

# *Escape from Lost World*



GRAYSON TOWLER

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# ESCAPE FROM LOST WORLD

(This story takes place during Chapter 20 of *The Dragon Waking*)

GRAYSON TOWLER

CLAY OSTROM EMERGED SLOWLY from the deepest sleep he'd ever known to a dull pain on the side of his head. It didn't feel like he was in bed—he was seated, slumped over in his chair. Had he fallen asleep in class? He managed to convince his torpid body to shift from its uncomfortable position. His flailing hand struck something solid, and a splash of ice-cold water sloshed onto his face and neck.

Clay jolted awake with a yelp.

He must've fallen asleep at the dinner table with his head pressed against his fork, and he'd knocked his water glass over onto himself when he moved. "Sorry," he said reflexively, only to realize he was speaking to nobody.

Memory rushed back as his mind cleared. He was in the Smithsonian Lounge restaurant, in the prehistoric-themed Lost World casino in Las Vegas. He'd come here with his friend Rose, a substitute teacher named Mrs. Jersey, and Jade—a real fire-breathing dragon who could disguise herself as a human girl. They'd come to see Rex Triumph, the billionaire mogul who owned Lost World and who had turned out to be a dragon in disguise himself. Triumph had offered to help them solve the mystery of a magical stone called the Harbinger.

But then what? Clay rubbed his eyes and tried to piece together what had happened.

He remembered coming into this private dining chamber through a hidden door in the Smithsonian Lounge. Rex Triumph himself, dressed in crazy gold robes like some ancient Chinese king, greeted them as honored guests. But then he'd gotten annoyed at Mrs. Jersey. Triumph had told them to "Go to sleep..."

The memory alone was so powerful Clay let out a massive yawn.

He shook his head sharply to clear it. Triumph must have cast a spell on them! Anger and betrayal

brought a hot flush to his face. He'd wanted to trust Triumph, but it turned out he was as conniving as Rose had feared. Rose, Jade, and Triumph were nowhere to be seen. Had Rose and Jade fallen asleep too? Had Triumph carried them off for some reason? Jade was supposed to be a stronger type of dragon than Triumph... so what had happened?

Mrs. Jersey was the only one left in the dining room. The teacher slumped with her head on the table, her mouth open as she snored softly, a small puddle of drool on the expensive linen tablecloth. Golden light from the enormous chandelier shone on empty chairs and plates set around the long table. Rose, Jade, and Triumph were nowhere to be seen.

Something moved at the edge of his vision, startling Clay out of his train of thought.

His head snapped around. Most of the walls of the opulent dining room were dedicated to display cases showing off fossils on pedestals, but one wall was a huge window overlooking the artificial prehistoric jungle of the Lost World casino. Outside the glass, Clay caught sight of a small blue-and-red figure perched on a tree branch. He recognized it as the animatronic avisaurus he'd seen before, a tiny feathered dinosaur no longer than his arm, its brilliant plumage bright against the deep green foliage.

He'd only seen the replica dinosaur once, when Triumph had first summoned him as a go-between to set up a meeting with Jade. But at the time he'd been in a hidden observation platform overlooking the shopping promenade of Lost World. Triumph had said the avisaurus was only visible from that one spot. So why could he see it now?

As he watched, the little dinosaur hopped over to a branch, peered at him through the window with curious dark eyes, then fluttered away into the leaves.

Clay let out a strangled cry of joy and lunged towards the window, pressing himself hard against

the glass in a desperate effort to get another look at the creature. The avisaurus had disappeared into the foliage, but Clay knew what he'd seen.

No machine ever built could move like the avisaurus had. It wasn't a replica. It was *alive*. Clay didn't know how, but he'd just seen a living dinosaur.

The floor shuddered, as if something immense had just taken a step.

A surge of fear ran through him. He grabbed Mrs. Jersey's arm and shook her as hard as he dared. "Wake up," he said, whispering at first but quickly raising his voice to a shout. "Something's happening. Wake up!"

