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Opening extract from

Astrosaurs: Day of the Dino-droids

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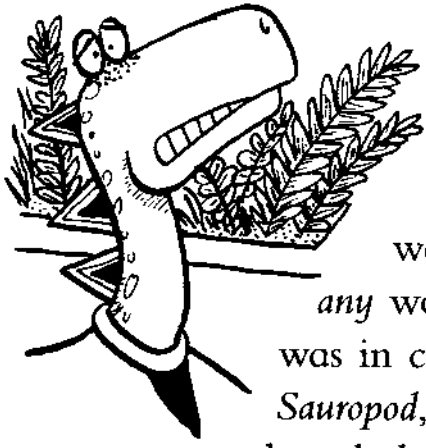
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Chapter One

THE TUNNEL IN SPACE



Captain Teggs was a very worried dinosaur.

Most days, he felt on top of the world – on top of *any* world. After all, he was in charge of the DSS *Sauropod*, the best ship in the whole Dinosaur Space Service. He had the finest, bravest crew any captain could hope for. And he even had a private larder crammed with three hundred types of delicious fern.

His life was one long exciting adventure in space – with just a spot of tummy-ache now and then.

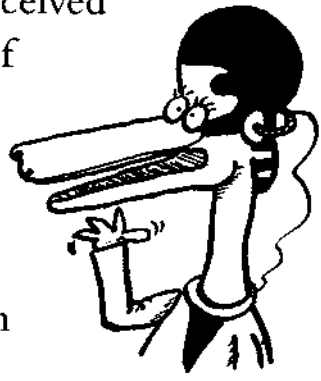
But today, sat in the *Sauropod*'s control pit, he was worried. And with good reason. Admiral Rosso – the crusty old barosaurus in charge of the DSS – had disappeared.

"I've double-checked the admiral's movements," said Arx, Teggs's second-in-command, looking up from his controls. "He left in his private starship for a holiday on the planet Trimuda. But no one has seen or heard from him since."



Teggs nodded glumly. "And he was due back at DSS HQ yesterday!" He turned to his communications officer, a stripy hadrosaur named Gipsy. "Anything to report?"

"I've listened in to every message sent and every signal received in Trimuda's part of space over the last week." Gipsy put down her headphones with a sigh. "Nothing from Admiral Rosso."

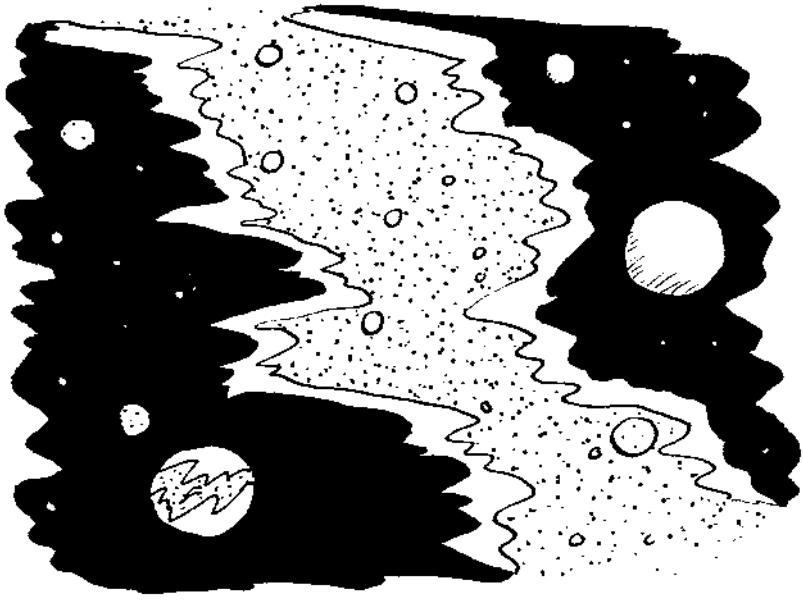


Teggs chewed on some bracken. "I just hope we find him safe and well – and *fast*. The Pick-a-Planet meeting is due to be held in just three days, and if we're not back at DSS HQ with Admiral Rosso by then . . ."

"It could mean trouble," said Gipsy.

"Trouble with a capital T!" Teggs agreed.

