



WHEN MY FRIEND DARIUS found the missing *C. rex* skeleton that half the town was searching for, at first I didn't believe him.

No way could he find it. No way.

How could a twelve-year-old kid find a missing museum exhibit that not even my uncle Leo could find?

"The museum staff has been searching all afternoon for that," I told him. "I think Uncle Leo would've noticed a forty-foot skeleton reappearing."

Maybe, I thought privately.

"I'll prove it," Darius insisted. "Follow me."

He nodded to the very back of the museum hall. *One of the corridors.*

My heart shivered.

Where were we, exactly? Would you believe me if I said we were on a class trip to the Museum of Natural History? Not the real one in New York City. This was my uncle Leo's version.

Kind of.

The museum building was brand-new, and there was a thrilling mystery attached to it. Basically, nobody knew who had built it, who had paid for it, or who in their right

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mind had looked around at all the job applications flooding in from Harvard and Stanford and Duke and said, “Ah! Yes! The D+ student from Cretacea College, Class of 2002! *That’s* the person I must put in charge!”

But all of it really happened.

Like Cinderella when she married the prince, Uncle Leo left his job scrubbing dishes at Wexley’s and became Executive Director of the Museum of Natural History—this freaky, huge place, full of paintings and statues and long, bendy corridors that never seemed to lead to the room you expected, like in *Harry Potter* or something.

“Hogwarts,” my teacher had called it. “On Friday morning, for our class trip, we’ll be visiting the closest thing to a real Hogwarts castle.”

Was it true? Was Ms. Wellington right?

In a minute, I’ll let you judge for yourself.



“C’MON,” DARIUS HISSED. “That corridor could disappear any second. We have to go *now*.”

I puffed out a breath. My eyes slid to Mrs. Fawcett, our chaperone. Was she watching us?

No. Her famous death glare was fixed on a Greek statue in the corner. I think the naked body offended her.

Everything offends Mrs. Fawcett.

“Hurry, Arlo. Before the old bag turns around!”

“Okay, okay. Fine.”

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Darius and I pretended to walk toward the restrooms, then swerved down a corridor that seemed to grow bigger as soon as we entered it.

I took slow, careful steps instead of speed-walking.

Don't squish, I begged my ankles. *Don't wrinkle. Don't flop.*

Darius raced out ahead of me. I watched his bookbag straps whip round the bend, heading God knows where.

"Darius?" I called nervously. "Darius?"

I shuffled after him, squishing and flopping. My heart pounded. Did I mention how eerie these corridors were? Do you know about the slime dripping down? The space-black windows? The weird, bloody light?

How about my legs? The missing bones in my legs?

I let out a long, wheezy breath as I finally emerged out the other end of the corridor. I blinked my eyes, peering round. The new room was totally strange. No ceiling. No walls. Just a wide open space filled with fog.

Fog and bones.

About ten seconds later, I found the missing *C. rex* skeleton.

It opened its jaw bone and lunged at me.

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THE CRAZIEST, SPOOKIEST, most bone-flopping day of my life started six hours earlier, with a dinosaur bone on my doorstep.

THWACK!

A sharp noise echoed over the porch, just as I slid down the staircase and into the kitchen. Dad looked up from his oatmeal. There was a second THWACK! as his *Fossil Fan* magazine dropped.

“How many times, Arlo?” he scolded. “No sliding down the banister!”

“But Dad,” I said. “*My ankles.*”

Dad’s eyebrows scrunched up, like they always did when I mentioned my bone stuff. “Check the porch,” he growled. “That sound should be one of your...*treatments* arriving.”

I rolled my eyes.

My dad is a college professor. It’s his job to know the answers to things. So he gets really cranky whenever he’s stumped by a question. He hates that no one can explain my condition.

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Last year, he drove me all the way to Arizona to visit the famous Mayo Clinic hospital. The doctors there took one look at my X-ray and screamed.

“B-Bones!” they cried. “Where are your *bones*, child?”

“How is he *alive*? How can he *stand it*?”

Would you believe me if said I *couldn't* stand it? Not then. Not for one second longer. My bones squished and I sank to the floor like a lump of spaghetti.

My name is Arlo Vreeland. I'm twelve, and everyone I meet asks the same exact question. If I'm really unlucky, they scream it.

