

Further Devotion

by the Dinosorceror of Lava Dome Five (<http://LD5.hn.org>)

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"I simply don't see where this is worth our attention."

There he goes again, she thought. Every time she talked with him it had to be an uphill battle. *At least he's not disagreeing with me...yet.*

Dino sat up more in his padded chair, actually looking her right in the muzzle, which he normally seemed to avoid. His reflection was quite clear in the polished wooden desk which separated the two in the well-lit office. "Don't get me wrong, Elena. Your research division has been fairly consistent in providing our company with the tools to advance...well, dare I say advance our entire civilization? K-Co has done some amazing things in the past twenty or so years, partly due to your research in the field of genetics...the applications of which are simply staggering."

He swiveled in his chair, looking out from his top-floor office across the bustling metropolis. "However, your interest in the precursors...that Draconian civilization...is entirely a personal project, and I fail to see any reason why I should allow even more company funds to be diverted to your personal research."

Before Elena had a chance to reply, Dino turned back and smiled a little. "Don't get me wrong. I don't mind rewarding you for the work you've done for the company. I'm not going to cut off your precursor funding completely, but..." He looked down at his desk, and flipped through several pages of Elena's report. "...all I had to do was look at the bottom line, and I can't imagine why you think this 'Genesis' project of yours is worth half a million credits. I almost thought it was a typographical error."

She decided to actually speak what she was thinking. "You didn't even read the proposal, did you?"

"Should I have?" he responded quickly, leaning forward on his desk, then back again. "Believe me, I don't hold anyone's beliefs against them, but I'm about as uninterested in this religious nonsense as a man can get. Your productivity earns you the right to pursue these personal research projects occasionally, but half a million credits? Are you out of your crest? K-Co barely spends that much on our main research divisions in a year."

"Since you didn't read the proposal, may I be allowed to summarize?"

Dino cleared his throat, shook his head and gestured.

Elena continued after a pause. "I'm simply trying to show you that this is not a personal project, and that the research will help advance the field of genetics."

Dino couldn't help but chuckle a bit, leaning back. "Okay, okay. We've known each other long enough that I'm willing to listen. If you can somehow link this hokey religious stuff to something that can turn a profit...other than in collection plates at a church, that is...I'm all ears."

Elena smirked, and took a photograph from the stack of papers in the folder on Dino's desk, holding it up. "This is a picture I took a week ago from a construction site where they tore down the old city hall."

Dino put his glasses on and peered at the photo. "If this is another one of your talon-gouges..."

"No," Elena stated. "It's much more significant than that. You see those symbols? They mark the entrance to a temple."

Dino took his glasses off and leaned back, rubbing his eyes. "Another Draconian temple. You've personally come across four of the things, so...where's the surprise?"

"From the age of the sediment, I believe this Draconian temple is pre-Judgement," Elena stated.

Dino thought for a moment, blinked a few times. "I'm not following you."

Elena explained. "One of the fundamental precepts of the Draconians was that the name of God was stricken from all records at a certain point in time in the past, when there was a great cataclysm that destroyed all life on our world. They called the event the Judgement. Manuscripts found in the caves of Mount Thunder tell that the cataclysm was brought on by an insult to God and that to prevent it from happening again, the true name of God was forgotten, banished by the new race of Draconians that God had created in their stead. They called this precept Silence."

"Very dramatic," Dino replied half-heartedly.

"Well, at first I believed it was all just an allegory for some kind of religious uprising or war, where beliefs changed radically in a short period of time. I thought that with enough study of the materials inside this temple, we could learn what this earlier, and possibly vastly different religion and culture was like."

"At first, you say, you believed that," Dino clarified.

"Yes, that was what most theologians theorized, including myself. That is, until I did some further study of a particular layer of sediment in the temple. We found relatively abundant samples of a microorganism, and not just fossil traces -- the organism was still thriving in the damp

environment of the temple. We took level three biohazard precautions in handling the specimens, which are in a temporary lab at the dig site right now," Elena motioned.

"But why such precautions? I mean, if it's a naturally occurring organism that's just now being classified, I should hope we would have developed some antibodies to combat it by now," Dino said with the confidence of a thousand years of civilization.

"No. Upon field examination of the organism, it was...almost beyond classification. And that's when the idea hit me that perhaps it wasn't a religious uprising that was the cataclysm of the Judgement, but -- "

"A plague," Dino said, the blood rushing from his scaly muzzle and his mouth becoming dry. "Good God."

