

Keepers of the gate

Everything was dark and cold, so very cold. As Mok slowly opened her eyes she thought she had gone blind. She saw nothing but darkness. She decided to give her eyes a second to adjust to the darkness in the hopes she would be able to make out any shape. Alas, everything was still dark. Since her eyes were apparently failing her, she started moving her legs in an attempt to figure out where she was. The cold feeling of numbness was slowly exchanged for a piercing pain in her left leg. Slowly bits and pieces of her memory started to come back to her. She remembered she had hurt her left side fleeing from the stampeding Dace and that she had taken refuge in the upside down dump truck box. She bit through the pain and tried to shake off the cold. "Okay Mok, on three. One..., two..., three." She groaned as the cold and injuries both made her legs and sides sore and stiff. As Mok crawled up she tried her best not to get tangled in the wires from the parachute she had used as makeshift bedding. Everything was still pitch black but at least she was standing upright now. She marched forward to what she assumed was the back of the box with the opening. Of course as luck would have it, she ended up just marching face first into the front of the box. She did in fact get out of the bed on the wrong side. Dazed, she stood there for a second to recover from the impact. "Surely if this side is solid, the other side should have the opening, right?" She thought to herself. This time she was a bit more cautious as she carefully placed one foot in front of the other. She braced for impact and instead hit some soft fabric. She pushed through what appeared to be another parachute that had fallen down the gaping hole in the ceiling. This time the deployed parachute had neatly fallen on top of the dump truck and completely covered the opening she had crawled through the day before. She wouldn't have minded the extra cover hadn't it meant she would bonk her head into the box. She untangled herself from the parachute, slowly adjusting to the dim light in the room she was in. Her mouth felt parched and she tried to think back of when she last had any water. Without knowing how long she had slept that would be impossible to derive. It doesn't help that she didn't know how much time she had spent down here in the complex. She missed the feeling of the early morning sun covering her face and its gentle warming effect. Down here there was only cold, making her miss the topside even more. As she had now traversed 2 zones she didn't have a clue if she would ever find her way out of here. She might just end up like the other dinos Dream had mentioned before and end up never to be seen again. Instead of letting all the bad thoughts get to her, she only saw one possible action, getting up and trying to find water. The movement would surely help her out with the sore and cold muscles and water wasn't just going to come falling down in her lap. Mok got moving and walked towards an illuminated sign near the end of the room. Without pretending she could read the sign and get an idea of where she was headed she gently pushed the doors open. To her surprise she had found a staircase going down. As much as she would prefer to head up throughout the complex and back to the surface, she would rather not run into the aggressive Dace again.

The only way is down

While descending the staircase she felt the temperature drop. Maybe it was the heat coming from the greenhouses that slightly heated up the previous level. Or maybe it was just that she was finally starting to heat up with movement, perceiving the temperature to be lower than it actually was. She reached the end of the staircase and bumped into the door. The door would not open and gave quite a bit of resistance. Determined Mok put her weight into

a big shove, slowly creaking the door open. The door had been blocked by a filing cabinet that was placed up against it. Mok's shove clearly was too much for the cabinet that had tilted and collapsed onto the floor, sending folders everywhere. As she made her way through the scattered folders she noticed some pictures on the floor. They vaguely resemble dinosaurs that she remembered from the topside. However once again she couldn't quite figure out one type of dinosaur she had spotted. Hopefully she could successfully avoid running into one of those guys. Making her way through the office space she spotted a big picture hanging on the wall. It featured a bunch of humans posing at the beach. As she stared at the picture she could swear she felt the warm sun on her skin again. "If i make it out of here, the first thing i am doing is going on a beach trip" the thought brought her joy and warmth and motivated her. She decided to hold on to the picture and take it with her. It would serve as a reminder of why she needs to push through and survive. Fueled with newly found determination she fought off the pain and moved on.

The office space madd way for another hallway. This time the hallways were a mix between the hallways she had encountered before. She noticed the walls had windows. But this time these windows were a lot smaller than before. Some were covered up and others were shattered. Curious as Mok was, she wanted to check what these rooms were all about. Slowly checking the room for movement or another dino she peered her head in the doorway. When she concluded that the room was safe to enter, she started exploring. The room was full of little white desks, cluttered with all types of translucent glass containers. In the back she spotted a big metal door with a small hatch at eye height. She tried to not knock over any of the glass containers and stay stealthy. She reached the hatch and looked through into what she could conclude was a holding bay. The entire bay was covered in blood, going all the way up to the ceiling. "What did they have in here? Could it have been designed for them to hold a dinosaur?" She had to think back of the pictures on the floor of the office room and wondered how these were related to the holding area. Unsure of whether or not she would figure it out, she decided to move on and pursue her quest to find water. All along the corridors she found a lot more blocked entrances or exits than on the previous levels. The way some of the improvised blockades were constructed, hinted at the goal being keeping whatever was behind those doors locked away. Some of the objects were way too big to be handled by puny humans. That and there were teeth marks all over them, giving away that the barricades were dino made. "I wonder what that's all about?" she pondered, while walking past barricade after barricade.

