

A Sound of Thunder – Intermediate Level Story

The sign on the wall seemed to to be moving under a thin film of warm water. Eckels closed his eyes for a moment, the sign burned in his memory:

TIME SAFARI, INC.
SAFARIS TO ANY YEAR IN THE PAST.
YOU NAME THE ANIMAL.
WE TAKE YOU THERE.
YOU SHOOT IT.

Warm liquid gathered in Eckels' throat. He swallowed and pushed it down. The muscles around his mouth formed a smile as he put his hand slowly out upon the air. In that hand he waved a check for ten thousand dollars to the man behind the desk.

"Don't I get some kind of document promising that I will come back alive?"

"We promise nothing," said the official, "except the dinosaurs." He turned. "This is Mr Travis, your Safari Leader in the Past. He'll tell you what and where to shoot. If he says no shooting, no shooting. If you don't do as he says, you will have to pay another ten thousand dollars, plus face possible government action, on your return."

Eckels looked quickly across the large office. Hundreds of wires snaking together so as to look like a single mass, gave off low continuous sound. Metal boxes gave off ever changing bands of light... now orange, now silver, now blue. There was a sound like a huge fire burning all of Time, all the years and all the calendars, all the hours piled high and set on fire.

"Unbelievable." Eckels breathed, the lights from the Machine on his thin face. "A real Time Machine." He shook his head. "Makes you think. If the election had gone badly yesterday, I might be here now running away from the results. Thank God Keith won. He'll make a fine President of the United States."

"Yes," said the man behind the desk. "We're lucky. If Deutscher had gotten in, we'd have the worst kind of government. There's a man who is for war but against everything else; against religion, against helping people, and against people knowing too much. People called us up, you know, joking but not joking. They said if Deutscher became President, they wanted to go and live in 1492. Of course it's not our business to sell Escapes, but to run Safaris. Anyway, Keith is President now. All you got to worry about is..."

"Shooting my dinosaur!" Eckels finished it for him.

"A Tyrannosaurus Rex. The King of Dinosaurs, the most amazing monster in history. Sign this form saying that if anything happens to you, we're not responsible. Those dinosaurs are hungry."

Eckels face turned red. "Are you trying to scare me!" he said angrily.

"To be honest, yes. We don't want anyone going who'll get scared and do something silly at the first sign of danger. Six Safari guides were killed last year, and twelve hunters. We're here to give you the most exciting experience a real hunter ever asked for. Taking you back sixty million years to shoot the biggest game in all of Time. Your personal check's still there. Tear it up."

Mr Eckels looked at the check. There was a small movement of his fingers.

"Good luck," said the man behind the desk. "Mr Travis, he's all yours."

They moved silently across the room, taking their guns with them, toward the Machine, toward the silver metal and the roaring light.

First a day and then a night and then a day and then a night, then it was day-night-day-night. A week, a month, a year, ten years! A.D. 2055. A.D. 2019. 1999! 1957! Gone! The Machine roared.

They put on their oxygen helmets and tested the radios.

Eckels moved from side to side on the soft seat, his face white, his mouth closed tightly. He felt his arms shaking and looked down and found his hands tight on the new rifle. There were four other men in the Machine. Travis, the Safari Leader, his assistant, Lesperance, and two other hunters, Billings and Kramer. They sat looking at each other, as the years flew by around them.

"Can these guns kill a dinosaur with one shot?" Eckels felt his mouth saying.

"If you hit them right," said Travis on the helmet radio. "Some dinosaurs have two brains; one in the head another far down the backbone. We stay away from those. That's too dangerous. Put your first two shots into the eyes, if you can. They will blind them, and go back into the brain."

The Machine screamed. Time was a film run backward. Suns went quickly by and ten million moons went by after them. "Think," said Eckels. "Every hunter that ever lived would love to be us today. This makes Africa seem like Illinois."

The Machine slowed; its scream fell to a whisper. The Machine stopped.

The sun stopped in the sky.

The fog that had been around the Machine blew away. They were in an old time, a very old time indeed, three hunters and two Safari guides with their blue metal guns across their knees.

"The first human isn't born yet," said Travis, "The Pyramids are still in the earth, waiting to be cut out and built. Remember that. Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler... none of them exists."

"Outside," Travis pointed, "is the jungle of sixty million two thousand and fifty-five years before President Keith."

He indicated a metal path that went off into the distance, over a streaming swamp among giant trees and plants.

"And that," he said, "is the Path laid by Time Safari for your use. It doesn't touch so much as one piece of grass, flower, or tree. It's made of a special metal that floats six inches above the earth. This is to keep you from touching this world of the past in any way. Stay on the Path. Don't go off it. I repeat. Don't go off. For any reason! If you fall off, it will cost you a lot of money. And don't shoot any animal we don't okay."

"Why?" asked Eckels.

The Machine sat in the ancient jungle. Distant bird cries blew on a wind. There was the smell of wet grass and an old salt sea. There were huge flowers on the trees the color of blood.