Elena almost smiled. *Interesting how he turns to that "silly" religion when there's dire news.* "Yes, a plague. We had initially begun a full-scale isolation of the dig site, but after only a few hours of research with a more powerful nanoscope that we brought in, we determined the organism to be benign. However, the organism is far from uninteresting."

Dino put his glasses back on, and leaned forward again, shuffling through her report idly. "How so?"

"We're only beginning to understand the fundamentals of dinoxyribonucleics, but if what I believe is true, this organism is a virtual fountain of life. Preliminary stains indicate that it is a kind of superset of the building blocks of life as we understand them now. The rate at which this organism grows and develops is astounding. Under laboratory conditions, the organism is beginning to mutate and develop into...well, we're not sure what."

Dino's smile was growing all the while Elena was speaking, as was his sickly sweet demeanor. "My dear Elena...I hope you can forgive me for my initial disregard of this report. If I had blown this off as yet another giant God clawprint chase...well, I don't want to think of what may have happened."

Yeah, I may have gone to another company, Elena thought.

"I can't believe that such a worthwhile project would be found in the ruins of superstition!" he continued. "God, the irony!" he laughed. "I don't think I'll have any trouble convincing the board to fund this project and then some. You know as well as I do that genetics is going to be the hot business in the foreseeable future."

As money rolled before Dino's eyes, Elena decided to hit him with her final hypothesis. "Well, I'd also like to summarize my hypothesis from the end of the report. If the results of further testing of this organism go as I think they will, we may be looking at confirmation of the oldest and most scorned precept in all of Draconian religion."

Dino, still smiling, blinked a few more times. "And what's that?"

"That all life on this planet was created not billions of years ago, but only a few thousand years ago."

Dino chuckled, not wanting to come down off his fiscal high. "Oh, don't be silly, Elena. There's been no evidence of this life-killing cataclysm...this, this Judgement. The evidence we do have from the fossil record shows life dating back millions of years, at the very least."

"Evidence which is just as substantial as Talon Cave in the side of Mount Thunder, or the shape of Claw Lake," Elena retorted. "And this new microorganism, although not malevolent now, could have at one time both destroyed existing life, while nearly simultaneously spawning new life."

"Now you are being silly. I've told you before that the cave and the lake are both simply naturally-occurring formations that happen to look like something an ancient and ignorant people believed in," Dino said, losing his humor. "As for this new organism, don't you think your obviously biased opinions may be a bit premature?"

Elena simply sighed.

Dino's business acumen took over as he continued. "Look, I'll expect a full rewrite of this report to take to the board of directors, leaving out all this Draconian nonsense and concentrating on genetics rather than God, if you please. I assume you've got the dig site sealed and secured?"

"Yes, sir...but..."

"It won't do to have rival corporations studying this organism before we've mastered it," Dino added.

"Sir?" Elena asked.

Dino smiled. "Yes?"

"Can I ask a favor of you?"

"For my new star scientist? Anything!" Dino laughed.

"I'd like you to come to the dig site with me," Elena asked, standing.

"Why, I was about to suggest that very thing, Elena. Bring some company cameras, too...I want to be there with a smile on my face as history is made. Who knows? We both might wind up on the board of

directors for this!" Dino exclaimed. "I'll meet you there at four-and-two this afternoon."

As Elena turned and left, she couldn't help but think that Dino still wouldn't read the report, and that he would never guess what she really had to show him in the ruined temple. If ignorance was bliss, she thought, Dino was the happiest man alive.

Not for long.

Dino arrived a few minutes late at the excavation site, but explained to Elena that another scientist from a different research division had asked to join him -- Dr. Ramses from pharmacology. "I want Ramses in on the ground floor of this operation," Dino said after they exchanged greetings. "If this organism is as useful as you say, it will have enormous usage in medical applications," Dino explained as they walked to the edge of the pit.

As they followed a rope down a crumbling staircase, Ramses decided to make smalltalk. "So, Elena...I take it you're a Draconian?"

Dino made an 'oy' and grunting sound before Elena replied, "Well, I don't practice as much as others, but yes."

"I could say the same thing about myself," Ramses replied, smiling knowingly.

Dino stopped in his tracks and turned to face them. "Oh...geez. I feel outnumbered now. I thought for sure you weren't the type to fall for this mumbo jumbo, Ramses."

