

THE DINOSAUR KINGDOMS ARE AT WAR.

THE DEADLANDS

HUNTED



SKYE MELKI-WEGNER



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DEADLANDS
HUNTED



**To Jason, who supported this story from
my earliest babbling about ankylosaur
battles all the way to publication**

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CRETACEA



THE MOUNTAIN
COURT

ASTRILAR'S LOCH

THE LAND OF
FALLING SKY

THE
DEADLANDS

THE EXILE CLIFFS

THE TANGLED PITS

THE GIANT'S NEST

THE FOREST
OF SMOKE

THE FIRE PEAK

THE
COLD
CANYON

THE MOUNTAIN KINGDOM

THE KING'S DOMAIN

THE UNKNOWN NORTH

THE FERN LEA

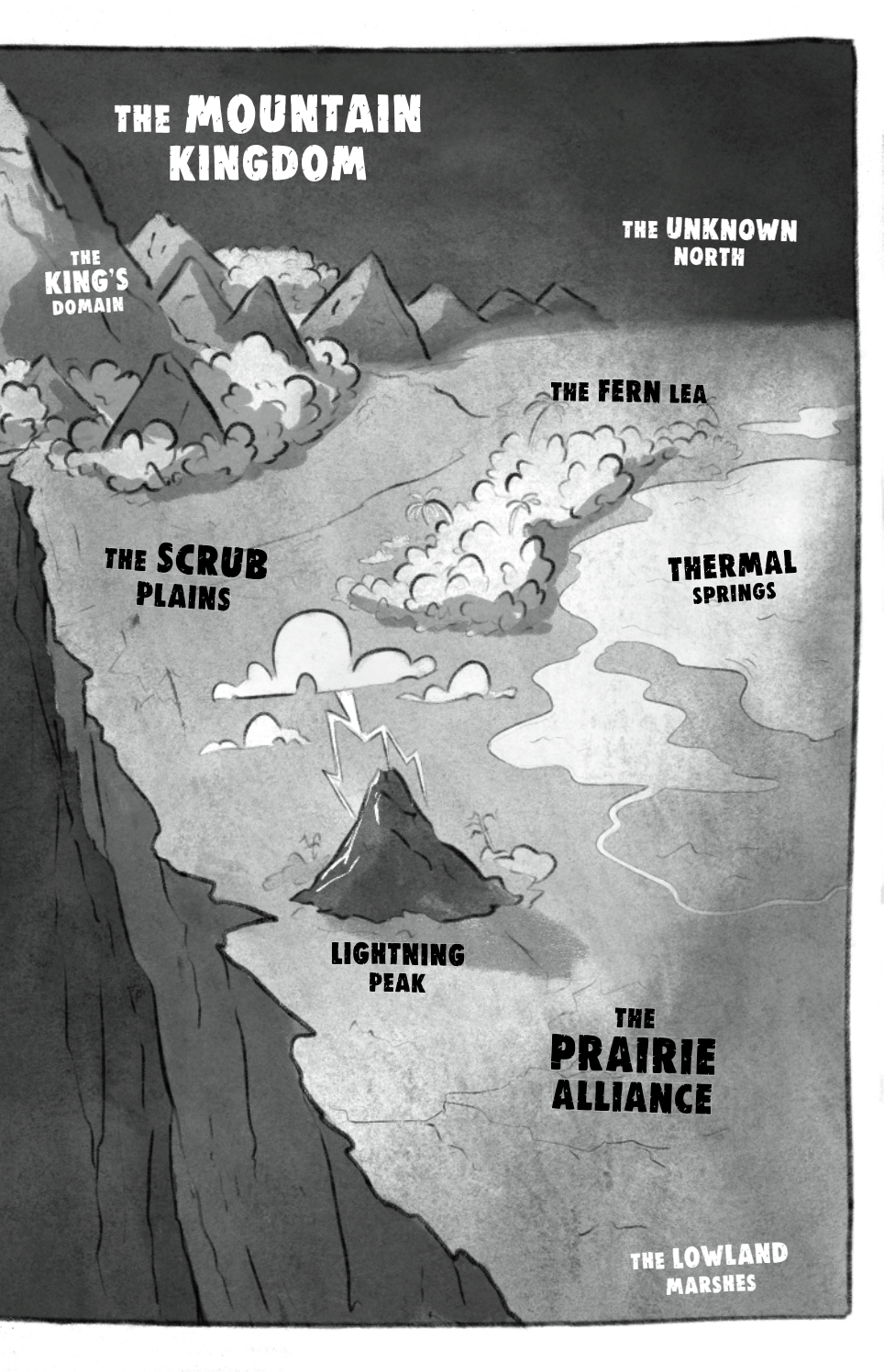
THE SCRUB PLAINS

THERMAL SPRINGS

LIGHTNING PEAK

THE PRAIRIE ALLIANCE

THE LOWLAND MARSHES







Dinosaurs of Cretacea

THE MOUNTAIN KINGDOM

Iguanodon

Name in the Old Stories: Spikegrip

Notable Territory: The King's Domain, the Tumbling Stream

Iguanodons are large herbivores. They possess spiked thumbs to wield in combat and to strip foliage from trees.

Oryctodromeus

Name in the Old Stories: Earthsinger

Notable Territory: The Broken Ridge, the Twilight Vale

Oryctodromeus are small, speedy herbivores that dig underground burrows. In the Cretacean war, they serve as soldiers, trench diggers, and crafters.

Stegoceras

Name in the Old Stories: Ridgebone

Notable Territory: The Sunless Meadow, the Flowering Crest

Stegoceras are relatively small herbivores that use their domed heads to ram their enemies in combat. They fight in large squadrons, overwhelming mightier foes by sheer force of numbers.

THE PRAIRIE ALLIANCE

Ankylosaur

Name in the Old Stories: Bristler

Notable Territory: The Fern Lea, the Scrub Plains

Ankylosaurs are large herbivores with armoured boneplates protruding from their backs. They use their vicious clubbed tails to strike down enemies.

Triceratops

Name in the Old Stories: Moonchaser

Notable Territory: The Lowland Marsh, the Graystone Dale

