



The Volcano

Lily stood and stared down into the bowl of the volcano. A slipping, sliding slope of shale led into the boiling cauldron of magma. The updraft from the hot air whipped her short, dark hair into a frenzy. Her green eyes glistened and reflected the red light. There was a tight knot in her stomach, evidence of the fear that gripped her. Now was the time.

She could just make out the dark recess halfway down the slope that she knew was the entrance to the cave. She'd lost several drones in the past week to make sure she had all the information she needed. The fact that she'd left a clear note with the coordinates and her intentions on her desk gave her some sense of comfort. If it all went wrong, at least somebody would know what had happened. The world needed to know what was down there.

Rocks and dust bounced around her feet as Lily scurried down the slope. It didn't take her long to reach the entrance, and she sprang onto the rough but flat ground of the cave. She caught her breath and looked around. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, almost touching the stalagmites that rose from the ground to meet them. It looked like the jaws of an enormous beast. Lily shivered but pulled herself together. If she couldn't handle the thought of an imagined giant animal, she'd have no chance where she was heading. Not if her suspicions were correct.

She'd first had the idea that there might be something underneath the volcano the previous year. She'd been analysing rocks that had been thrown out by an earlier eruption. She'd seen evidence of plants that hadn't existed for millions of years, still alive on the stone. As a child, she'd adored Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and it didn't take a great leap to understand what her discovery meant.

Ahead of her, the cave wound back and forth but always downward. She soon lost any sense of how deep she was, but she knew that she must have been underneath the base of the volcano. The tunnel ended abruptly when it opened out onto a vast underground cavern. It was like a window to another world - an ornate, stained-glass window that showed a time long ago. The cavern stretched for miles in all directions; the farthest reaches were lost out of sight. Ancient tree ferns rose tens of meters from the ground, even the smallest plants stood taller than Lily.

Something large roared close enough to prick the hairs on the back of Lily's neck. At first, Lily couldn't work out where the light was coming from; it was nearly as bright as midday on the surface. She realised that it was falling from above in wide shafts, and she had to assume that there must be hidden tunnels in the side of the volcano that allow light to pass down. If not, then it was something beyond her imagination.

A dark shadow drifted lazily overhead. Lily glanced up and stared at the leathery underbelly of a large, flying reptile. It was a pterosaur. Lily's assumption had been spot on: she'd found a lost land of dinosaurs.