"I don't discount anything simply because I can't understand it," Ramses replied, walking past Dino with Elena behind him.

Dino sighed. "I think I gotta look for employees with a lower gullibility factor," he muttered to himself. "Well, slightly lower."

The stairwell took them to a small well-lit room where two interns were gently cleaning and exposing glyphs carved into the stone walls, the most stunning of which was a large golden winged Dragon, the stone overlaid with gold leaf, or perhaps even fashioned from solid gold. As Elena led them through a narrow doorway, Dino grabbed her arm gently when they were inside. "Are you sure you can trust those kinda valuables to a couple of schoolkids?" he whispered tersely.

Elena frowned at him in the dimly lit corridor they had stepped into, and pulled her arm away. As the two scientists led the way, Dino again whispered, "I'm just saying that I think you've been blinded by this superstition, and you're not securing this find as you should be!"

"All my workers are devout Draconians, Dino," Elena sighed, not even turning to respond as they felt their way down the corridor, the walls slick with moisture. "They would no more steal from this temple than you would sell something without profit."

"Hey, no need to talk crazy now," Dino replied, his hand feeling slick and almost gooey from the condensation on the corridor walls.

They eventually came to a rather cramped room, a torch burning on their side of a portal. "Now it's time for you to see the truth about this 'mumbo jumbo', as you call it," she said, stepping into the room.

The light from the torch illuminated and glittered on the walls of the cavern they stepped into, as if they had entered a gigantic geode. Rubies, emeralds, gold, diamonds -- more than the mind could comprehend in a single gaze -- the temple was alive with riches!

"Holy shit!" Dino shouted, his voice cracking. He staggered across the floor, and then noticed -- even the floor itself was coated with gold and jewels!

He didn't notice as a lever was pulled, and a stone sealed the portal they had stepped through.

"And...and you wanted half a million credits to fund the research? Good God, woman! We can start our own company...we can buy a freakin' city with this kinda wealth!" Dino stuttered.

A sly look came across Elena's muzzle. "And don't forget this." In her hands was a thin film of a slimy, milky substance that she rubbed between her taloned fingers.

"Oh, the hell with the enzyme...protein...whatever the hell it was! With this kinda money, we can buy a damned -- " Dino began.

Elena had tossed the substance onto Dino's muzzle. "How incredibly typical. How incredibly disgusting," she spat.

Dino wiped the substance from his eye and spat it out. "What, what? Don't worry, you'll get the raptor's share of the money!"

"That is all you think about, isn't it, Dino? That is all your entire morally bankrupt civilization cares about. Money. Profit. Gaining wealth at the expense of another," Elena growled.

It was then that Dino turned to locate Dr. Ramses in all of this, and saw that he had traveled behind him, towards a giant white egg-like surface protruding into the far wall of the cavern. He was kneeling and writing on some sort of scroll. Dino then finally realized the cavern had been sealed. "What the hell is going on here?" Dino shouted.

Ramses looked over his shoulder. "Allow me to explain, Mr. Sorcerer," he chuckled.

Dino's eyes widened, and blinked a bit. "How...how did you know I changed my last name?"

Ramses turned back to the white, lightly textured surface, rubbing his hand along it. "It's simple fate, Dinosorcerer. Whether you choose to believe in it or not, fate is real, as real as our beloved God. You can choose to ignore the truth, as do so many, but it will do you no good."

Dino's jaw dropped. "Oh, brother...sealed in a tomb with wackos!" He looked around for something to use as a melee weapon, but found nothing but coins and gems. The torch Elena had brought in was nearby her on the wall.

"Oh, don't worry, Dinosorcerer," Elena chuckled, as she took off her clothing to reveal intricate body tattoos and a rather skimpy Draconian priestess outfit. "Once you awaken our great God and purge this planet of your festering disease of a civilization, you will be freed in so many different ways."

Dino took a wide stance, slowly backing away from Elena until his back was against the rough, golden wall. "L...listen. It's not too late. If you open that door and let me out, we'll forget all about this, and just split the money three ways, okay?" Dino said nervously. "How...how the hell did you all get involved in this wacko shit anyway?"

Ramses stood and exposed his own ceremonial garb. "We have been waiting centuries for your birth, Defiler. When the Dinosorcerer arrived, we knew we were only a lifetime away from the great time prophesized. We Draconian Priests assembled near you to prepare for the glorious event."

"Have you completed the sacred translation, Master Linguist Ramses?" Elena asked.