Triceratops are large herbivores with a distinctive trio of horns on their faces. They use their great size and strength to engage in battle.

NEUTRAL SPECIES

Anurognathid

Name in the Old Stories: Windwhisper

Notable Territory: Lightning Peak

Anurognathids are tiny bird-sized pterosaurs that consume a mixture of plants and insects. They take no side in the war, preferring to serve their own interests as crafters or mercenary spies.





Sauropod

Name in the Old Stories: Starsweeper

Notable Territory: The Cold Canyon

Sauropods are the largest dinosaurs alive, with extremely long necks and tails. They belong to no kingdom, but travel along the Cold Canyon collecting myths and stories.

CARNIVORES OF THE DEADLANDS

Carnotaurus

Name in the Old Stories: Thorneyes

Carnotaurus resemble tyrannosaurs at a glance, although they are stockier and sprout horns above their eyes.

Pterosaur

Name in the Old Stories: Skyproowler

Pterosaurs are massive winged predators. They soar above Cretacea and swoop down to pluck their prey from the earth below.

Raptor

Name in the Old Stories: Nightslicer

Raptors are small, vicious carnivores that roam the Deadlands in search of prey. To compensate for their stature, raptors tend to hunt in packs.

Tyrannosaur

Name in the Old Stories: Coldclaw

Tyrannosaurs are the largest carnivores in the Deadlands. They use their massive jaws and fearsome bite strength to tear apart their prey.





CHAPTER ONE

The Starsweepers

Nightfall leaked into the warren, cold and grey. Eleri tensed in the gloom, his long tail curled around his body. Lichen crinkled as other dinosaurs nestled into neighbouring burrows. How long would it take his herd to fall asleep?

As Eleri drew a sharp breath, nerves tingled from his grey face to his speckled legs. His feathers prickled down his spine. His herd lived in the complex web of tunnels they'd dug, sheltered from enemy troops – and wild carnivores. But right now, the last place Eleri wanted to be stuck was underground. He had plans for tonight.