“ARLO! WHERE ARE YOUR BONES?”

“You're asking me,” I like to say, “but who am I supposed to ask?”

The truth is, I'm all right most of the time. I'm a nice, normal kid.

Just bendy.

With the right focus, I can walk normally. I even jog sometimes. Most people would never know that I'm missing up to forty percent of my bones.

The only trouble is when I get scared. If something startles me, if I lose concentration...well, that's when things can get messy.

Beneath my tan skin with all the fuzzy red hairs twisting out (more than anyone else in my grade) I have sixty to seventy percent of a full human skeleton.

Guess what else? I'm losing more all the time.

That's why I was pretty careful as I crossed the kitchen to our tiny front door.

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Don't slip, I warned myself. *Don't squish and collapse*.

I gripped the handle and pulled. The door opened barely an inch. Oops. I was so busy focusing, I'd forgotten to unhook the latch.

Not that I needed to.

"Ugh, fine," I said, moving forward. My bones squished as I slid through the gap. A second later, I popped out the other side.

Really.

A cool breeze touched my face. I stepped into the sunlight, toward a ball of crumpled-up newspaper that sat on the porch. There was no label attached.

Not good, I thought. *Dad must really be panicking*.

Any company that shipped its products without a bag or a box was probably sketchy. But what choice did we have? I really, really needed my bones back. Maybe one of Dad's crazy treatments might actually work.

But probably not, I thought grimly.

Feeling helpless, I reached for the newspaper bundle.

"RaaaawWWWwwwwRRRrrr!!!"

There was a horrible roaring sound. Pain shot up my arm as a set of razor-sharp teeth bit my knuckles.

I screamed out in terror.

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“FLUFFKINS!” CRIED A VOICE. “Fluffkins, no! Don’t bite the stranger!”

A tall woman with a helmet of stiff yellow hair came scurrying onto the porch. She scooped up the scruffy brown dog that attacked me.

A chihuahua. A demon dog.

My skin slurped like molasses as Fluffkins’ teeth slipped down my fingers.

“Hi, Carlo,” said the woman. “Fluffkins didn’t mean it. Did you, Fluffy-poo? Kisses! *Muah, muah, muah!*”

She kissed Fluffkins a gazillion more times, then skipped away without even apologizing.

Do I know her name? Yes.

Does she know my name? No.

Fair is fair. Why should I write her name in my book?

Eyes slitted, I grabbed the sopping-wet bundle and slithered into the house. What was in this thing? Dog food? A human heart?

I slammed the door angrily. There was a CLUNK! as a large object fell out of the wrapping and onto our *Dr. Fossil Says Welcome!* mat.

I stared down at it. “Whoa.”

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I was expecting to see a pile of shattered glass or a test tube that leaked on the floor. Some top secret product Dad had found on the Internet.

That wasn't it, though.

Not even close.

I was still staring when Dad finally took interest. He set his magazine down and walked over. Scooping the giant white bone off the floor, he sank into a trance as he closely examined it.

"Hmmm. *Archaeopteryx*? No, *Stegosaurus*. Late Jurassic. A shin bone, perhaps?"

He turned to me, blinking back to reality.

"Arlo Vreeland, where on God's green earth did you *find* this?"

My face paled. I started patting my rib cage and flexing my knees. *Did I lose another bone? Was that my bone on the floor?*

My thoughts were a little insane. Before I could answer, Dad let out a roar. His face purpled and his bushy eyebrows got all scrunched together.

"Sacrilege! Vandalism! THAT SCOUNDREL!"

Dad's hands were shaking. He stared in horrified shock at the shin bone. I leaned closer. There were words etched on top of the bone.

To Arlo Vreeland — ADMIT ONE

You are cordially invited to THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, now featuring America's newest dinosaur, the *Creeposaurus rex*! Present this fossil at the gate for special Forbidden Zone access.

THE BONE TAKER

“T-T-This is a priceless artifact!” Dad stammered. “*The college* donated these bones. He’s – he’s supposed to protect them!”

“Can’t you sandpaper the words off?” I asked.

I thought it was pretty funny.

“One hundred and fifty million years old,” Dad grumbled. “And he’s engraving them! He treats them like napkins!”

Dad was talking about Uncle Leo, of course. The museum director.

His brother.