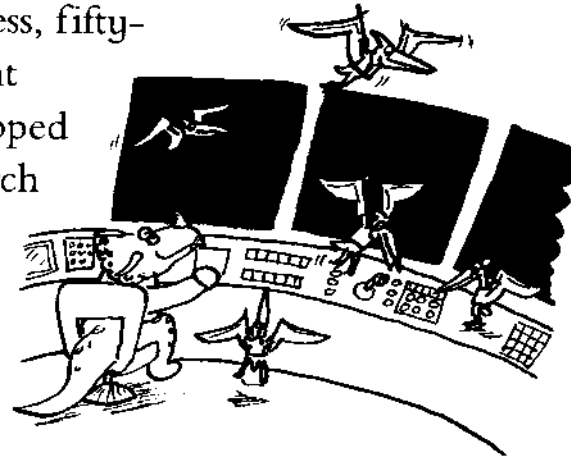
New planets were discovered at the outer edges of the Jurassic Quadrant all the time. If they were found in the Vegetarian Sector, they were claimed by the plant-eaters. If they were found in the Carnivore Sector, they were taken by the meat-eaters. But any worlds discovered close to the Vegmeat Zone – the no-man's-land between the two dinosaur empires – were up for grabs. And each side wanted these worlds for themselves.



In olden times, there would be a big battle for each of the planets. But now, thanks to Admiral Rosso, things were different. Meat-eaters and plant-eaters alike gathered each year at DSS HQ for the Pick-a-Planet meeting. Here, the battles were fought with words, not weapons, and the planets were divided up evenly.

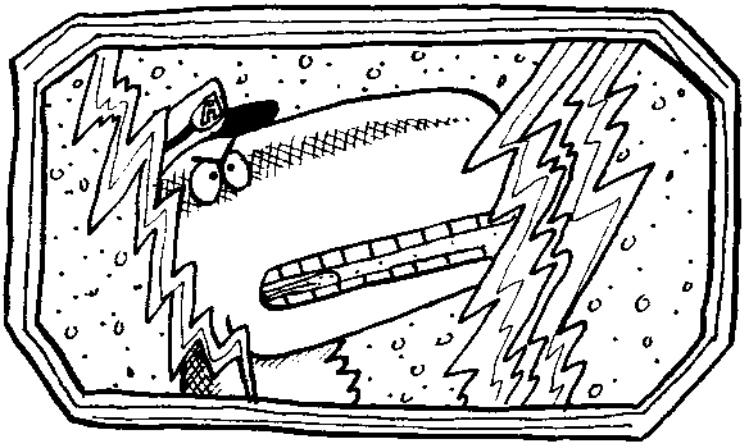
But Rosso was the only dinosaur trusted by both sides to play fair. Without him, the meeting could go dangerously wrong . . .

A loud bleep made the astrosaurs jump. The dimorphodon – the ship's fearless, fifty-strong flight crew – flapped over to perch at their positions, ready for anything.



Gipsy frowned at her controls. "It's Iggy," she said. "He's sent a code-two warning signal."

"*What?*" Teggs reared up in his control pit. Iggy was the *Sauropod*'s chief engineer. He was brilliant with all things mechanical. But a code-two warning signal meant he'd found a serious problem with the ship. "Put him on screen!"



Iggy's scowling, scaly face appeared on the scanner. "Captain, the engines seem to be playing up. I can't stop the ship slipping sideways through space!"

"*Sideways?*" Teggs frowned. "What do your controls say, Arx?"

Puzzled, Arx tried to scratch his head – but he couldn't reach, so a dimorphodon did it for him. "Iggy's right. We are drifting off-course."

"But why?" Gipsy wondered.

Arx looked very serious. "*Something* is pulling us towards it!"

"Let's see what's out there," said Teggs.

Gipsy whistled at the dimorphodon, and Iggy's face faded from the scanner to reveal the dark, sparkling wilderness of space.

"Nothing but a few stars and empty blackness!" Gipsy declared.

