

ASTOUNDING

SCIENCE-FICTION

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Contents for September, 1942, Vol. XXX, No. 1

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Cover by William Timmins

Illustrations by Kolliker, Kramer, Ley, Orban and Schneeman

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STARVATION

By Fredric Brown

● He was the mighty hunter, the giant tyrant-lizard king of the world.
All feared him, all—ran from him, ran on fleet little mammalian feet.

Illustrated by Kramer

For many days now he had wandered ponderously through the hungry forests, across the hungry plains of dwarf scrub and sand, and had wandered along the lush edges of the streams that flowed down to the big water. Always hungry.

It seemed to him that he had always been hungry.

Sometimes there was something to eat, yes, but it was always something small. One of the little things with hoofs, one of the little things with three toes. All so small. One of them was not more than enough to put a keener edge on that monstrous saurian appetite of his.

And they ran so fast, the little things. He saw them, and his huge mouth would slaver as he ran earth-shakingly toward them, but off they whisked among the trees like little furry streaks. In frantic haste to catch them, he would bowl over the smaller trees that were in the way, but always they were gone when he got there.

Gone on their tiny legs that went faster than his mighty ones. One stride of his was more distance—devouring than fifty of theirs, but those flashing little legs flickered a hundred strides to his one. Even in the open where there were no trees for them to dodge among, he could not catch them.

A hundred years of hunger.

He, *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, king of all, mightiest and most vicious fighting engine of flesh that ever the world had evolved, was able to kill anything that stood against him. But nothing stood against him. They ran.

The little things. They ran. They flew, some of them. Others climbed trees and swung from limb to limb as fast as he could run along the ground until they came to a tree tall enough to be well out of his twenty-five-foot reach and thick enough of bole that he could not uproot it, and then they would hang ten feet above the grasp of his great jaws. And gibber at him when he roared in baffled, hungry rage.

Hungry, always hungry.

A hundred years of not-quite-enough. Last of his kind, and there was nothing left to stand up

against him and fight, and fill his stomach when he had killed it.

His slate-gray skin hung upon him in loose, wrinkled folds as he shriveled away within it, from the ever-present ache and agony of hunger in his guts.

His memory was short, but vaguely he knew that it had not always been thus. He'd been younger once, and he'd fought terribly against things that fought back. They had been scarce and hard to find even then, but occasionally he met them. And killed them.

The big, armor-plated one with the terrible sharp ridges along his back, who tried to roll over on you and cut you in half. The one with the three huge forward-pointing horns and the big ruff of heavy bone. Those had been ones who went on four legs; or had gone on four legs until he had met them. Then they had stopped going.

There had been others more nearly like himself. Some had been many times bigger than he, but he had killed them with ease. The biggest ones of all had little heads and small mouths and ate leaves off the trees and plants on the ground.

Yes, there had been giants on the earth, those days. A few of them. Satisfying meals. Things you could kill and eat your fill of, and lie gorged and somnolent for days. Then eat again if the pesky leather-wings with the long bills of teeth hadn't finished off the Gargantuan feast while you had slept.

But if they had, it did not matter. Stride forth again, and kill again to eat if hungry, for the pure joy of fighting and killing if you were not hungry. Anything that came along. He'd killed them all—the horned ones, the armored ones, the monster ones. Anything that walked or crawled. His sides and flanks were rough and seamed with the ancient scars of ancient battles.

There'd been giants in those days. Now there were the *little* things. The things that ran, and flew, and climbed. And wouldn't fight.

Ran so fast they could run in circles around him, some of them. Always, almost always, out of



reach of his curved, pointed, double-edged teeth that were six inches long, and that could—but rarely had the chance to—shear through one of the little hairy things at a single bite, while warm blood coursed down the scaly hide of his neck.

Yes, he could get one of them, once in a while. But not often enough, not enough of them to satisfy that monstrous hunger that was Tyrannosaurus Rex, king of the tyrant reptiles. Now a king without a kingdom.

It was a burning within him, that dreadful hunger. It drove him, always.

It drove him today as he went heavy-footed through the forest, scorning paths, crashing his way through heavy underbrush and sapling trees as though they were grass of the plains.

Always before him the scurry and rush of the footsteps of the little ones, the quick click of

hoofs, the *pad-pad* of the softer feet as they ran, ran.

It teemed with life, that forest of the Eocene. But with *fleet* life which, in smallness and speed, had found safety from the tyrant.

Life, it was, that wouldn't stand up and fight, with bellowing roars that shook the earth, with blood streaming from slaving jowls as monster fought monstrosity. This was life that gave you the run-around, that wouldn't fight and be killed.

Even in the steaming swamps. There were slippery things that slithered into the muddy water there, but they, too, were fast. They swam like wriggling lightning, slid into hollow rotten logs and weren't there when you ripped the logs apart.

It was getting dark, and there was a weakness upon him that made it excruciating pain for him

to take another step. He'd been hungry a hundred years, but this was worst of all. But it was not a weakness that made him stop; it was something that drove him on, made him keep going when every step was effort.

High in a big tree, something that clung to a branch was going "Yahh! Yahh! Yahh!" mocking and monotonously, and a broken piece of branch arced down and bounded harmlessly off his heavy hide. Lese majesty. For a moment he was stronger in the hope that something was going to fight.

He whirled and snapped at the branch that had struck him, and it splintered. And then he stood at fullest height and bellowed challenge at the little thing in the big tree, high overhead. But it would not come down; it went "Yahh! Yahh! Yahh!" and stayed there in cowardly safety.

He threw himself mightily against the trunk of the tree, but it was five feet thick, and he could not even shake it. He circled twice, roaring his bafflement, and then blundered on into gathering darkness.

Ahead of him, in one of the saplings, was a little gray thing, a ball of fur. He snapped at it, but it wasn't there when he closed his jaws upon the wood. He saw only a dim gray streak as it hit the ground and ran, gone in shadows before he could take a single step.

Darker, and though he could see dimly in the woods, he could see more clearly when he came to the moonlit plain. Still driven on. There was something to his left, something small and alive sitting on haunches on a patch of barren soil. He wheeled to run toward it. It didn't move until he was almost there; then with the suddenness of lightning it popped down a hole and vanished.

His footsteps were slower after that, his muscles responded sluggishly.

At dawn he came to the stream.

It was effort for him to reach it, but he got there and lowered his great head to drink, and drank deeply. The gnawing pain in his stomach rose, a moment, to crescendo, and then dulled. He drank more.

And slowly, ponderously, he sank down to the muddy soil. He didn't fall, but his legs gave way gradually, and he lay there, the rising sun in his eyes, unable to move. The pain that had been in his stomach was all over him now, but dulled, more an aching weakness than an agony.

The sun rose high overhead and sank slowly.

He could see but dimly now, and there were winged things that circled overhead. Things that swept the sky with lazy, cowardly circles. They were food, but they wouldn't come down and fight.

And when it got dark enough, there were other things that came. There was a circle of eyes two feet off the ground, and an excited yapping now and then, and a howl. Little things, food that wouldn't fight and be eaten. The kind of life that gave you the run-around.

Circle of eyes. Wings against the moonlit sky.

Food all about him, but fleet food that ran away on flashing legs the minute it saw or heard, and that had eyes and ears too sharp ever to fail to see or hear. The fast little things that ran and wouldn't fight.

He lay with his head almost at the water's edge. At dawn when the red sun was again in his eyes, he managed to drag his mighty bulk a foot forward so he could drink again. He drank deeply, and a convulsive shudder ran through him and then he lay very quietly with his head in the water.

And the winged things overhead circled slowly down.

THE END.