The teacher wobbled in his grip for a few seconds, still trapped in a deep sleep. Then he saw her eyelids flutter. She took a deep, shuddering breath and gripped his wrist with surprising strength. "Clay," she said in a papery voice. "What's happening?"

"I don't know," he said. "Rose and Jade are gone, and so is Rex Triumph. And now there's weird stuff happening."

"What do you mean?"

Something groaned from the jungle, a thrumming call like no animal that Clay had ever heard. The trees shook, leaves raining towards the ground with the tremor.

Clay swallowed hard and nodded towards the window. "Like that. Mrs. Jersey... I think it's the dinosaurs. I think they're waking up."

He helped Mrs. Jersey out of her chair. She looked more fragile than he'd ever seen her. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Jersey said, then let out a trembling sigh. "Triumph put us to sleep, didn't he?" She looked disgusted with herself. "And me, falling for a hypnotic suggestion like a mere novice."

Clay grimaced, remembering the sense of Triumph's presence in his own mind. "I think dragon magic is way more powerful than hypnosis."

Mrs. Jersey made a "harrumph" noise that Clay couldn't interpret, then asked: "What do you mean about dinosaurs waking up?"

He quickly told her about the avisaurus he'd seen. Another tremor shuddered through the dining room, setting the hundreds of crystals in the chandelier tinkling. They both looked around the room, and Clay gripped Mrs. Jersey's hand. "It's just a guess," he said, "but remember how Rose told us about Jade making her figurine come to life? I think the same thing's

happening to all the robot dinosaurs in the casino." His eyes widened as another thought occurred to him. "Or maybe we've been sent back in time! Or there's a time portal open somewhere and dinosaurs are coming through—"

Mrs. Jersey cut him off. "Let's just stick to what we know. Our first priority has to be to reach Rose and Jade. Have you tried your phone?"

"Not yet," he said, reaching into his pocket. But his phone showed no signal when he tried to call Rose's number. "That's weird."

"It might have something to do with the weather, if the winds are as bad as the forecast said they'd be," she said.

"Or we really *have* gone back in time," Clay said, excitement and terror adding a quaver to his voice. "We'd be completely cut off from civilization!"

Mrs. Jersey pointed at the chandelier. "We're still getting electricity from somewhere."

"Oh yeah," Clay said, feeling a little sheepish. "So what's wrong with the phones?"

"I don't know. Maybe the magic itself is disrupting the signal. If there's enough enchantment in the air to somehow bring dinosaurs to life, there's no telling what other effects it might have."

As if in response to her statement, a powerful impact from somewhere outside shook the dining room hard enough to topple the wine glasses on the table and raise a shrill symphony from the rattling crystals in the chandelier. The main lights flickered and died, leaving them in complete darkness for a long moment until the emergency lights snapped on.

In the dim reddish glow, Clay looked at Mrs. Jersey with wide eyes. "We better go. Can you walk okay?"

She grasped his shoulder for support, taking deep breaths that seemed to be restoring some of her vitality. "Stay with me, Clay. Let's hurry." Together they made their way out of Triumph's private chamber, through the narrow hall and hidden door that led into the main dining room of the Smithsonian Lounge.

They found the restaurant in a state of chaos. All the diners were on their feet, their half-eaten meals abandoned as they clustered near the double doors that led to the waiting area at the restaurant entrance. The waiters and cooking staff milled around in a disordered mess, chattering to each other in frightened voices. All the attention was focused on a family of three huddled at the exit, the faces of the mother and father white with terror as they shielded their wailing toddler.

"A monster!" cried the mother as she clutched her daughter. "We tried to leave, and there was a monster!"

One of the waiters tried to comfort her. "What was it?"

"A... a rhino or something," the father. He had a smear of blood on his forehead and shards of broken glass stuck to his suit.

Murmurs of fear rippled through the crowd. From the chatter, Clay gathered that something big had crashed into the wall when the family had tried to leave, but nobody wanted to be the first to open the doors again and see what had happened.