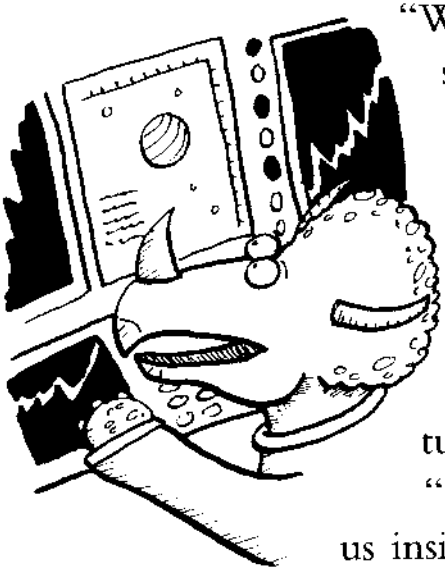
"It may be blackness, but I don't think it's empty." Arx turned to face his friends. "There's only one thing in space with the power to drag things towards it like this. A black hole!"

Teggs jumped out of his control pit.

"A black hole? But that's the most dangerous thing in the universe. Once it starts to suck you in, there's no escape!"

Gipsy's head-crest had flushed bright blue with alarm. "How come it's not marked on any of the star charts?"

"Perhaps it has just appeared," Arx suggested, checking his instruments.



"Well, that's very strange. This is no ordinary black hole. It seems to be the entrance to some kind of tunnel – a tunnel in space!"

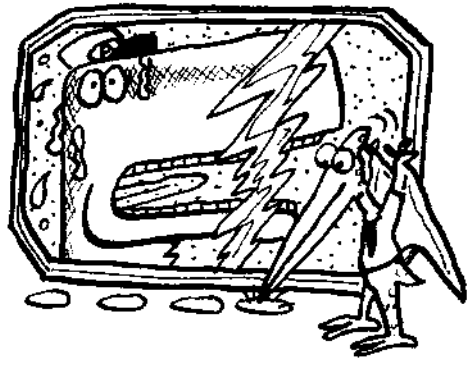
"Then if it sucks us inside, who knows where we might come out," Gipsy hooted. "We could end up on the other side of the universe!"

"If we even survive the journey," said Teggs. "We must break free before it's too late!"

Another loud bleep startled them all – higher-pitched this time.

"A code-*one* warning," Gipsy gasped. "Iggy again!"

A dimorphodon bashed a button with his beak, and Iggy's face swam back into view on the scanner. Beads of sweat sat upon his scaly brow.



"Captain, the dung-burners are working at full power but I still can't stop us slipping sideways! We're going faster and faster!"

"Iggy, listen," said Teggs. "There's some sort of tunnel in space out there and it's sucking us in! If we can't break

free we're in big trouble. Can you boost the engines?"

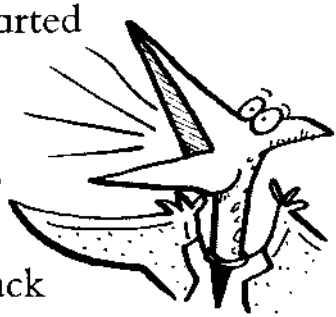
The iguanodon gulped. "We'll need more dung," he said. "And fast!"



Teggs nodded. "Gipsy, quick! Tell Cook to serve up slimy seaweed and fruit chutney to everyone on board."

Iggy smiled grimly. "That should do it, sir."

Gipsy called the chef right away. But the ship had already started to shake, and the temperature was rising.



The alarm pterosaur started to squawk at the top of her lungs: "Danger! Red Alert! Finish your swamp tea! Hold on tight!"

A dreadful thought struck Teggs. "Do you think that Admiral Rosso's starship fell through this black-hole space-tunnel thing?"

"It seems very likely, Captain," Arx agreed, his horns drooping. "I'm afraid we may never find him now."

Suddenly, the ship rocked with a massive explosion. In the dim light, Iggy's sooty face appeared on the scanner.



"Forget the dung," he said bitterly. "The engines couldn't take the strain. They just blew up!"

"That means we will be sucked in even faster!" cried Arx.

The ship shook harder and started to spin. The lights dimmed. The whole flight deck grew burning hot. Even the ferns started to smoulder in the control pit. Teggs quickly ate them all before they could burst into flames.

He sighed, licking his lips. "That could be the last hot meal I ever eat!"

Then the ship lurched, and all the astrosaurs were thrown to the floor.



"We're picking up speed!" yelled Arx. "Ten seconds till we're sucked inside the space tunnel!"

"Hold on tight, everyone!" shouted Teggs. "I think we're about to find out how water feels when it goes down the plughole!"

Even as he spoke, the *Sauropod* hurtled headlong into the pit of blackness . . .