"It is complete. For the first time in many years, the name of our God will be spoken," Ramses sneered. "A new age is at hand."

"I can't believe this. I'm the manager in charge of a leading manufacturing concern, and I'm about to be killed by a couple of prehistoric lunatics," Dino muttered, rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, we have no intention of killing you, Dinosorceror," Elena purred. "Only God has the power of death over life. And when you summon him, it will be his wise Judgement that decides your fate." Ramses handed Elena an opened scroll, and her eyes widened as she read. They began to advance on Dino.

Dino started to skirt along the cavern wall. "Wh...what are you going to do?"

"We? We are mere observers. You are going to summon God that he may deliver his Judgement once again on this exhausted world," Ramses growled.

"Okay...okay. So...all I have to do is summon God...and you'll let me go?" Dino asked.

"God will release us all," Elena replied in monotone.

Dino stared at the scroll momentarily, noticing the two metallic handles which held the parchment, then eagerly took it from Ramses' claws as he approached. Dino then unwrapped the scroll, and saw many arcane figures. Beneath them were a few lines of text, and Dino began to read them briefly and silently:

DEAD IS THE WORLD THAT DEFIES PALANTH...

Dino had barely read the single phrase on the scroll before he pulled on the two handles, shredding the parchment as Ramses and Elena gasped. He held a handle of the scroll firmly in each hand, and stabbed with each rod as if it were a dagger. "That's what I think about your stupid religion," Dino spat, kicking coins and gems at the two Priests. "Now open the damned door. These rods may not be sharp, but I bet I could bash your damned heads in with 'em..."

Ramses and Elena lowered their gaze, staring at Dino with raw hatred.

"I said open the damned door!" Dino shouted again, and Elena slowly went to the door, pulling a well-hidden lever along the top part of the doorway. As the stone blocking the door began to slowly slide away, Dino used the heavy metal rods to point Ramses and Elena through.

"You fools just lost your cut," he spat, wiping the sweat from his brow, feeling in control of the situation again. They glowered at him momentarily before turning down the hallway. "And here's a prophecy for ya...don't expect to be out on parole until you're too old to stand up by yourself."

Dino traded one of the rods for the torch that lit the room. Seeing that Elena and Ramses were almost to the other end of the hall, he turned to face the egg-shaped construct on the far wall. "And to hell with you as well, great God Palanth," Dino said sarcastically, spitting on the floor.

The headlines the next day read K-CO FINDS TREASURE HOARDE. The further story about the religious fanatics and the discovery of the Draconian god's name were in a sidebar three pages into the newspaper, as was the discovery of the mysterious microorganism. Ramses and Elena had said nothing to reporters, lawyers or anyone since leaving the cavern. Furthermore, K-Co seemed more concerned with how to spend

their wealth and invest in new fields rather than investigate an anomalous microbe that swam in a gooey, milky brine.

Dino, needless to say, was given a promotion. He supervised the excavation of the cavern the following day, and interrogated existing employees, discovering that the Draconian cult Ramses said had surrounded him surrendered rather quickly and remained just as silent as Ramses and Elena. Dino ensured that he had only well-trusted employees at the dig site.

Three days after he had entered the cavern, Dino returned to examine the site, now that it had been cleared of valuables. All that remained was the huge white egg-like intrusion in the stone wall, the surface having a few glyphs inscribed on it. Artificial light now circled the bare room, fixtures drilled into the now dull, brown walls.

Knowing he was the only one in the dig site, he took the liberty to think aloud. "Well, I can't help but think that those precursors did something right. Someone back then knew about wealth, and how to acquire it. I almost wish I could shake the hand of whoever gathered all of those riches," he sighed, patting the white surface before him.

He turned to face the glyphs in the white surface, rubbing his hand along them. "And so you were the big secret. The great God Palanth...so feared that no one even dared speak your name. Thousands upon thousands of gullible half-wits to serve you. I bet anything that Palanth was actually the name of the guy who swindled all of that loot. I suppose I should thank you, O tyrant of the past, for leaving your wealth for me!" he chuckled, then turned to leave the room. "Such a shame that we're going to blast this cave to smithereens and find out what's behind this stone, and everyone's going to forget your name again."

The lights in the cavern flickered out.