Clay turned to Mrs. Jersey and spoke in an excited whisper. "I'll bet it was a dinosaur."

The teacher looked out at the agitated crowd. "These people are on the verge of panic. Clay, go look and see what we're dealing with. I'll try to calm them down."

Mrs. Jersey approached an abandoned serving trolley and lifted the great domed lid off a silver platter. Using a ladle as a beater, she clanged on the lid like a makeshift gong. The loud noise cut through the babble of the restaurant, drawing every eye her way.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" she called out in the voice that had brought countless unruly classrooms to order. "Your attention, please. I need your attention."

As the crowd focused on Mrs. Jersey, Clay slipped away from her side and hurried towards the front door. Holding his breath, he leaned against the heavy wooden door to ease it open just enough to poke his head out.

What had once been an elegant, tasteful space where guests could relax as they waited for their table now looked like ground zero of a bomb blast. Some great force had utterly destroyed the outer doors and cracked the *maitre d's* podium down the middle. Shattered glass and debris littered the floor. The ragged gap where the doors had been now revealed the shopping promenade of Lost World, where he could clearly see the culprit of the disaster, pawing the tile and glaring around with fierce, dark eyes.

"Triceratops," Clay whispered.

The three-horned dinosaur stood in all its immense glory, swinging its mighty armored head back and forth as if looking for a challenger. It loomed in the corridor like a tank made from living flesh, its thick reddish hide mottled with walnut-colored spots, and its broad armored neck frill standing out in vivid orange. As Clay watched, it rubbed its head against the side of the gift shop, gouging huge furrows in the

woodwork with its trio of fearsome horns. He wrinkled his nose as a dense, rank stench hit him—about a dozen yards away from the triceratops, he saw a gloppy brown pile right in the entrance to a luxury clothing store.

To Clay, even the dinosaur's poop was a miracle.

Clay stared in breathless wonder at the magnificent dinosaur, too entranced to feel afraid. He could've stayed like that forever, soaking in the reality of a living creature whose beauty surpassed even his vivid imagination. But he knew Mrs. Jersey was counting on him to give his report. He finally pulled his head back and let the door close. Mrs. Jersey stood there, looking expectantly at him. Behind her, the restaurant crowd stood in a neat row, as orderly as any class preparing for a fire drill. "Well?" she asked.

"It's a triceratops," he said.

This news sent a fresh wave of murmurs through the crowd. "The statue?" one of the waiters asked. "It's all the way on the other end of the promenade."

"No, it's here!" said the woman with the toddler. "It attacked us."

"Did the animatronics go haywire or something?" someone else asked.

Clay shook his head—this was just like it had been at the Hoover Dam, when nobody had been able to admit a real dragon had flown right over their heads. "No, it's alive," he said loudly and clearly. "It's real."

The crowd reacted with shouts of disbelief and outrage, but Clay refused to be silenced. He pointed at the father of the family who had tried to leave. "You saw it. Did that look like a robot to you? Look! You've got its spit on your sleeve!"

The man held up his arm to reveal a heavy splatter of mucus stuck to his shirt. Somehow, the smears of warm saliva seemed to do more to convince the crowd that the triceratops was real than the overwhelming presence of the animal itself. The tuxedo-clad manager poked his head out the door to confirm Clay was telling the truth.

"Clones," said one young man. "It's gotta be a clone."

"Maybe a cyborg," someone else suggested.

"One of Triumph's crazy publicity stunts," another said. Various other possibilities bubbled up from the nervous group, ranging from genetic experiments gone awry to the intervention of aliens. Nobody suggested that magic might be at work, but before Clay could offer this explanation, Mrs. Jersey spoke up once more.



"It doesn't matter how the creature got here," she said. "The fact is that it *is* here, and it's blocking our only exit."

Clay looked at her. "Isn't there a fire exit or something?"

"I asked the staff about that," she said. "Unfortunately, it's only another route out into the promenade. It won't get us past the dinosaur."