"We don't want to change the Future. We don't have a place here in the Past. The government doesn't like us here. We have to pay a lot of money to certain people to be able to be here. Running a Time Machine a difficult business. Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, an insect, a flower even. Doing that could destroy an important link in a growing species."

"I don't understand," said Eckels.

"All right," Travis continued, "say you accidentally step on one mouse here and it dies. That means all the future families of this one particular mouse are destroyed, right?"

"Right"

"And all the families of the families of the families of that one mouse! With a single step, you kill first one, then ten, then a thousand, a million, a billion possible mice!"

"So they're dead," said Eckels. "So what?"

"So what?" answered Travis a little angrily. "Well, what about the foxes that'll need those mice to survive? For want of ten mice, a fox dies. For want of ten foxes a lion dies. For want of a lion, all manner of insects, birds, countless billions of life forms are destroyed. Then, fifty-nine million years later, a caveman, one of only twelve in the whole world, goes hunting wild animals for food. But you, friend, have stepped on all the animals in that region. By stepping on one single mouse. So the caveman does not have enough food and dies. And that caveman, please note, is not just any man. No! He is a future nation. He would have had ten sons, and they would have had one hundred sons, and so on to create a whole race. Destroy this one man, and you destroy a nation and the part of our history that goes with it.

The step of your foot, on one mouse, could start a series of events, the effects of which could shake our earth and future down through Time. With the death of that one caveman, a billion others will die before they are born. Perhaps Rome never rises on its seven hills. Perhaps Europe is forever a dark forest, and only Asia rises, healthy and full of people. Step on a mouse and you pull down the Pyramids. Step on a mouse and you leave your mark, like a Grand Canyon, across all of Time. Queen Elizabeth might never be born, there might never be a United States. So be careful. Stay on the Path. Never step off!"

"I see," said Eckels. "Then it wouldn't pay for us even to touch the grass?"

"Correct. Destroying certain plants could have an effect too small to be seen now. But it could add up bit by bit over sixty million years into a major change. Of course, all this may be wrong."

"Maybe Time can't be changed by us. Or maybe it can be changed only in little ways that no one will notice. A dead mouse here could mean a few too many insects there, but a huge increase in insect populations millions of years later. Crops destroyed over wide areas, millions dead from not having enough food, and finally changes in the social structure of whole countries. Or it could take something even smaller... a soft breath, a whisper, a hair, pollen on the air, such a slight, slight change that unless you looked close you wouldn't see it. Who knows? Who really can say he knows? We don't know. We're guessing. But until we do know for certain whether our messing around in Time can make a big difference to history, we're being careful. This Machine, this Path, your clothing and bodies, were sterilized, as you know, before the journey. We wear these oxygen helmets so we can't introduce our bacteria into the ancient air."

"How do we know which animals to shoot?"

"They're marked with red paint," said Travis. "Today, before our journey, we sent Lesperance back with the Machine. He came to this time and followed certain animals."

"Studying them?"

"Right," said Lesperance. "I follow them through their whole lives, noting which of them lives longest. Very few. How many times they have young. Not often. Life's short. When I find one that's going to die by accident, such as when a tree falls on him, I note the exact hour, minute, and second. I shoot a paint bomb. It leaves a red mark on his side. We can't miss it. Then I plan our journey into the Past so that we meet the Monster not more than two minutes before he would have died anyway. This way, we kill only animals with no future, that are never going to have young again. You see how careful we are?"

"But if you come back this morning in Time," said Eckels excitedly, you must have met us, our Safari! How did it turn out? Was it successful? Did all of us get through... alive?"

Travis and Lesperance gave each other a look.

"That would be a paradox," said Lesperance. "Time doesn't permit that sort of thing... a man meeting himself. When such things look like happening, Time moves out of the way. Like an airplane hitting an air pocket. You felt the Machine jump just before we stopped? That was us passing ourselves on the way back to the Future. We saw nothing. There's no way of telling if this Safari was a success, if we got our monster, or whether all of us - meaning you, Mr Eckels - got out alive."

Eckels smiled weakly.

"Enough," said Travis sharply. "Everyone on his feet!"

They were ready to leave the Machine.

The jungle was high and the jungle was broad and the jungle was the whole world forever and forever. Sounds like music and sounds like flying tents filled the sky. Those were pterodactyls flying high above with huge gray wings.

Eckels, standing on the narrow Path, pointed his rifle at one playfully.

"Stop that!" said Travis. "Don't even point your gun at something for fun, you fool! If your guns should go off... "

Eckels looked angry. "Where's our Tyrannosaurus?"

Lesperance checked his watch. "In front of us. We'll meet him in sixty seconds. Look for the red paint! Don't shoot till we give the word. Stay on the Path. Stay on the Path!"

They moved forward in the wind of morning.

"Strange," said Eckels quietly. "In sixty million years, Election Day over. Keith made President. Everyone celebrating. And here we are, a million years lost, and they don't exist. The things we worried about for months, a lifetime, not even born or thought of yet."