Be still. Be silent.

Eleri repeated the mantra in his head, counting the minutes.

Around the corner, his father gave a muffled snort. A snore, or was that just wishful thinking?

If Eleri couldn't sneak out tonight, he wouldn't get another chance. His homeland, the Mountain Kingdom, was at war with the Prairie Alliance. The enemy's triceratops army was on the march – and there were rumours of an ankylosaur siege at the edge of the kingdom. Whenever the war flared up, young oryctodromeus like Eleri were confined to the warren, all the entrances guarded. If he didn't go tonight, it would be too late.

Now or never.

Eleri rose, muscles clenching as he struggled not to crunch his lichen nest. He tiptoed on his hind legs, balanced by his sweeping tail. His claws were tools for digging tunnels ... or tonight, for sneaking out of them.

He crept forwards, throat tight as he passed each sleeping nook. His herdmates curled in their nests, feathers rustling as they dreamed. A carved stone marked the Heir's Cavern, where his brother Agostron slept. Agostron was the perfect soldier: strong, sensible, and fiercely patriotic to the Mountain Kingdom.

Beside him, Eleri was ... nothing.

A disappointment.

That was the word his father had used. He'd spoken it in hushed whispers, when he thought that Eleri was out of earshot. *Nothing like his brother, I'm afraid. A disappointment, that one...*

Eleri's throat clenched. He didn't care. He didn't need approval. Who cared about the Wise Ones, anyway? All they did was dig holes, obsessing about tunnel width and burrow depth. Eleri had other plans for his life. One day he would journey beyond the warren. He would explore faraway lands, collecting the tales of their herds. He would venture where the clouds swelled and ebbed, teasing him towards the horizon...

Where the sky wasn't dirt, but starlight.

Outside, the air was tangy: a stark contrast to the cool damp of the warren. The breeze bristled, sharp with grit. Ash storms were rare nowadays, fifty years after the Fallen Star had struck, but they did sometimes occur.

Just dirt, Eleri told himself. The Deadlands weren't burning tonight, and the distant Fire Peak wasn't ablaze.

His family's warren lay deep within the Mountain Kingdom. Even if the Prairie Alliance sent a scouting party, it would be easy to hear a gang of ankylosaurs or triceratops smashing through the undergrowth. Horn heads weren't exactly known for their subtlety.

Instead, he feared the carnivores.

The carnivores held no allegiances. They belonged to no kingdoms or armies. They lived alone – and they killed alone. Like the pterosaur that had snatched Eleri's mother, plucking her from the Broken Ridge when Eleri and Agostron were still in their eggshells. And so Eleri crept in silence, his claws scabbling in time with the patter of his heart.

Crunch.

Eleri froze. He whipped around, scanning the undergrowth for signs of movement. *Crunch.* There it was again: a clawstep in the dark...

If a raptor lunged from the brush, Eleri wouldn't stand a chance. Carnivores didn't care that he was a sworn citizen of the Mountain Kingdom. To them, he was just a snack – a trifle to crush between their teeth.

He couldn't move.

He couldn't breathe...

"Eleri?" a voice whispered.

Relief roiled through him, wild and giddy. Then came exasperation as the speaker prowled into a patch of moonlight and Eleri recognized his brother. Agostron clutched a precious starfleck in his claw, using its crystalline shine to cast a path between the trees.

Eleri forced a cool smirk, concealing his moment of panic. "Good evening, Brother Dearest. Nice night for a stroll."

"You're a fool!" Agostron hissed, scurrying forwards. He loomed above Eleri, making the most of his height and heft. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?"

"Only if you tattle on me."

"Flaming feathers!" Agostron swore.

"Watch it, Princeling." Eleri threw him a grin. "The Wise Ones don't approve of cursing. What would they say if they heard their future leader using such language?"

Agostron's tail gave an unhappy flick. "You've got to come back – it's too dangerous to be out at night."

Eleri stood his ground. "I can't miss tonight, you know that! It'll be a whole year before they're back again."

Agostron groaned. "By the stars, you've got less brains than a stegoceras. I should've known this'd be about *them*..."