"Aw, crap." Dino reached for two items on his belt, a flashlight and a portable radio transceiver. He turned on the flashlight, and shone it down the slimy corridor that lead to the stairwell to the surface, where some light from outside was filtering down the narrow shaft. He then spoke into the radio. "What the hell's going on up there? There's still someone down here, y'know! I didn't give the order to cut the power yet!" he said angrily.

There were a few moments of static, then a voice replied to him on the radio. "Sir? You're...you're not going to believe this."

"What?"

"The cargo. It's...gone."

"What? Don't tell me those lunatics have attacked up there!" Dino nearly shouted.

"No, no sir. The cargo is just...just gone. The crates...just became...they're just...empty," the voice replied, confused.

DEFILER.

The single word was planted in his mind by a voice deeper than any Dino had heard before in his life. A chill went down his spine that caused him to drop the radio. "Who...who's in here with me?" he shouted nervously.

He slowly swept the flashlight around the walls of the cavern, until the spotlight came across an edge, an edge of blackness. As he further illuminated the wall, he saw that the white egg-like intrusion was gone, and left nothing but a pitch black void in its place. In disbelief, Dino ran over to where the intrusion had been, feeling inside the empty space and shining his light into it, but the beam faded before it ever hit an opposing wall.

How can something that big move without a sound? he thought to himself.

"Oh, no...it can't...NO!" a voice on the radio in the cavern behind him shrieked before it crackled and snapped to silence. Dino nearly wet himself in the five seconds of silence before...

THOOM.

An impact of something on the surface shook the cavern, loosening rocks and one of the light fixtures as Dino turned, his flashlight beam flailing across the cavern ceiling to see what was going on. He shone the light on the radio on the cavern floor, and saw that a falling rock had crushed it into several fragments. Shining it up at the ceiling again, he saw that fissures were developing. He became conscious that he was breathing rapidly, so he swallowed and tried to calm down.

"I gotta get out of--"

THOOM!

Stronger than the first tremor, this quake loosened all the fixtures on the walls and fist-sized rock shards started to pummel Dino. He swallowed the bile that was building in his throat, and scampered on all fours towards the door to the cavern. The hallway beyond, once a smooth and slimy rectangular prism, was now angled slightly in the middle and had several fissures running across it. The flashlight flickering in his hands, he virtually slid down the hallway and clawed at the bottom of the stairs.

THOOM!

The ground beneath him seemed to momentarily turn to rubber as Dino dropped the flashlight and looked up the stairwell to the sky. It was

as if the earth had suddenly decided to shift three feet to one side, and the staircase couldn't keep up with the move evenly. Once the shifting earth settled, he scrambled up the fractured staircase, and clawed in the dirt on the surface outside. He peered over the edge, looking for assistance, but none of the dozen workers he saw were looking in his direction. His grasp finally located the electrical cable that had been feeding power to the dig site, and he heaved himself onto the surface, rolling away from the stairwell.

Dino caught his breath for a few moments before becoming more aware of his surroundings. The sound of shouting, screaming and confusion became louder and louder in the city around him. He got to his feet, looking at the nearby street, the motorized vehicles all at a standstill, people running between them, looking over their shoulder.

It was only then that he followed their gaze to a sight that obscured the heavens.

A golden Dragon filled half of the sky, his wings partially outstretched behind him, his foreclaws grasping air before him -- moreover, a most definite him. The tall twenty-story buildings in the center of town, which stood only a few hundred feet away from Dino, could hardly obscure the lower half of the great Dragon's body from his view. The crystalline windows of the buildings had already shattered, and lay in fragments on the street below. From between the buildings, he saw a great golden pillar fall slowly, then stop.

Dino realized he was looking at one of the gigantic Dragon's legs, driving into the earth below. A few moments later, the shockwave reached him. The ground before him seemed to ripple and crack like brittle ice beneath a wave. It was as if someone had yanked a rug out from under Dino's feet, and he fell on his backside. Looking around, everyone in view had fallen as well, but were already clamboring back to their feet to run from the approaching Dragon.

Dino wasn't sure if it was because of the great scale of the Dragon, or whether the Dragon chose to move so, but the great golden colossus seemed to be moving in slow-motion. Huge pupilless eyes adorned the giant muzzle, which seemed to sweep back and forth across the city with an expression of indifference.

