with no educational toys, nothing to look at, no variation in its environment at all. It looked like the way they used to pen "killer" elephants in the bad old days; the only difference was that this BrontoSaurian wasn't chained by one ankle. There was barely enough room for the creature to turn around; no room at all for it to lie down. There was nothing else in the pen but a huge pile of green vegetation at one end and an equally large pile of droppings at the other.

Good God, he thought, appalled, Don't they even clean the cage?

As he watched, the BrontoSaurian dropped its tiny head, curved its long, flexible neck, and helped itself to a mouthful of greenery. As the head rose, jaws chewing placidly, another barrel of droppings added itself to the pile from the other end of the beast.

The BrontoSaurian seemed to be perfect for making fertilizer, if nothing else.

Well, soon he would be fertilizing the acreage of the Los Lobos National Park, free and happy, and the memory of this dank, cramped prison would be a thing of the past.

Howard disabled the last of the alarms and shock fences, pulled open the gates, and stepped aside, proudly waiting for the magnificent creature to take its first steps into freedom.

The magnificent creature dropped its head, curved its neck, and helped itself to another mouthful of greenery. As the head rose, jaws chewing placidly, it took no note of the open gates just past its nose.

"Come on, big boy!" Howard shouted, waving at it.

It ignored him.

He dared to venture into the pen.

It continued to ignore him. Periodically it would take another mouthful and drop a pile, but except for that, it could just as well have been one of the mechanical dinosaurs it was supposed to replace.

Howard spent the next half hour trying, with diminishing patience, to get the BrontoSaurian to leave. It didn't even look at him, or the open door, or anything at all except the pile of juicy banana leaves and green hay in front of it. Finally, Howard couldn't take it any longer.

His blood-pressure rising, he seized the electric cattle prod on the back wall, and let the stupid beast have a good one, right in the backside.

As soon as he jolted the poor thing, his conscience struck him a blow that was nearly as hard. He dropped the prod as if it had shocked him, and wrapped his arms around the beast's huge leg, babbling apologies.

Approximately one minute later, while Howard was still crying into the leathery skin of the Bronto's leg, it noticed that it had been stung. Irritating, but irritation was easy to avoid. It shifted its weight, as it had been taught, and stepped a single pace sideways.

Its left hind foot met a little resistance, and something made a shrieking sound—but there had been something shrieking for some time, and it ignored the sound as it had all the rest. After all, the food was still here.

Presently, it finished the pile of food before it and waited patiently. There was a buzzing noise, and a hole opened in the wall a little to its right. That was the signal to shift around, which it did.

A new load of fresh vegetation dropped down with a rattle and a dull thud, as the automatic cleaning system flushed the pile of droppings and the rather flat mortal remains of her savior Howard down into the sewage system.

Mary approached the corral carefully, on the alert for guards and prepared to act like a stupid, lost bimbo if she were sighted. But there were no guards; only a high metal fence of welded slats, centered with a similar gate. There was something stirring restlessly inside the corral; she couldn't see what it was, for the slats were set too closely together. But as she neared the gate, she heard it pacing back and forth in a way that made her heart ache.

Poor thing—it needed to run loose! How could these monsters keep a wild, noble creature like this penned up in such an unnaturally barren environment?

There were alarms on the gate and on the fence; she didn't have Howard's expertise in dealing with such things, but these were easy, even a child could have taken them off-line. As she worked, she talked to the poor beast trapped on the other side of the gate, and it paused in its pacing at the sound of her voice.

"Hang in there, baby," she crooned to it. "There's a whole big National Park on the other side of the lab fence—as soon as we get you loose, we'll take that big BrontoSaurian through it, and that will leave a hole big enough for a hundred animopersons to run through! Then you'll be free! You'll be able to play in the sunshine, and roll in the grass—eat all the flowers you want—we'll make sure they never catch you, don't you worry."

The beast drew nearer, until she felt the warmth of its breath on her coat sleeve as she worked. It snuffled a little, and she wrinkled her nose at the smell.

Poor thing! What were they feeding it, anyway? Didn't they ever give it a chance to bathe? Her resentment grew as it sniffed at the gap between the metal slats. Why, it was lonely! The poor thing was as lonely as some of those rodeo horses had been! Didn't anyone ever come to pet and play with it?

Finally she disabled the last of the alarms. The creature inside the corral seemed to sense her excitement and anticipation as she worked at the lock on the gate. She heard it shifting its weight from foot to foot in a kind of dance that reminded her of her pet parakeet when he wanted out of his cage, before she'd grown wiser and freed it into the abundant outdoors.

"Don't worry little fellow," she crooned at it. "I'll have you out of here in no time—"

With a feeling of complete triumph, she popped the lock, flipped open the hasp on the gate, and swung it wide, eager for the first sight of her newly freed friend.

The first thing she saw was a huge-headed lizard, about six feet tall, that stood on two legs, balancing itself with its tail. It was poised to leap through the gate. The last thing she saw was a grinning mouth like a bear-trap, full of sharp, carnivorous teeth, closing over her head.