"Hey, I've known some perfectly nice stegoceras."

"That's not the point!"

Eleri turned from his brother, resuming his trek through the undergrowth. "You're welcome to tag along, if you like."

"Tag along?" Agostron hurried after him. "I'm not going to 'tag along', Eleri. I'm going to fulfil my duties as heir. The safety of this herd is my responsibility."

Was Eleri imagining it, or was there a cold undercurrent in Agostron's tone? His voice stiffened on the word "heir" – as if to remind Eleri of his superior rank.

"I'm your brother," Eleri pointed out. "Not just a herd member."

"I won't show favour to relatives."

"You keep telling yourself that, but we all know the truth. Deep down, you want to see the show too."

"Your skull is overstuffed with daydreams," Agostron snapped. "It's time to take your responsibilities seriously."

"I do," Eleri said. "Doesn't mean I can't take my daydreams seriously too."

Agostron gave an irritable huff.

As the brothers padded towards the Broken Ridge, the

breeze grew stronger. It blew from the Deadlands – and even now, it carried the reek of decay.

Fifty years ago, the Fallen Star had brought death and despair, ash and toxic rain. Thousands of dinosaurs had died on impact. Millions had starved as forests withered and seas boiled. A strange mist had encircled the world, staining its victims with starlight.

But some survived. A few rare herds dwelled in sheltered ravines or found hidden canyons where the forests still grew.

When the dust settled, the true impact of the Fallen Star had emerged. Although the starmist had faded, the surviving dinosaurs had ... *changed*. Their minds grew alert, rich with songs and thoughts and language. They learned to speak. To dream. To share their stories. To trade resources and form alliances.

To wage war.

Agostron was a born warrior, intensely loyal to his herd and kingdom. But from the day he'd hatched, Eleri had been weaker than his peers. As the runt of the herd, he barely reached his brother's shoulders.

Eleri was no warrior. He dreamed of becoming a storyteller – of travelling the world and collecting legends of distant lands. Of bringing those stories back to the Mountain Kingdom. He would share breathtaking tales of trickery and bravery, cleverness and heroism, while his herdmates

listened in awe...

But in wartime, such dreams cracked like eggshells.

Eleri was doomed to be a digger: a disposable soldier who scabbled at the dirt to aid the war effort. Unless he ran away, he would spend his life gouging trenches on the battlefield, his hopes and feathers stained with mud.

Just a *disappointment*.

But tonight, Eleri took the lead. He scurried along the Broken Ridge, which capped the peak of a narrow crag. When the trail plunged into darkness on either side, Eleri used his tail for balance. Scraggly trees rose from the edges, painting creases in the night sky.

“No need to run!” Agostron huffed, bustling after him. “And I should go first – I’m the one with the starfleck.”

Eleri glanced at the light in his brother’s claw. Starflecks were precious fragments of the Fallen Star. When they burned, they increased the strength and speed of their bearer. It was wasteful to burn a fleck tonight, but Agostron could afford to fritter away its power. As future Prince of the Broken Ridge, he had a steady supply from those hoping to win his favour.

Beside him, Eleri walked in shadow.

Beyond the ridge, they climbed a gravel slope. Pebbles skittered, but their claws gave them grip and leverage. One at a time, the brothers scrambled up to the Southern Lookout.

“We made it!” Eleri puffed. “Just in time for the show.”

He hurried to the edge of the Lookout, eyes widening as he drank in the view. From here, the whole of Cretacea seemed his to claim. Rangy cliffs protruded beneath him, like the teeth of a long-dead carnivore.

Eleri drew a deep breath, tasting the night. This was his home. His world. The open sky, littered with stars, and the endless plains beyond. Not the damp, stuffy old warren.

“I don’t like this.” Agostron’s voice was a growl. He clenched his claw around the starfleck, cutting off its light. “We’re too exposed here. It’s too open.”

Eleri ignored him, focusing on the sweep of the landscape below. The Mountain Kingdom trailed down from cliffs into foothills. The kingdom was a knot of peaks and vales, home to herds of iguanodons, stegoceras, and oryctodromeus. Far below, the Cold Canyon split the landscape in half, slithering away to the southern horizon.