While the entire dig site and most of the people Dino had seen running had already fled the area, he found himself too paralyzed with fear to move, or even get back to his feet. Every minute, one of the Dragon's great hindfeet landed on the earth, creating a tremor that caused the buildings before him to sway perilously and the ground to shatter with more fissures. The giant Dragon's approach was slow, deliberate, and ponderous. Although the muzzle, seemingly miles above, was gazing off into the distance, the titanic Dragon appeared to be heading in Dino's direction.

It took minutes for the awesome spectacle filling Dino's vision to allow rational thought to enter his mind again. He realized that he was looking at the Dragon God Palanth, and that he himself had unleashed him, just as the Draconian priests had prophesized.

The latest impact opened a fissure near Dino, and he had to roll to one side to keep from falling into it. Turning back to gaze upon the approaching Dragon, the seemingly ever-increasing scale of the titan defied his comprehension once more. The twenty-story buildings across the street were now three blocks away from Palanth's legs, and they barely managed to obscure the Dragon's ankles from view.

Dino almost lost control of his bowels for the second time when he followed the pillars of gold upwards, past the massive, muscular underbelly and chest, and realized that even though Palanth's titanic feet were three blocks away, his massive clawed hands and fearsome muzzle were already looming overhead -- and then some.

The realization made Dino spasm and tremble. Try as he might to block it out, each roaring footfall of the immense Dragon seemed more detailed the closer Palanth got. His ears could pick out the sounds of the different materials underfoot being obliterated -- vehicles, concrete, people. As Palanth's left leg lifted, Dino could see large debris raining down from the golden-scaled sole of Palanth's hindfoot as it moved forward and hovered momentarily over a building a block away. The huge surface underfoot was wider than the roof of the building; the incredibly massive taloned digits splayed, making an eerie sound. It remained airborne only for a moment, then quickly lowered. Palanth's original distance was, indeed, the reason the Dragon God appeared to move in slow-motion, because at this range Palanth's pounding leg seemed to make quick work of the building and another to the side as a cloud of dust and debris billowed out, filling the canyon-like streets. Vehicles tumbled before the massive cloud, the wave of dust finally sweeping across Dino's prone body as it lay in the vacant lot, obscuring his view once again.

As the dust cleared, the area around Dino also grew darker, now in eclipse from Palanth's immense form. A horrible twisting, grinding shriek filled his ears for a moment, and as his eyes scanned for the source, he saw that it was one of the two last remaining buildings before him collapsing in on itself. Repeated tremors of the Dragon's footfalls, including the impact of the titan's left foot right behind it, had finally broken enough of the superstructure to allow gravity alone to finish the destruction. Dino screamed dryly as he turned to run; the building had buckled in two and now was falling towards the dig site.

The only safety Dino could see was the stairwell to the cavern, so he grabbed the electrical cord as he dove inside, slamming against the cracked stone staircase wall as a thick cloud of dirt exploded above him, bricks and mortar pelting his crested head, his body becoming covered in sand and dirt as it blasted down into the cavern around him. His grip on the cable held, and as the rain of debris ebbed he crawled up enough to look over the edge at what remained of the city around him. The huge

clawed toes of Palanth's left foot lay in a row before Dino, now unobscured by structures, only a few hundred feet away. Each massive, white claw was almost half as big as the one remaining building in his view to the left.

As the rumbling of the earth around him ceased, it was replaced by a new rumbling from above. Dino pulled himself out of the stairwell again, while high above, the Dragon's girth blocked out the sky, and each muscle beneath the rippling scales made a sound of its own. The gigantic Dragon was drawing a breath, his chest expanding well beyond Dino's field of view to the rear.

Panting on his hands and knees, an explosion nearby jolted Dino, and he saw the remaining building to the left fly apart like a pile of sticks and dust being kicked. In fact, Palanth had done just that -- he had lifted his great right foot a short distance off the ground, and moved it forward. The mass of the building before it was not even significant enough to slow the progress of the huge, clawed digits as they tore through the building and settled on its remains, almost in a row with the gigantic claws to Dino's right. He was almost amazed that the bedrock, although solid and deep below the city, held the mountainous Dragon God's weight, and the huge claws before him settled only a short distance into the earth.

From somewhere behind him, Dino began to hear a voice shouting that stood out from the others that were growing more and more faint as the populous fled the immediate area to escape the megadragon's crushing tread. Dino was close to passing out from the overload to his senses, as if his brain couldn't fathom what was occurring around him. The shouting got louder nonetheless, and it broke through his self-induced stupor. As Elena ran up behind him, she shouted Dino's name one last time as he turned to gaze at her, covered in as much dust and debris as he was.

