

Gator

By Robert J. Sawyer

Something scampered by in the dark, its footfalls making tiny splashing sounds. Ludlam didn't even bother to look. It was a rat, no doubt—the sewers were crawling with them—and, well, if Ludlam could get used to the incredible stench, he could certainly get used to the filthy rodents, too.

This was his seventy-fourth night skulking about the sewers beneath New York. He was dressed in a yellow raincoat and rubber boots, and he carried a powerful flashlight—the kind with a giant brick battery hanging from the handle.

In most places, the ceiling was only inches above his head; at many points, he had to stoop to get by. Liquid dripped continuously on the raincoat's hood. The walls, sporadically illuminated by his flashlight beam, were slick with condensation or slime. He could hear the rumble of traffic up above—even late at night it never abated. Sometimes he could hear the metal-on-metal squeal of subway trains banking into a turn on the other side of the sewer wall. There was also the constant background sound of running water; here, the water was only a few inches deep, but elsewhere it ran in a torrent, especially after it had rained.

Ludlam continued to walk along. Progress was always slow: the stone floor was slippery, and Ludlam didn't want to end up yet again falling face forward into the filth.

He paused after a time, and strained to listen. Rats continued to chatter nearby, and there was the sound of a siren, audible through a grate in the sewer roof. But, as always, he failed to hear what he wanted to hear.

It seemed as though the beast would never return.

* * *

The double doors to Emergency Admitting swung inward, and ambulance attendants hustled the gurney inside. A blast of ice-cold air, like the ghostly exhaling of a long-dead dragon, followed them into the room from the November night.

Dennis Jacobs, the surgeon on duty, hurried over to the gurney. The injured man's face was bone-white—he had suffered severe blood loss and was deep in shock. One of the attendants pulled back the sheet, exposing the man's left leg. Jacobs carefully removed the mounds of gauze covering the injury site.

A great tract of flesh—perhaps five pounds of meat—had been scooped out of his thigh. If the injury had been another inch or two to the right, the femoral artery would have been clipped, and the man would have bled to death before help could have arrived.

“Who is he?” asked Jacobs.

“Paul Kowalski,” said the same attendant who had exposed the leg. “A sewer worker. He'd just gone down a manhole. Something came at him, and got hold of his leg. He high-tailed it up the ladder, back onto the street. A passerby found him bleeding all over the sidewalk, and called 9-1-1.”

Jacobs snapped his fingers at a nurse. “O.R. 3,” he said.

On the gurney, Kowalski's eyes fluttered open. His hand reached up and grabbed Jacobs's forearm. “Always heard the stories,” said Kowalski, his voice weak. “But never believed they were really there.”

“What?” said Jacobs. “What’s really there?”

Kowalski’s grip tightened. He must have been in excruciating pain. “Gators,” he said at last through clenched teeth. “Gators in the sewers.”

* * *

Around 2:00 a.m., Ludlam decided to call it a night. He began retracing his steps, heading back to where he’d come down. The sewer was cold, and mist swirled in the beam from his flashlight. Something brushed against his foot, swimming through the fetid water. So far, he’d been lucky—nothing had bit him yet.

It was crazy to be down here—Ludlam knew that. But he couldn’t give up. Hell, he’d patiently sifted through sand and gravel for years. Was this really that different?

The smell hit him again. Funny how he could ignore it for hours at a time, then suddenly be overpowered by it. He reached up with his left hand, pinched his nostrils shut, and began breathing through his mouth.

Ludlam walked on, keeping his flashlight trained on the ground just a few feet in front of him. As he got closer to his starting point, he tilted the beam up and scanned the area ahead.

His heart skipped a beat.

A dark figure was blocking his way.

* * *

Paul Kowalski was in surgery for six hours. Dr. Jacobs and his team repaired tendons, sealed off blood vessels, and more. But the most interesting discovery was made almost at once, as one of Jacobs’s assistants was prepping the wound for surgery.