West of the canyon, foothills melted into a patchwork of scrub and gorges, home to the Prairie Alliance. Out on the plains, triceratops and ankylosaurs banded together, waging war against the Mountain Kingdom in an attempt to claim its fertile land.

On the prairie, a dark mass was gathering. Eleri couldn’t make out any details, but it wasn’t hard to recognize the shape of a mustering army. His insides tightened. It was true, then. The Prairie Alliance planned a fresh attack. Every siege, the Alliance claimed more land. Every battle, their

onslaught pushed farther.

One by one, the foothills fell into enemy claws.

But the war was reaching a tipping point. Day by day, the number of soldiers dwindled. No one admitted it aloud, but Eleri had heard the rumours. The elders spoke of it in hushed tones, whispering their worries in the dark of the warren.

Sooner or later, the war must end. One kingdom would win – and the other would lose. And when that happened, King Torive of the Prairie was determined to claim these peaks as his own.

In the silence, Eleri refocused on the canyon's east side. There, the view held something far more sinister than an army.

“The Deadlands,” he whispered. “Hey, do you think—”

“The migration's starting,” Agostron cut in. “Since you went to all the effort of sneaking out, I assume you'd like to actually see it?” His mouth curled. “Or has your attention span shrunk to match your height?”

Eleri whirled back, stung by the jab. Growing up, he had always liked to think of Agostron's insults as brotherly teasing – but recently, the heir's words had ... sharpened. As if something acidic had seeped into the mockery.

Then he heard them. Footsteps. Dozens of footsteps, creaking like mountains. With a rush of anticipation, Eleri pushed Agostron's insult from his mind. He gazed into the Cold Canyon, searching for the source of the noise.

The starsweepers were coming.

Clouds shifted, spilling moonlight into the canyon. Eleri's insides flipped as light fell across their bodies: huge and heaving, their necks as tall as trees and their tails as long as rivers...

"It's them!" He leaned forwards in excitement. "Flaming feathers, it's really them..."

"Now *you* watch your language," Agostron muttered.

The final herd of sauropods – the largest dinosaurs left alive – lumbered along in the night. These bards and poets travelled up and down the canyon each year, spreading tales from the farthest corners of Cretacea.

Wise and ancient, the giant sauropods didn't care for petty wars or border squabbles. They simply travelled, year after year, decade after decade. They were living, walking stories. According to legend, they had swept the stars across the skies, using their elongated necks to scatter specks of light across Cretacea.

In Eleri's wildest dreams, he made the journey with them.

"How long do you reckon they'll stay this year?" Eleri breathed.

"Not long," Agostron said. "Not with another battle brewing."

"But no one would dare attack them! They've got the favour of the stars on their side."

"Doesn't matter. They don't like violence."

Eleri nodded. His brother was right, of course. Sometimes,

the sauropods stayed in the lower foothills for a few days, grazing in preparation for their journey north. But this year, they wouldn't linger. The giants would continue their migration, passing through the Mountain Kingdom into the Unknown North.

By tomorrow, they'd likely be gone.

"Well, we saw them," Agostron said dismissively. "One last time, at least. Time to head home."

Eleri threw him a sharp look. "Don't talk like that."

"Like what?"

"'One last time' – like they're about to die out or something."

Agostron shrugged. "Their herd shrinks every year. And I don't see any hatchlings, do you?"

"But—"

"You're too softhearted, Eleri. Grow up and face reality."

Eleri glared, preparing a retort. Of course, countless herds and species had died since the Fallen Star, but this was different. These were the *starsweepers*. They couldn't just ... die. It would be like a story dying.

Before he could speak, a sharp cry stabbed the night. Eleri flinched, tossing his head skywards to spot the source of the screech.

Dark wings blotted the stars.

"Run!" Agostron screamed. "Run, Eleri!"

For a moment, Eleri stared. Then he tore after his brother, skittering down the slope in a churn of grime and gravel. Dust

flew into his face, and he spluttered as his claws scrabbled for purchase.

High above, the pterosaur dove.