Wrong type of party

Mok arrived at a crossroads of intersecting tunnels. She had just spent the last hour wandering past rows of rooms like the one she had explored. Desperation was starting to get a grip on Mok and she didn't know which path to choose. As a last resort she decided to follow her nose. She had caught a whiff of what she could have sworn was a meaty smell. The second the smell reached her nose, her belly started to grumble. "Well I guess a quick bite couldn't hurt". And thus she once again followed her nose. Tracing the smell of meat between the sharp smell of chemicals was no easy feat but she persevered. As the smell of meat became more poignant she started hearing what almost sounded like bickering. "Other dino's, i would have preferred to stay far away from them" she muttered as her belly rumbled. "Surely just checking it out could 't hurt, right?" She started rationalizing her moves

and choices. She sneakily checked around the corner to see what the fuss was all about. She spots 2 dino's dragging pieces of meat down an office space. The space itself looks quite a lot like the one she encountered when she went down the staircase earlier. She doesn't recognize the type of dino but they don't seem friendly. There's a big black dino with a distinctive orange crest on his head and the end of his tail. The other dino is a lot paler with brown to nearly white hues. The brown one is in the front dragging what seems to be a severed hind leg. The black one is dragging along a severed front leg which is a lot smaller in size. She overhears their conversation. "[Cinnamon](#), how far do we have to go before we can eat? I'm getting tired of hauling this food." complained the black Acro while dragging behind. The brown Acro sighs and responds with an annoyed tone. "Stop being impatient, [Pepper](#). We just have to go a little bit further and then we can finally eat." Mok had a chuckle at the pair being a spicy duo, literally and figuratively. Pepper refuted; "How much is a little further, my paws are starting to hurt from all the walking and hunting." This time Cinnamon snarled back "Well if you hadn't messed up the hunt for our first prey, we wouldn't have spent so long hunting. We could have already had our bellies filled with delicious meat." Pepper eased back a little bit, caught off guard by the tone. "Well I'm sorry for not seeing that big stump and tripping over it. How was I supposed to know it was there?" Visibly getting more and more agitated Cinnamon shouted "Because I told you to stay back and let me lead the hunt. Stop trying so hard and listen to me for once!". Pepper had had enough and shouted back "Well maybe if you had let me lead more hunts I could finally start getting better at them!" This was the final straw and Cinnamon snapped. He dropped the hind leg and charged Pepper. Both of them rolled off into a ball of chaos consisting of male Acro rage and Dace front leg. Mok watched the couple abandon the big hind leg and decided she would seize the opportunity to strike. Nimble, she maneuvered her way towards the abandoned piece of meat while keeping an eye on the bickering pair. She sank her teeth in the meat and bolted off with the oversized chunk of meat. "Gotta go fast, before they notice" Mok thought to herself as she hauled ass with her haul. Mok had cleared the area and could in the background hear the sounds coming to a halt. She heard another conversation starting between the hunting party. "Look at what you did! Now our biggest piece of meat is missing!" Growled Cinnamon. "Ok ok, i'm sorry! I didn't mean for that to happen." Pepper argued back. "I'm just saying if you taught me more things I could be of better assistance to you during hunts. I just want to be more helpful..." he finished off. Cinnamon sighed again "Fine, but next time when the target is smaller. What are we going to eat now? Your piece of meat is not nearly enough for the both of us..." Cinnamon paused, took a deep breath and took a moment to calm down. "Fine, you stay here and I will go back to get another piece. Just. Stay. Put" he commanded Pepper. Pepper, fearful of starting another fight agreed to these terms and stayed put. Mok finally got far enough away to no longer hear any noise and started feasting on the hind leg. All while she thought to herself "how lucky am I to not need to hunt and just enjoy this delicious meal"

Thirsty for more adventure

After the delicious free meal Mok started to get more and more thirsty. Her stomach was full, but she noticed she was getting a headache, probably from dehydration. She went back towards where she had found the bickering pair earlier and noticed both individuals were gone. She figured she was safe to continue down the hallway which was earlier blocked by