"Should we wait for it to go away?" a bus boy asked.

Mrs. Jersey looked at Clay. "Does the creature look like it will leave soon?"

Clay considered this. "It was scraping its horns on the wall," he said. "I think that may be a way to mark its territory." He'd seen a documentary of elephants marking territory by gouging trees with their tusks.

Mrs. Jersey nodded. "Which means it might attack anything it sees as an invader."

"So what now?" asked a waitress. "Should we wait for someone to come get us?"

One of the patrons pulled out his cell phone. "I'm calling the cops." He grimaced at the screen. "No signal?"

"Something's interfering," Mrs. Jersey said. "Anyway, I doubt the police have a standard procedure for coping with rogue dinosaurs. We need to figure out how to get ourselves out of here." She leaned over and lowered her voice so only Clay could hear. "I think your first guess was right about the dinosaur exhibits coming to life. Is there a place in Lost World without any animatronics or statues?"

He thought for a few moments. "The parking garage," he said.

"Excellent," Mrs. Jersey said. "That's where we want to go. The next question is how we deter the triceratops."

"Does anyone have a gun?" someone asked.

"That thing's as big as a tank," said the father of the family who'd tried to leave. "Unless somebody brought a military grade weapon—"

"Nobody's going to shoot it!" Clay shouted. He couldn't believe anybody would be so stupid. The only living triceratops anybody had ever seen, and the first thing they thought of was to blow holes in it.

The man scowled at him. "Well, son, how do you propose we get past that monster?"

"It's *not* a monster," he said. "It's an animal. And all animals are afraid of fire. We should use fire to get past it."

"Oh great," the man said, rolling his eyes. "Let's just burn the hotel down."

Mrs. Jersey put a supportive hand on Clay's shoulder. "No, it's a good idea," she said. "We should be able to make simple hand torches."

"No way you could stop a beast like that with a torch," the man said.

"We're not going to engage the dinosaur in hand-to-hand combat," she said in a cutting voice. "As Clay said, animals are instinctively afraid of fire. The smell and sight of the torches should keep it at bay while we go by."

Mrs. Jersey's calm assurance seemed to win over the crowd. They began to chatter about making torches out of the supplies in the restaurant. She turned to Clay. "Keep an eye on the triceratops. I'll signal you when we're ready to get moving."

Clay didn't need any convincing to look at the dinosaur some more. He eased the door open and peeked out—the great creature was still there, mauling the walls with its mighty horns. He guessed it was more than twice the size of the elephants he'd seen at the zoo, maybe weighing around six tons. But why was it there at all? Either Jade or Rex Triumph must have been responsible, but what reason could they have for bringing the dinosaurs to life? What were Rose and Jade doing now anyway? Anxiety for his friends gnawed at him.

Mrs. Jersey placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered to him. "We're almost ready."

He pulled back quietly from the doorway, then turned to look at the waiting crowd. Many of them held torches made from the legs of barstools, their ends wrapped with Sterno-soaked linen napkins that burned with steady flames. The gangly bartender held a fire extinguisher in his twitchy hands—Clay guessed that Mrs. Jersey had decided to play it as safe as they could with the open flames.

"Is the creature showing any sign of leaving?" Mrs. Jersey asked.

He shook his head, then noticed an odd movement back in the deep shadows of the dining area. Where a fossil display of an oviraptor once stood on its elevated display, he now saw a living dinosaur, covered in sleek green and yellow feathers and staring out at the world with perfectly round, bright red eyes. It was about the size of an emu, and its beak looked like it could bite through heavy cable. Clay got the strong impression that the creature had only come to life a few seconds ago, and was still trying to get its bearings. The oviraptor bobbed its head at the crowd of people, then

hopped silently off the pedestal and disappeared into the shadows, unseen by anyone but Clay.

He almost spoke out about what he'd seen, but he clapped his mouth shut with a private smile. Seeing the oviraptor had been a special moment, one he didn't care to share. Nobody else had to know.