A white, fluted, gently curving cone about four inches long was partially embedded in Kowalski’s femur.

A tooth.

* * *

“What the hell are you doing down here?” said the man blocking Ludlam’s way. He was wearing a stained Sanitation Department jacket.

“I’m Dr. David Ludlam,” said Ludlam. “I’ve got permission.”

He reached into his raincoat’s pocket and pulled out the letter he always carried with him.

The sanitation worker took it and used his own flashlight to read it over. “Garbologist,” he said with a snort. “Never heard of it.”

“They give a course in it at Columbia,” said Ludlam. That much was true, but Ludlam wasn’t a garbologist. When he’d first approached the City government, he’d used a fake business card—amazing what you could do these days with a laser printer.

“Well, be careful,” said the man. “The sewers are dangerous. A guy I know got a hunk taken out of him by an alligator.”

“Oh, come on,” said Ludlam, perfectly serious. “There aren’t any gators down here.”

* * *

“Thank you for agreeing to see me, Professor Chong,” said Jacobs. Chong’s tiny office at the American Museum of Natural History was packed floor to ceiling with papers, computer printouts, and books in metal shelving units. Hanging from staggered coat hooks on the wall behind Chong was a stuffed anaconda some ten feet long.

“I treated a man two days ago who said he was bit by an alligator,” said Jacobs.

“Had he been down south?” asked Chong.

“No, no. He said it happened here, in New York. He’s a sewer worker, an -”

Chong laughed. “And he said he was bitten by an alligator down in the sewers, right?”

Jacobs felt his eyebrows lifting. “Exactly.”

Chong shook his head. “Guy’s trying to file a false insurance claim, betcha anything. There aren’t any alligators in our sewers.”

“I saw the wound,” said Jacobs. “Something took a massive bite out of him.”

“This alligators-in-the-sewers nonsense has been floating around for years,” said Chong. “The story is that kids bring home baby gators as pets from vacations in Florida, but when they grow tired of them, they flush ‘em down the toilet, and the things end up living in the sewers.”

“Well,” said Jacobs, “that sounds reasonable.”

“It’s crap,” said Chong. “We get calls here at the Herpetology Department about that myth from time to time—but that’s all it is: a myth. You know how cold it is out there today?”

“A little below freezing.”

“Exactly. Oh, I don’t doubt that some alligators have been flushed over the years—people flush all kinds of stuff. But even assuming gators could survive swimming in sewage, the winter temperatures here would kill them. Alligators are cold-blooded, Dr. Jacobs.”

Jacobs reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the tooth. “We extracted this from the man’s thigh,” he said, placing it on Chong’s cluttered desk.

Chong picked it up. “Seriously?”

“Yes.”

The herpetologist shook his head. “Well, it’s not a gator tooth—the root is completely wrong. But reptiles do shed their teeth throughout their lives—it’s not unusual for one or more to pop loose during a meal.” He ran his thumb lightly over the edge of the tooth. “The margin is serrated,” he said. “Fascinating. I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

* * *

Ludlam went down into the sewers again the next night. He wasn’t getting enough sleep—it was hard putting in a full day at the museum and then doing this after dark. But if he was right about what was happening...

Homeless people sometimes came into the sewers, too. They mostly left Ludlam alone. Some, of course, were schizophrenics—one of them shouted obscenities at Ludlam as he passed him in the dark tunnel that night.

The water flowing past Ludlam's feet was clumpy. He tried not to think about it.

If his theory was right, the best place to look would be near the biggest skyscrapers. As he often did, Ludlam was exploring the subterranean world in the area of the World Trade Center. There, the stresses would be the greatest.

Ludlam exhaled noisily. He thumbed off his flashlight, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the near-total darkness.

After about two minutes, he saw a flash of pale green light about ten feet in front of him.

* * *

Jacobs left Chong's office, but decided not to depart the museum just yet. It'd been years since he'd been here—the last time had been when his sister and her kids had come to visit from Iowa. He spent some time looking at various exhibits, and finally made his way into the dinosaur gallery. It had been fully renovated since the last time he'd seen it, and—

Christ.