the Acro pair. This office was adjacent to another big room, much like the one she had come across before. However this time there was no holding room. This room had a wall filled with tubes. Some appeared to have young, developing dino's inside of them. Some were completely empty and others smashed. She noticed one of the smashed tanks had what appeared to be water in it. The water had sunk just to the level where the crack in the tube was present. She improvised and used the opening in the tube to reach the water and quench her thirst. The water tasted funny, not like the clean creek and river she usually would consult for drinking. But the taste wasn't the worst, it was somewhere in between a murky puddle and stagnant water. It would do the trick and rehydrate her after that big meal. She was so focused on getting all that water down, she let down her guard. Unbeknownst to her an unknown figure had managed to sneak up on the slurping Sucho. If the Acro had wanted to hurt and kill Mok, they probably would have had plenty of opportunity to do so. Instead the Acro purposely knocked over one of the glass containers on the desks. The glass shattered on impact on the floor, startling Mok. She managed to almost choke on the last gulp of water due to that crashing glass. She started to cough and struggle, to the amusement of the Acro that had just entered. He burst out in laughter as Mok dropped to the floor coughing her lungs out. The Acro almost started crying with laughter at the young dino's struggle. The laughter slowly faded as the dino didn't stop coughing on the floor. The joy quickly turned to worry for the struggling Sucho. "Are you okay there, buddy?" The Acro worryingly asked Mok. She regained her breath and composition. She sprang upright, not wanting to appear weak to the Acro in front of her. "I am now, no thanks to you." she responded. [The Acro](#) was a little bigger than Mok and also appeared a lot more intimidating. The inside of his mouth had an eerie bluish hue to it, contrasted by his orange eyes. His toes and tail featured even brighter blue highlights. His feathery body featured a neat combination of brown, taupe, beige and gray markings. She gazed over and realized that if the Acro had wanted to kill her, he would have done so already. She took a more gentle tone "I'm sorry, you just really caught me at a bad time. You scared me by sneaking up on me like that." The Acro cheekily answered "You're lucky that's all I did to you." in an attempt to induce a reaction from Mok. Mok didn't budge and didn't exactly know how to respond to that quip. A silence fell.

Lab rats gone nuclear

"Where did you come from?" Asked Mok, still unsure if she would actually get an answer out of the Acro. "I was born and raised here. I've been around these parts for quite some time now, some would refer to me as a legacy member of the old guard. Others would call me Flux" the Acro responded confidently. Mok got a bit annoyed at the non answer given and rephrased "I'm sorry, it appears I wasn't clear enough. I mean where did you just come from? I didn't spot you on the way in." The Acro chuckled. "I was following 2 other Acros on the hunt in the level above. They left quite a bit of tasty scraps. Easy pickings." He boasted. She decided to keep the info to herself that she had run into them before. "And where have they gone to then" she asked, trying to pry if the Acro was alone or not. "Well they definitely didn't go down another level" he sarcastically said while raising an eyebrow at Mok. Was he hinting at something she hadn't figured out yet? Observing the visible confusion on Mok's face, he asked her "Do you even know where you are?". He had certainly gotten Mok's interest as she perked up. "You're in the laboratory and testing facility, dear. You don't want to know

what all went down here..." he said in a somber voice. Mok saw that Flux was hurt by thinking of what all went down here. She still decided to pry, despite the Acro's pain. "I have no clue, please enlighten me." He started reminiscing. "These facilities were the ground where humans experimented on fellow dinosaurs and other creatures. They tried to see how far they could push nature to its limits. They used any living thing they could get their hands on to run their tests. I wasn't here for it all but they tried to alter the way things were. In a very forced way. They tried everything, altering how we were built, crossing traits that shouldn't be crossed. In the end they decided to try and recreate new test subjects. So they could have an endless supply of new test subjects. They even tried experimenting with how far they could radiate us and how we reacted to that." Mok was enamored by the narrative and sat there gasping at every word he muttered. "Barely anything survived the tests, and those who did, they put in holding cells, to observe. Few did survive, although I'm not sure you could refer to it as surviving..." Flux halted, as if continuing would break his heart completely. "I'm fairly content here, there are simple ways to get food and drink, without a lot of effort. You just have to be smart about it." Mok wanted to ask if he knew why almost all the doorways had been barricaded. "Why did you block all those doors? Are you afraid of the Dace?" The Acro laughed "Our food doesn't scare us, what lies below is that which scares us. He scares us..." Mok let out an audible gasp. "He...?" She asked with a trembling voice. "He is the result of the atrocities that took place here. He is what is keeping us here. There is a way out of this complex, close but not too far. But he guards it. He has no interest in leaving or letting us leave." Mok wondered why Flux wouldn't want to leave. "Why don't you try to leave? It's beautiful out there. And so cold and smelly down here." Mok tried to convince the Acro. She had forgotten that the Acro had only known this cold and smelly place. He had gotten so accustomed to it, it was his home. Suddenly she remembered her memento she had taken from the office. The picture of the beach. She excitedly shoved it into the Acro's face. "But look, how beautiful and warm it looks! You can't imagine how nice the sun and warm sand feels. And the breeze and salty smell of the ocean!" Her plan seemed to work as the Acro looked interested at how she described said beach. "This sand, what does it feel like?" He asked. "Well it's nice and warm, at times. And soft... or sometimes solid and hard" she excitedly stumbled in her explanation. The Acro seemed visibly excited now as well at the thought of a visit to the beach. "Hmmm if that beach has you so excited, maybe it is better than being stuck here in this place. Maybe it is worth the risk of trying to get past him..." Mok threw in her last bargaining chip and offered the Acro the picture. "Here, you can hold on to this until I take you there myself... after... we get out of here..?" She tried to pull Flux across the line. "Fine, that sounds good to me. I always liked the feeling of the warmth the greenhouse lights and heaters radiated on my skin. Let's do it. Let's get us out of this cold and wet place. Mok cheered and excitedly blurted out "Lead the way, let's get you to the beach!"