"Behold, Defiler, the Dragon God Palanth!" she said, placing her hands on her hips and sneering at the kneeling Dinosorceror. Her expression changed to one of adoration and submission as she looked upwards at her God. "O mighty Palanth! At long last you have returned to cleanse us of our impurities!"

Dino followed her gaze upwards, scrambling around behind her, but he saw no sign from Palanth that he was even aware of the existence of the two miniscule beings before his toes. As the crowds of fleeing citizens filtered through and disappeared behind the rubble of nearby buildings, it became eerily quiet. The only sound that was dominating was that of the earth groaning under the weight of the talons as they shifted slightly.

Elena's eyeridges began to furrow slightly as she craned her neck back to gaze upon Palanth's great height. "Mighty One! I am but a humble servant, but I ask that you pass judgment on the Defiler, as is prophesized!"

This time, Palanth did seem to respond to the cries of the tiny ant at his feet, almost as if it had been quiet enough for him to hear her. The titanic golden Dragon began to lift his right clawfoot, the toeclaw tips kicking up more debris as they lifted from the rubble.

Elena turned and looked down yet again at the Dinosorceror, who was crawling on his back like a crab. Her eyes narrowed. "Now you will get your great reward, you insignifi -- "

A massive ivory talon replaced Dino's view of Elena. Before Dino even got a chance to look up, the talon began to lift again. However, something was amiss. In the crater left by the incredibly huge toe was the lower half of Elena's body. On the crater's edge was Elena's upper half. Her waist revealed a mixture of wires and metallic rods. A green fluid was leaking from several thin hoses and dripped inside the crater.

"Cut!"

The director shouted the word several times in frustration through the stage's sound system. "Goddamn it, what happened here, people?"

A voice from behind the backdrop shouted, "We lost hydraulic pressure in one of the servos!"

The director emerged, stomping out of the control booth and onto the set. "We need this friggin' robot for thirty-five more scenes!"

Dino coughed a bit and dusted himself off as a stagehand brought him a water bottle. The real Elena was standing off the set, and just rolled her eyes a bit.

Dino looked up at the huge partial toe that now hung over the set as safety guywires were attached, and then walked up to Elena and peered down at her while he sipped his drink. The robot's eyes looked at him and it spoke in a distinctly masculine voice, "You'll still go out with me, won't you honey?"

Dino chuckled, and more laughter could be heard from behind the backdrop from the team controlling Elena. The director walked up to Dino and scolded, "I'm glad you all think this is so funny. Animatronics aren't cheap. This is going to screw up our shooting schedule big time in order to work around the repairs." The director looked up at the underside of the mock Palanth toe. "It was supposed to land *beside* Elena and just *look* like it crushed her. There are plenty more scenes that we need this dummy for!"

"Hey, I've got a college education! Actually, I've got five!" Elena said again via the team behind the backdrop.

The director scowled. "Well then I can expect you to get the repairs done five times as fast, smartasses. This is a wrap for today, people! We'll move on to scene 104B first thing tomorrow morning."

Dino shook off more dust and was handed a towel as he met Elena off the set. Dino smiled and chuckled at Elena. "Yeah, man, how else are you going to do your macro scenes later in the movie? Y'know, I tried working with those little explosive charges on a miniature set...geez, almost ten years ago. Those little buggers hurt like hell! You're lucky you got a robot stand-in now."

Elena chuckled. "Oh, I don't know. There would certainly be something satisfying about doing it all myself." She winked and went to her trailer.

Later that evening, Dino was relaxing in his temporary home near the studios. He was surprised how quickly "Entertainment Tonight" picked up on the story. The chyron on his television read: FINAL DEVOTION, FURTHER TROUBLES.

In truth, this latest mishap was just one in a long line of problems the production had encountered, and they were only in the first week of filming. To make matters even worse, the religious 'authorities' were making their usual stink, and managed once again to get television air time.

One young saurian woman appeared on the screen. "This movie is simply blasphemy! It treats our entire system of beliefs as nothing more than a children's story!"

Dino rolled his eyes and turned off the television with the remote, sinking deeper into his plush chair. "This is the real world lady," he muttered softly to himself, closing his eyes. "People are a little too civilized to take your fairy tale bullshit seriously."

Somewhere in the distance, a resonating **THOOM** shook the windows in the Dinosorceror's living room.

It was to be followed by many, many more.