Jesus Christ.

It wasn't identical, but it was close. Damn close.

The tooth that had been removed from Kowalski's leg looked very much like one of those on the museum's pride and joy – its Tyrannosaurus rex.

Chong had said there couldn't be alligators in New York's sewers.

Alligators were cold-blooded.

But dinosaurs -

His nephew had told him that last time they were here—he'd been six back then, and could rattle off endless facts and figures about the great beasts—

Dinosaurs had been warm-blooded.

It was crazy.

Crazy.

And yet -

He had the tooth. He had it right here, in his hand. Serrated, conical, white—

White. Not the brown of a fossilized tooth—White and fresh and modern.

Dinosaurs in the sewers of New York?

It didn't make any sense. But something had taken a huge bite out of Kowalski, and—

Jacobs ran out of the dinosaur gallery and hurried to the lobby. There were more dinosaurs there: the museum's rotunda was dominated by a giant Barosaurus, rearing up on its hind legs to defend its baby from two marauding Allosaurs. Jacobs rushed to the information desk. "I need to see a paleontologist," he panted, gripping the sides of the desk with both arms.

"Sir," said the young woman sitting behind the desk, "if you'll just calm down, I'll -"

Jacobs fumbled for his hospital ID and dropped it on the desktop. "I'm a doctor," he said. "It's—it's a medical emergency. Please hurry. I need to talk to a dinosaur specialist."

A security guard had moved closer to the desk, but the young woman held him at bay with her eyes. She picked up a black telephone handset and dialed an extension.

* * *

Piezoelectricity.

It had to be the answer, thought Ludlam, as he watched the pale green light pulsate in front of him.

Piezoelectricity was the generation of electricity in crystals that have been subjected to stress. He'd read a geological paper about it once—the skyscrapers in New York are the biggest in the world, and there are more of them here than anywhere else. They weigh tens of thousands of tons, and all of that weight is taken by girders sunk into the ground, transferring the stress to the rocks beneath. The piezoelectric discharges caused the flashes of light—

—and maybe, just maybe, caused a whole lot more.

* * *

"Son of a gun," said David Ludlam, the paleontologist who agreed to speak to Dr. Jacobs. "Son of a gun."

"It's a dinosaur tooth, isn't it?" asked the surgeon.

Ludlam was quiet for a moment, turning the tooth over and over while he stared at it. "Definitely a theropod tooth, yes—but it's not exactly a tyrannosaur, or anything else I've ever seen. Where on Earth did you get it?"

"Out of a man's leg. He'd been bitten."

Ludlam considered this. "The bite—was it a great scooping out, like this?" He gestured with a cupped hand.

"Yes—yes, that's it exactly."

"That's how a tyrannosaur kills, all right. We figure they just did one massive bite, scooping out a huge hunk of flesh, then waited patiently for the prey animal to bleed to death. But—but—"

"Yes?"

"Well, the last tyrannosaur died sixty-five million years ago."

"The asteroid impact, I know—"

"Oh, the asteroid had nothing to do with it. That's just a popular myth; you won't find many

paleontologists who endorse it. But all the dinosaurs have been dead since the end of the Cretaceous.”

“But this tooth looks fresh to me,” said Jacobs.

Ludlam nodded slowly. “It does seem to be, yes.” He looked at Jacobs. “I’d like to meet your patient.”

* * *

Ludlam ran toward the green light.

His feet went out from under him.

He fell down with a great splash, brown water going everywhere. The terminals on his flashlight’s giant battery hissed as water rained down on them.

Ludlam scrambled to his feet.

The light was still there.

He hurled himself toward it.

The light flickered and disappeared.

And Ludlam slammed hard against the slimy concrete wall of the sewer.

* * *

“Hello, Paul,” said Dr. Jacobs. “This is David Ludlam. He’s a paleontologist.”