Clay realized whatever magic was affecting the casino must still be in progress, finding new things to transform and awaken—and not just the animatronic dinosaurs. He remembered all the fossils in the private dining room. This place might be crawling in dinosaurs soon. As much as he'd like to see even more prehistoric wonders come to life, he knew the tourists would freak out.

"We'd better go," he whispered to Mrs. Jersey. "It's not getting any safer in here."

Mrs. Jersey turned to address the crowd in her clear, authoritative voice. "Torch-bearers will form a barricade and present the flame towards the animal. Everyone else will proceed single-file behind the torch-bearers at a walk. Once we are past the triceratops, do not separate. We'll form a traveling group with the torch-bearers around the perimeter to guard us against any further encounters."

"Is there something *else* out there?" asked a cook in a strangled voice.

"I don't know," Mrs. Jersey said. "Best to play it safe. When we reach the parking garage, we'll plan our next move." She passed Clay a torch and rested her hand on his shoulder. "Lead the way," she said.

He took a deep breath, his whole body thrumming with fear and excitement, then slowly pushed open the door.

The triceratops raised its head and snorted when Clay emerged with his torch, its great nostrils flaring. Clay secured his sweaty grip on the torch and held it out far in front of him, hoping the thick smell of burning linen would be enough to activate the dinosaur's instinctive fear of flame. The immense creature let out an anxious honking noise and took a step back, its tail toppling a display of baseball caps in the gift shop. It held its ground, but didn't look like it wanted to get any closer.

Beside him, Mrs. Jersey's voice came out tense but hopeful. "I think it's working!" she called back to the others. The rest of the torch-bearers filed out and began to take up position. Clay heard the whimpering of children and the anxious, strained voices of parents trying to soothe them. Long shadows danced

erratically as some of the tourists waved their torches threateningly.

"Cut that out!" Clay hissed, holding his torch steady. "Don't antagonize it! Just be cool and keep moving."

The triceratops stomped and swung its fearsome head back and forth, but seemed more anxious than aggressive. Clay guessed that their numbers probably unsettled the animal as much as the fire—in its native world, groups of raptor-like predators could pose a threat to even the biggest dinosaurs. It kept wary eyes and deadly horns pointed their way, but did not charge.

The tourists filed slowly past, held in order by a continuous stream of instructions and encouragement from Mrs. Jersey. As the last diners emerged from the restaurant, Clay thought they might actually make it through okay.

Then a long, high trilling noise echoed from somewhere down the promenade. The triceratops abruptly swiveled its armored head to face the sound and let out a thunderous snort.

Someone in the line panicked and tried to shove past the other diners. The long-limbed bartender, who'd been standing with his fire extinguisher at the ready, got bumped in the back and took a stumbling step towards the dinosaur. The bartender's eyes bulged like golf balls in his pale face, and the man's hand clenched on the extinguisher's trigger. A jet of hissing white gas spat from the nozzle directly towards the horned snout.

The triceratops let fly with a bugling roar of terror. It spun its massive body with astonishing speed, sending the cash register and several racks of souvenirs hurtling out of the gift shop as its tail swept through. Screams rose up from the fleeing crowd as six tons of dinosaur surged into a sudden gallop. The triceratops fled one way, and the humans fled the other.

Several of the diners with torches dropped their burning brands on the promenade floor as they ran—the Sterno-soaked napkins unraveled as the torches hit the floor, and the flames spluttered uselessly on the tile. The orderly procession disintegrated, transforming into a panicked throng stampeding towards the parking garage exit.

Clay heard the trilling noise again. It was closer this time.

"Stop running!" he called after them, but it was useless. He turned to Mrs. Jersey, a terrible realization growing in his heart. "Whatever made that noise might be a predator," he said. "If it sees people running..."

"Its instincts will tell it to chase," Mrs. Jersey finished, a grave look on her face. "Come on." She took off at a controlled trot. "Don't show fear."