Hank threw his rope over a chair in the employee lounge and sank into the one next to it, feeling sweat cool all over his body. He pulled his hat down over his eyes. This had not been the most disastrous morning of his life, but it was right up there. Somehow the Dino had gotten into Gertie's pen—and whoever had left the gate open last night was going to catch hell. The little carnivore couldn't hurt the Bronto, but he had already eaten all the Dobermans that were supposed to be guarding the complex, and he was perfectly ready to add a lab tech or lab hand to the menu. You couldn't trunk the Saurians; their metabolism was too weird. You couldn't drive a Dino; there wasn't anything he was afraid of. The only safe way to handle the little bastard was to get two ropes on him and haul him along, a technique Hank had learned roping rhinos in Africa. It had taken him and Buford half the morning to get the Dino roped and hauled back to his corral. They'd had to work on foot since none of the horses would come anywhere near the Dino. All he needed was one more thing— "Hank!" someone yelled from the door.

"What, dammit?" Hank Sayer snapped. "I'm tired! Unless you've got the chowderhead that left Dino and Gertie's pens open"

"They weren't left open, they were opened last night," said the tech, his voice betraying both anger and excitement. "Some animal-rights yoyos got in last night, the security guys found them on one of the tapes. And the cleanup crews found what was left of two of them in the pit under Gertie's pen and just inside Dino's doghouse!"

That was more than enough to make Hank sit up and push his hat back. "What the hell-how come--"

The tech sighed. "These bozos think every animal is just like the bunny-wunnies they had as kids. I don't think one of them has been closer to a real bull than videotape. They sure as hell didn't research the Saurians, else they'd have known the Dino's a land-shark, and it takes Gertie a full minute to process any sensation and act on it. We found what was left of the cattle-prod in the pit."

Hank pushed his hat back on his head and scratched his chin. "Holy shit. So the bozos just got in the way of Gertie after they shocked her, and opened Dino's pen to let him out?"

"After disabling the alarms and popping the locks," the tech agreed. "Shoot, Dino must have had fifteen or twenty minutes to get a good whiff and recognize fresh meat. . . ."

"He must've thought the pizza truck had arrived--" Suddenly another thought occurred to him. "Man, we've got three Saurians in here--did anybody think to check Tricky's pen?"

Alarm filled the tech's face. "I don't think so--"

"Well, come on then," Hank yelled, grabbing his lariat and shooting for the door like Dino leaping for a side of beef. "Call it in and meet me there!"

Tricky's pen was the largest, more of an enclosure than a pen; it had been the home of their herd of aurochs before the St. Louis zoo had taken delivery. Tricky was perfectly placid, so long as you stayed on your side of the fence. Triceratops, it seemed, had a very strong territorial instinct. Or at least, the GenTech reproductions did. It was completely safe to come within three feet of the fence. Just don't come any closer. . . .

Hank saw with a glance that the alarms and cameras had been disabled here, too. And the gate stood closed--but it was not locked anymore.

Tricky was nowhere in sight.

"He wouldn't go outside the fence," Hank muttered to himself, scanning the pasture with his brow furrowed with worry. "Not unless someone dragged him--"

"Listen!" the tech panted. Hank held his breath, and strained his ears.

"Help!" came a thin, faint voice, from beyond the start of the trees shading the back half of Tricky's enclosure. "Help!"

"Oh boy." Hank grinned, and peered in the direction of the shouts. "This time we got one."

Sure enough, just through the trees, he could make out the huge brown bulk of the Triceratops standing in what Hank recognized as a belligerent aggression-pose. The limbs of the tree moved a little, shaking beneath the

weight of whoever Tricky had treed.

"Help!" came the faint, pathetic cry.

"Reckon he didn't read the sign," said Buford, ambling up with both their horses, and indicating the sign posted on the fence that read, "IF YOU CROSS THIS FIELD, DO IT IN 9.9 SECONDS; TRICKY THE TRICERATOPS DOES IT IN 10."

"Reckon not," Hank agreed, taking the reins of Smoky from his old pal and swinging into the saddle. He looked over at the tech, who hastened to hold open the gate for both of them. "You'd better go get Security, the cops, the medics and the lawyers in that order," he said, and the tech nodded.

Hank looked back into the enclosure. Tricky hadn't moved.

"Reckon that'un's the lucky'un," Buford said, sending Pete through the gate at a sedate walk.

"Oh, I dunno," Hank replied, as Smoky followed, just as eager for a good roping and riding session as Hank wasn't. Smoky was an overachiever; best horse Hank had ever partnered, but a definite workaholic.

"Why you say that?" Buford asked.

Hank shook his head. "Simple enough. Gettin' treed by Tricky's gonna be the best part of his day. By the time the lawyers get done with 'im-well, I reckon he's likely to wish Gertie'd stepped on him, too. They ain't gonna leave him anything but shredded underwear. If he thought Tricky was bad--"

"Uh-huh," Buford agreed, his weathered face splitting with a malicious grin. Both of them had been top rodeo riders before the animal-rights activists succeeded in truncating the rodeo-circuit. They'd been lucky to get this job. "You know, I reckon we had oughta take our time about this. Exercise'd do Tricky some good."

Hank laughed, and held Smoky to a walk. "Buford, old pal, I reckon you're readin' my mind. You don't suppose the damn fools hurt Tricky, do ya?"

Faint and far, came a snort; Hank could just barely make out Tricky as he backed up a little and charged the tree. A thud carried across the enclosure, and the tree shook. "Naw, I think Tricky's healthy as always." "Help!" came the wail from the leaves. Hank pulled Smoky up just a little more.

And grinned fit to split his face.

This wasn't the best day of his life, but damn if it wasn't right up there.