“A what?” said Paul Kowalski. He was seated in a wheelchair. His leg was still bandaged, and a brace made sure he couldn’t move his knee while the tendons were still healing.

“A dinosaur specialist,” said Ludlam. He was sitting in one of the two chairs in Jacobs’ office. “I’m with the American Museum of Natural History.”

“Oh, yeah. You got great sewers there.”

“Umm, thanks. Look, I want to ask you about the animal that attacked you.”

“It was a gator,” said Kowalski.

“Why do you say that?”

Kowalski spread his hands. “‘Cause it was big and, well, not scaly, exactly, but covered with those little plates you see on gators at the zoo.”

“You could see it clearly?”

“Well, not that clearly. I was underground, after all. But I had my flashlight.”

“Was there anything unusual about the creature?”

“Yeah—it was some sort of cripple.”

“Cripple?”

“It had no arms.”

Ludlam looked at Jacobs, then back at the injured man. Jacobs lifted his hands, palms up, in a this-is-news-to-me gesture. “No arms at all?”

“None,” said Kowalski. “It had kind of reared up on its legs, and was holding its body like this.” He held an arm straight out, parallel to the floor.

“Did you see its eyes?”

“Christ, yes. I’ll never forget ‘em.”

“What did they look like?”

“They were yellow, and -”

“No, no. The pupils. What shape were they?”

“Round. Round and black.”

Ludlam leaned back in his chair.

“What’s significant about that?” asked Jacobs.

“Alligators have vertical pupils; so do most snakes. But not theropod dinosaurs.”

“How do you possibly know that?” said Jacobs. “I thought soft tissues don’t fossilize.”

“They don’t. But dinosaurs had tiny bones inside their eyes; you can tell from them what shape their pupils had been.”

“And?”

“Round. But it’s something most people don’t know.”

“You think I’m lying?” said Kowalski, growing angry. “Is that what you think?”

“On the contrary,” said Ludlam, his voice full of wonder. “I think you’re telling the truth.”

“Course I am,” said Kowalski. “I been with the City for eighteen years, and I never took a sick day—you can check on that. I’m a hard worker, and I didn’t just imagine this bite.”

He gestured dramatically at his bandaged leg. But then he paused, as if everything had finally sunk in. He looked from one man to the other. “You guys saying I was attacked by a dinosaur?”

Ludlam lifted his shoulders. “Well, all dinosaurs had four limbs. As you say, the one you saw must have been injured. Was there scarring where its forearms should have been?”

“No. None. Its chest was pretty smooth. I think maybe it was a birth defect—living down in the sewer, and all.”

Ludlam exhaled noisily. “There’s no way dinosaurs could have survived for sixty-five million years in North America without us knowing it. But…” He trailed off.

“Yes?” said Jacobs.

“Well, the lack of arms. You saw the T. rex skeleton we’ve got at the AMNH. What did you notice about its arms?”

The surgeon frowned.

“They were tiny, almost useless.”

“Growing smaller and smaller as time went by—more-ancient theropods had much bigger arms, and, of course, the distant ancestors of T. rex had walked around on all fours. If they hadn’t gone extinct, it’s quite conceivable that tyrannosaurs would have eventually lost their arms altogether.”

“But they did go extinct,” said Jacobs.

Ludlam locked eyes with the surgeon. “I’ve got to go down there,” he said.

* * *

Ludlam kept searching, night after night, week after week.

And finally, on a rainy April night a little after 1:00 a.m., he encountered another piezoelectric phenomenon.

The green light shimmered before his eyes.

It grew brighter.

And then—and then—an outline started to appear.

Something big.

Reptilian.

Three meters long, with a horizontally held back, and a stiff tail sticking out to the rear.

Ludlam could see through it—see right through it to the slick wall beyond.

Growing more solid now...

The chest was smooth. The thing lacked arms, just as Kowalski had said. But that wasn’t what startled Ludlam most.