Clay fell in beside her, keeping his torch at the ready. The fire was still their best hope at keeping any dinosaurs at bay. He tried to figure out how to run in an assertive, confident way, and nearly tripped over his own shoes.

Behind him, he heard the hooting cries of terror from the fleeing triceratops as it charged down the promenade. Then an astonishing din arose, as if someone had dropped several wheelbarrows full of bells down a long flight of stairs.

Clay hunched his shoulders reflexively against the tempest of noise. "I think it's smashing up the slot machines."

Mrs. Jersey gripped his shoulder. "With luck, that racket will startle any other dinosaurs away for a while. Let's hurry."

A new realization soon occurred to Clay as he and Mrs. Jersey followed the fleeing tourists: panic-stricken mobs don't move anywhere near as fast as he would have expected. Maybe the fastest and fittest of the fleeing diners were covering ground quickly somewhere up ahead, but there were a lot of stragglers going slower than he and Mrs. Jersey were at their steady jog. Some were trying soothe crying children, while others had tripped or run into each other in the chaos. Mrs. Jersey helped one stunned tourist to his feet as she reached the trailing end of the fleeing mob. She herded along the frightened refugees like a sheep dog, egging them on towards the safety of the parking garage.

Clay took up his post in the rear guard with the torch, pivoting back and forth as he tried to spot any danger.

As the lingering echoes of the triceratops' distant rampage died away, Clay heard a rustling from one of the clothing stores they passed. He peered into the depths of the darkened shop for several long seconds, but the glare of his own torchlight blinded him to any movement. He swiveled and looked away, only to catch a glimpse of a pair of large eyes staring out at them from the shadowy depths of a café.

A moan of fear escaped his throat as his fingernails dug into the wood of his makeshift torch. "Don't show fear," he told himself. "Don't show fear."

The eyes bobbed, blinked, then vanished.

The trilling noise they'd heard before reverberated out of the darkness. It seemed to come from every

direction. Clay's jaw began to quiver, and he heard his teeth chattering. Some small, distant part of him marveled that teeth really *did* chatter—he'd thought that only happened in cartoons.

Then his torch came apart.

It didn't even sputter or give any warning—one second the Sterno-soaked napkin was blazing away, and the next it unraveled and plopped to the ground in flickering fragments, leaving him holding an ash-blackened barstool leg. He gaped at the remains in numb horror.

"Clay?" Mrs. Jersey said. "What happened... oh no." She stood beside him, staring down at the fluttering remnants of the torch.

In the dim light cast by the burning scraps of napkin, Clay saw a dark figure detach itself from the shadows. Wide eyes glimmered as they reflected the dying firelight, swaying about eight feet off the ground. Something hard clicked sharply on the tile as the creature took a step towards them.

"Back away with me, Clay," Mrs. Jersey said, her fingers tight on his shoulder. "Steady, now."

Deep animal instincts in Clay's body screamed at him to run from whatever was coming out of the darkness, and it took all his will to stay in control. Running would only set a predator off—he knew that. But their slow retreat wasn't going to work either. The dinosaur, whatever it was, kept coming. Did it want to get them, or did it just consider them an obstacle in the way of the more vulnerable, panicking prey of the tourists? Clay's twisting gut told him the dinosaur was about to overcome the last of its reluctance and make its move—and somebody was going to wind up as its dinner.

A desperate inspiration struck him, and Clay reached in his pocket for his phone. He cranked up the volume all the way and navigated on the little screen with a quivering thumb. Though he still didn't have any connection, he had a space-shooter game on the phone itself. He looked up from the phone as the app loaded, the light from the display reflected in the looming eyes of the oncoming dinosaur.

Then the intro movie to the shooter began to blare hard-rock guitar and the sound of blasting gunfire.

The dinosaur let out a startled screech. Clay held his phone out like a shield and waved his burnt-out torch like a sword, whooping at the top of his lungs in time with the driving anthem of the game. The screen's illumination lit the darkness, and for a



moment Clay saw the wiry outline of a bipedal dinosaur, a crest of feathers sticking up from the top of its head. An instant later, the creature whirled and skittered back into the shadows.

