



# *STAR LIFE KEEPERS*

## CHAPTER 31: VELOCIDACTYL ASSAULT

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### Leaving Buckhorn Station

Jason woke up at dawn to the sounds of an army breaking camp. The area smelled like the aftermath of a forest fire mixed with sizzling bacon. Raiders had tried to start a fire outside their camp during the night and soldiers were making breakfast from hogs purchased at nearby farms.

He was running late, so he skipped eating, instead giving food and water to Max while he packed. He and Bullseye took down their tent, stuffing their few belongings into saddlebags on the back of their horses. They joined General Kearney's marching soldiers while Max ran behind them. Zann the Wise had disarmed other highway bombs past the ponds filled with dead farm animals.

Riding AbbyRose, Amanda caught up with Jason and Dash as the armies marched to the Black River.

As annoying as his sister could be, Jason was relieved they had reunited—but he would never admit it to her.

Bullseye and Bryn rode behind them. Fender was up ahead with the Grandpap, Sir Percy, and the Crimson Queen. The latter's Army of the Red Unicorn troops remained in the rear of Kearney's column. The Oronoccon queen was livid they were being held in reserve.

After lunch, under a clear blue sky, the troops resumed their march to Tunnelsburg, which was about twenty miles away. The ground changed from flatland to hills, from hard red clay to black

crumbly dirt. The countryside was like a checkered board from an East of the Most East game, with small stands of trees intermixed with clearings for family farms. Looking to his left, Jason saw a dense thicket of pine trees. There was a cabin and a small barn on his right.

A large bird flew above him and created a fleeting shadow.

He looked up.

Another pterodactyl.

Riderless.

As the flying dinosaur swooped lower, Jason saw it was not a purebred ptero but some kind of crossbreed. It had the big jaws, teeth, and claws of a velociraptor but the smooth, aerodynamic body of a pterodactyl.

A velocidactyl!

During his school lessons, Maester Foote had shown him a drawing of a hybrid like the one above him.

Jason sensed he was the prey, thinking about the Disappeareds, and made a split-second decision to lure the creature away from the marching troops. He knew it would be impossible to squeeze Dash through the tightly packed pine trees, so he yanked the reins toward a field to his right. He kicked Dash's flanks. His horse broke into a full gallop. Jason glanced up at the darkening sky. The green and black flying raptor was following him. Its talons flexed, spreading wide open to lift him from his saddle.

Jason steered Dash toward a nearby cabin. A woman, holding a baby in her arms, came out the door and onto the front porch. She screamed and froze, clutching the child against her chest.

"Get back in your house," Jason yelled to her, ignoring the feeling of terror that slapped him in the face like a sheet of freezing rain. He veered toward a building made of split logs and a thatched roof. The double doors were wide open.

Jason slowed down and entered the woman's barn. The smell of manure hit him like a blast of foul air. A donkey and oxen peered over the gates of their stalls.

Jason halted Dash.

Pieces of the thatched roof sprinkled onto them. The donkey brayed. Oxen stiffened their legs.

Looking up, Jason watched as a claw ripped open a section of the roof. A high-pitched hissing filled the closed-in space. Dash got up on his hind legs. Jason held on tight.

A small opening appeared in the roof.

Jason calmed his horse.

The velocidactyl's green face peered inside the barn.

Orange featherlike tufts lined each side of its head. Red eyes, burning like hot coals, fixed on Jason who jumped off Dash. The creature's jaws opened, exposing a set of vicious-looking teeth.

Max ran into the barn, barking.

Amanda and Bullseye entered on foot as they got their recurve bows ready. Bryn trailed behind, removing the launcher for short spears from her belt.

Jason recalled that, before they left Buckhorn Station, Grandpap had given each of them a few arrows with Orionite tips, which he'd had Evergreen Nation's craftsmen make for him. He also provided darts with the sapphire-metal points to Bryn. He predicted the starfire weapons were going to be necessary to kill dinosaurs.

A muscular velocidactyl arm popped through another opening in the roof. Claws reached down at them. The brittle wooden framework groaned under the dinosaur's weight. The openings grew wider and revealed more of the winged raptor. Bullseye and Amanda took aim and shot arrows, knocking one after another in a flash. Their arrows bounced off the creature's green and yellow hide.

Jason withdrew the Sword of Mykael. It vibrated in his hand. He tightened his grip.

Setting a four-foot dart in the wooden shaft's long groove, Bryn wedged its heel against the back of the launcher's cup and against her armpit. She stepped forward and levered her upper arm to thrust it forward. Flinging her wrist, like a soldier firing a catapult, she heaved the feathered short spear. It bounced off the dinosaur.

Max ran in circles, barking at the attacker whose hissing had grown louder.

Bryn released another dart. The starfire point lodged in the dinosaur's soft yellowish neck, smoldering under the creature's skin.

The velocidactyl flailed around on the roof trying to shake the dart loose. Boards creaked, mixed with the noise of terrified animals neighing and braying. The enraged creature prepared to jump into the barn. Its jaws opened wider.

Bryn loaded and fired another short spear, which again hit the hissing winged raptor in the neck but penetrating deeper to slow down its attack.

Amanda shot an arrow into the velocidactyl's left eye. The starfire tip sizzled. The pain and smoke made the beast go berserk.

Bullseye's arrow followed and lodged in its face.

Amanda's next shot pounded into its other eye.

The dinosaur's agonizing shriek rattled the walls of the barn. Blinded, it reached down through the broken boards.

Jason heard the familiar cry of a different dinosaur.

Remaining boards sagged from an added weight and the roof collapsed.

The stunned velocidactyl—its neck ripped open—fell to the barn floor. A stream of black blood mixed with straw and dirt. A pterodactyl, with a sky-blue face and a blue and gold collar, looked down through the opening.

Bullseye nocked another arrow.

“Stop,” Jason yelled. “She’s my pet.”

He lifted the vibrating Sword of Mykael. The blade glowed like a burning sapphire. He thrust it downward with all his might into the velocidactyl. Jason held tight. With one last effort, the velocidactyl moaned, trying to shake off the sword to continue the fight. Its head sunk to the floor—flopping around—and went still.

“I never heard of anyone having a pet dinosaur,” Bullseye replied. “Pretty soon you’ll tell us you have a pet dragon, too.”

“I’ve raised Tery since the previous maester brought her home as a fledgling from a visit to the west.”

Everyone else stood in amazement as the dinosaur dissolved into small pieces. Bullseye and Bryn let loose with an elven battle cry. Amanda imitated them. Tery squealed, trying to take part in the celebration. Max sniffed at the dinosaur remains as they disappeared.

Jason sent a mind-message. *Tery, perfect timing. Thanks for saving us.*

“Those starfire arrowheads and spearheads were incredible,” Bullseye said. “Otherwise, we might all be dead.”

The other kids agreed with him.

Bryn hooked her eight-inch spear thrower to her belt and asked, “Jason, why was the flying crossbreed focused on you?”

“A ptero also came after me at Summit Peak, but the five-headed dragon chased it away. Her husband prophesied that human and elf Star Life Keepers would unite with dragons against the Jurassicans. She agrees with the old baker at Narrow Passage that Emperor Zimri and his wife Morelda may be after us. Fits with the lines I found in the Dragonora Prophecy.”

*Adults bow down and march together to the grave,*

*But, like the two, Star Life kids will be seen as brave.*

Jason said, “And maybe that’s why they kidnapped Elisa.”

The farmer arrived from his fields and thanked them for saving his wife and baby.

After getting over the shock of the attack, the four kids caught up to Kearney's column. The troops continued their march toward the Black River, chanting, "On to Tunnelsburg."