The head was definitely tyrannosaurid—loaf-shaped, with ridges of bone above the eyes. But the top of the head rose up in a high dome.

Tyrannosaurs hadn’t just lost their arms over tens of millions of years of additional evolution. They’d apparently also become more intelligent. The domed skull could have housed a sizable brain.

The creature looked at Ludlam with round pupils. Ludlam’s flashlight was shaking violently in his hand, causing mad shadows to dance behind the dinosaur.

The dinosaur had *faded* in.

What if the dinosaurs hadn’t become extinct? It was a question Ludlam had pondered for years. Yes, in this reality, they had succumbed to—to something, no one knew exactly what. But in another reality—in another *timeline*—perhaps they hadn’t.

And here, in the sewers of New York, piezoelectric discharges were causing the timelines to merge.

The creature began moving. It was clearly solid now, clearly *here*. Its footfalls sent up great splashes of

water.

Ludlam froze. His head wanted to move forward, to approach the creature. His heart wanted to run as fast as he possibly could in the other direction.

His head won.

The dinosaur's mouth hung open, showing white conical teeth. There were some gaps—this might indeed have been the same individual that attacked Kowalski. But Kowalski had been a fool—doubtless he'd tried to run, or to ward off the approaching beast.

Ludlam walked slowly toward the dinosaur. The creature tilted its head to one side, as if puzzled. It could have decapitated Ludlam with a single bite, but for the moment it seemed merely curious. Ludlam reached up gently, placing his flat palm softly against the beast's rough, warm hide.

The dinosaur's chest puffed out, and it let loose a great roar. The sound started long and loud, but soon it was attenuating, growing fainter—

—as was the beast itself.

Ludlam felt a tingling over his entire body, and then pain shooting up into his brain, and then a shiver that ran down his spine as though a cold hand were touching each vertebra in turn, and then he was completely blind, and then there was a flash of absolutely pure, white light, and then—

—and then, he was there.

On the other side.

In the other timeline.

Ludlam had been in physical contact with the dinosaur as it had returned home, and he'd been swept back to the other side with it.

It had been nighttime in New York, and, of course, it was nighttime here. But the sky was crystal clear, with, just as it had been back in the other timeline, the moon perfectly full. Ludlam saw stars twinkling overhead—in precisely the patterns he was used to seeing whenever he got away from the city's lights.

This was the present day, and it was Manhattan Island—but devoid of skyscrapers, devoid of streets. They were at the bank of a river—a river long ago buried in the other timeline as part of New York's sanitation system.

The tyrannosaur was standing next to Ludlam. It looked disoriented, and was rocking back and forth on its two legs, its stiff tail almost touching the ground at the end of each arc.

The creature eyed Ludlam.

It had no arms; therefore, it had no technology. But Ludlam felt sure there must be a large brain beneath that domed skull. Surely it would recognize that Ludlam meant it no harm—and that his scrawny frame would hardly constitute a decent meal.

The dinosaur stood motionless. Ludlam opened his mouth in a wide, toothy grin—

—and the great beast did the same thing—

—and Ludlam realized his mistake—

A territorial challenge.

He ran as fast as he could.

Thank God for arms. He managed to clamber up a tree, out of reach of the tyrannosaur's snapping jaws.

He looked up. A pterosaur with giant furry wings moved across the face of the moon. Glorious.

He *would* have to be careful here.

But he couldn't imagine any place he'd rather be.

Sixty-five million years of additional evolution! And not the boring, base evolution of mice and moles and monkeys. No, this was *dinosaurian* evolution. The ruling reptiles, the terrible lizards—the greatest creatures the Earth had ever known, their tenure uninterrupted. The way the story of life was really meant to unfold. Ludlam's heart was pounding, but with excitement, not fear, as he looked down from his branch at the tyrannosaur-like being, its lean, muscled form stark in the moonlight.

He'd wait till morning, and then he'd try again to make friends with the dinosaur.

But—hot damn!—he was so pleased to be here, it *was* going to be a real struggle to keep from grinning.