Uncle Leo has what Mom calls “a checkered past.” Growing up, he used to visit us every few months. It was fun for me. I love Uncle Leo. But on every visit, during dinner, I remember Dad would lean forward and say, “How much is it this time, Leo?” And Uncle Leo would tell me to go upstairs (but I wouldn’t) then say something like, “The car broke down, Harry, I need a hundred dollars. This is the last time, I swear.”

“My good-for-nothing brother,” Dad called him.

That was before the Museum of Natural History job that changed Uncle Leo’s life—and kind of ruined my dad’s.

I told you, Dad is a college professor. His full title is “Dr. Harold Vreeland, The John H. Ostrom Chair of Paleontological Science at Cretacea College,” although the sign on his office door has a different name on it.

Yes. Dr. Fossil.

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So you can imagine Dad's reaction when he found out his priceless fossils would be shipped to Uncle Leo's museum for safe-keeping. Uncle Leo is practically Dad's boss now.

How ironic is that?



DAD STILL WASN'T finished complaining.

“And – and that *Creeposaurus* nonsense!” he ranted. “What a joke! Any *trained* paleontologist will tell you that ‘brand-new’ skeleton of his—okay, yes, it’s remarkably well-preserved for its size—but it isn’t groundbreaking, either! It’s a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Just a *T. rex!* Not some kooky new species!”

Dad’s chest was heaving. He was really worked up.

“The fool obviously put the bones in the wrong order. That explains the discrepancies. The strange dorsal vertebra. The so-called...fangs.”

“Fangs?” I said. “Poison fangs?”

Dad rolled his eyes. “This is why fossil work should be left to professionals, Arlo. Museums are glorified gift shops. A trained monkey could work one. By contrast, that same monkey would need an advanced degree and several years of dig site experience before teaching at Cretacea College.”

“And a minor in spelling,” a voice added, giggling.

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Mom sauntered into the room, fully dressed in her work clothes.

“Excited for your field trip, Arlo?” She picked the bone up and peered through her glasses. “Wow, *Creeposaurus rex!* How interesting!”

“It’s not real,” Dad grunted.

Mom’s eyes lit up. “What if it is?” she said, nudging me.

Dad reached for his briefcase, ignoring her. “Arlo, my boy, I want you to be my eyes and ears in that museum today. You’re a movie guy, right? Bring your camera. I want a close-up view of this so-called *Creeposaurus rex.*”

He passed me a packet full of squiggles and shapes.

“Bone diagrams,” he explained. “When you’re taking pictures, pay special attention to the ischium and tarsus regions. You know what they say: if the tarsus won’t fit, you can *forget* the phalanges!”

He gave a honking laugh.

Paleontologists are seriously weird.

With a long sigh, I took the packet from Dad and slipped it into my pocket. Yes. My class trip had just turned into a homework assignment.

I was pretty annoyed. I didn’t want anything to do with Dad and Uncle Leo’s fight. Even if I did, I wouldn’t necessarily take Dad’s side.

I told you, I like Uncle Leo. He’s goofy and strange, just like me. Plus he’s a riot. People love him.

That’s why, deep down, I hoped the *Creeposaurus rex* was real. I felt a thrill of excitement imagining a *T. rex* with

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giant, hooked fangs. I couldn't wait to be in the same room with a forty-foot, man-eating skeleton.

Okay, *dino-eating*. The ultimate predator.

“RAAAWWWRRRR!”

I let out a yelp as Dad's phone alarm suddenly howled. “Paging Dr. Fossil,” it continued. “Dr. Fossil. Dr. Fossil.”

“Time to go,” said Dad, standing up. “I have a very important class to teach. Unlike *some people* in the family.”

He gave a “*bmph!*” in the invisible direction of Uncle Leo, kissing Mom's ink-black hair on his way out the door.

When I looked up, I noticed Mom's eyes were twinkling again. “And which *important class* are we teaching today?” she asked Dad.

Blood drained from his face. He nibbled his lip.

“The, er, biology,” he half-mumbled, “of dinosaurs.”

“Oh how *intriguing!*” Mom gasped. “Silly me, I thought paleontologists wouldn't know the first thing about dino biology. All we have are the bones. Isn't that right?”

“Well, ah...it's very complicated. Very important.”

Dad slipped the latch and rushed out the door.

Would you believe it if I told you he screamed?