"Well done, Clay!" Mrs. Jersey rasped. "Hurry, now! We're almost there!"

They hustled across the last hundred yards of the promenade, Mrs. Jersey steering them while Clay held his phone at arm's length with the game's movie looping over and over. From behind him came the squeal of metal hinges and the rattle of dress shoes on concrete. He took a quick look over his shoulder and saw the last of the fleeing tourists crowding their way through the steel double-doors that led to the parking garage. They were almost in the clear.

The hunting trill of the dinosaur rang in his ears, loud and terribly close. It sounded like it was angry.

Instinct took over. Clay flung his spent torch in the direction of the sound, and was gratified to hear a parrot-like squawk of annoyance. He bolted for the parking lot door, taking the last few steps at a full sprint and clearing the portal just behind Mrs. Jersey. Together they slammed the doors shut with a loud bang and the click of the latch.

An instant later something heavy collided with the steel, shaking the door so hard it nearly knocked Clay off his feet.

There was a lock on the door, but they didn't have the key. Clay dropped his phone, which went silent as clattered to the ground, and took hold of the handle with both hands to hold it shut. Mrs. Jersey's clammy hands folded over his to reinforce his grip. They both held on, poised to resist with all their might if the dinosaur somehow figured out it needed to push down on the handle to open the door.

One of the tourists let out a squeak of alarm behind him. Some had already fled to their cars, but most were gathered around watching and talking in strained voices.

"Quiet!" Clay snapped. Silence fell in the parking garage.

Clay pressed his ear to the door, listening for any movement from the prehistoric predator on the other side.

He heard a shrill, wavering rasp, like something sharp and hard scraping slowly across the door's painted steel surface. The sound tapered off to silence.

Clay's breath came in shallow gasps as he strained to hear anything else. The seconds ticked by, then

a minute, and there was nothing. He caught the faintest hint of the predator's distinctive hunting trill from somewhere far away.

"I think it's gone," he said.

Tension flooded out of his body and he collapsed against the door, heaving in huge breaths of relief. A crazy smile split his face and laughter started to bubble out of his lungs. "That... was... so... *awesome!*"

Mrs. Jersey wore such a startled look on her sweat-slick face that Clay laughed even harder. "We might have been killed," the teacher said.

"Yeah, sure," Clay said between bursts of giggles. "But... we're like the first people in *history* to almost get eaten by a dinosaur! Can you believe it?"

The teacher shook her head as if *he* was the thing she couldn't believe.

The gathered crowd of tourists all began to whisper in relief, breaking up into their family groups. A couple of kids gave a thankful wave in Clay's direction, but most everyone else just seemed to want to get away as fast as possible.

"I wonder what that last dinosaur was?" Clay said, looking longingly at the door. "I never got a good look at it."

"Do *not* even think about going back in there, young man!" Mrs. Jersey said. "I'm going to check and see if any of our refugees need help. Stand guard and make sure that door stays closed. Shout for me if anything happens." She pointed at his phone on the floor. "If that thing isn't broken, try to reach Rose. She's the only one who might have some clue about what's going on here."

Still shaking with fits of giggles, Clay picked up his phone. It had shut itself off when he'd dropped it, but it booted back up fine. There was still only the barest signal, so he decided to try texting Rose. He laughed to himself as he sat propped against the door, not paying much attention to what he was typing, reliving his incredible journey from the Smithsonian Lounge over and over again in his mind.

Lost World really was the coolest place in the entire world.



GRAYSON TOWLER has a lifelong fascination with dragons, dinosaurs, magic, and the mysteries of the natural world. In addition to being a storyteller, he has been a marketing copy writer, web designer, substitute teacher, comic artist, and small business owner. He and his wife, Candi, and their dog, Luna, live in a house owned by three relatively benevolent cats in Longmont, Colorado.

*Photo by Andrew L. Young.*