"Safety catches off, everyone!" ordered Travis. "You, first shot, Eckels. Second, Billings, Third, Kramer."

"I've hunted tiger, wild pig, buffalo, elephant, but now, this is it," said Eckels. "I'm shaking like a kid."

"Ah," said Travis.

Everyone stopped.

Travis raised his hand. "There," he whispered. "In the mist. There he is. There's His Royal Majesty now."

The jungle was wide and full of sounds.

Suddenly it all stopped, as if someone had shut a door.

Silence.

A sound of thunder.

Out of the mist, one hundred yards away, came Tyrannosaurus Rex.

"It," whispered Eckels. "It....."

"Sh!"

It came on great oiled, powerful legs. It towered thirty feet above half of the trees, a great evil god, holding its small arms close to its oily chest.

Each lower leg was like a powerful machine, a thousand pounds of white bone, sunk in thick ropes of muscle, covered in rock-like skin. Each upper leg was a ton of meat and bone, as strong as steel. From the great chest, two tiny arms hung out front. Arms with hands which might pick up and examine men like toys as the snake-like neck made itself ready to eat them. And the head itself, like a ton of shaped stone, lifted easily upon the sky. Its mouth was open, showing a fence of teeth like large, sharp knives. Its huge eyes rolled, empty of all expression except hunger. It closed its mouth in a deathly smile. It ran, its body pushing trees and bushes out of the way as if they were not there. As it moved, its feet dug into the wet earth, leaving foot prints six inches deep wherever it put its weight.

It ran far too smoothly for its ten tons. It moved into an area of sunlight and suddenly stopped, its beautifully reptilian hands feeling the air.

"Why, why," said Eckels in wonder, "it could reach up and take hold of the moon."

"Sh!" Travis said angrily. "He hasn't seen us yet."

"It can't be killed," Eckels said quietly, as if there could be no argument. He had weighed the evidence and this was his considered opinion. The rifle in his hands seemed a toy. "We were fools to come. This is impossible."

"Shut up!" whispered Travis.

"Nightmare."

"Turn around," commanded Travis. "Walk quietly to the Machine. We'll give you back half your fee."

"I didn't think it would be this big," said Eckels. "I made a mistake, that's all. And now I want out."

"It sees us!"

"There's the red paint on its chest!"

The great dinosaur raised itself. Its thick skin shone like a thousand green coins. The coins were covered by a thick, sticky liquid in which tiny insects moved. The whole body seemed to move, even though the monster itself stood still. It breathed out. The terrible smell of dead meat blew down upon them.

"Get me out of here," said Eckels. "It was never like this before. I was always sure I'd come through alive. I had good guides, good safaris, and safety. This time, I got it wrong. I've met my match. This is too much for me to handle."

"Don't run," said Lesperance. "Turn around. Hide in the Machine."

"Yes." Eckels seemed unable to move. He looked at his feet as if trying to make them walk. He gave a cry of helplessness.

"Eckels!"

He looked as if he could not understand what was happening, and took a few small steps.

"Not that way!"

The Monster, at the first motion, ran forward with a terrible scream. It covered one hundred yards in six seconds. The rifles lifted and fired. The Monster roared, teeth shining in the sun, and the smell of old blood that came from its mouth was all around them.

The rifles fired again. Their sound was lost in scream and dinosaur thunder. The reptile moved its great tail from side to side. Trees exploded in clouds of leaf and branch. The Monster moved its small hands down toward the men, to break them in half, to push them into its teeth and its screaming throat. Its eyes leveled with the men. They saw themselves mirrored. They fired at the wild black circle in the center of each eye.

Like a mountain avalanche, Tyrannosaurus fell.

Thundering, it held on to trees and pulled them with it. It pulled and tore the metal Path. The men threw themselves back and away. The body hit, ten tons of cold meat and stone. The guns fired. The Monster moved its heavy tail again, made a sudden movement of its neck, and lay still. A fountain of blood shot out from its throat. Somewhere inside, a bag of liquids broke open. Sickening sprays of blood and the terrible smelling liquid covered the hunters. They stood.

The thunder died away.

The jungle was silent. After the avalanche, a green peace. After the nightmare, morning.

Billings and Kramer sat on the pathway and were sick. Travis and Lesperance stood with smoking rifles, cursing. In the Time Machine, on his face, Eckels lay shaking. He had found his way back to the Path, climbed into the Machine.

Travis came in, looked at Eckels, took some special cloth from a metal box, and returned to the others, who were still sitting on the Path.

"Clean up."

They wiped the blood from their helmets. They began to curse too. The Monster lay, a mountain of solid meat. Within, you could hear sounds as the furthest parts of it died; everything shutting off, closing down forever. It was like standing by the engine of a train that has just crashed. The weight of its body broke the tiny arms, caught underneath. The meat settled, shaking.

Another sound of something breaking. Far above, a giant tree branch broke off and fell. It crashed upon the dead dinosaur with finality.

"There." Lesperance checked his watch. "Right on time. That's the branch that was supposed to fall and kill this animal originally." He looked at the two hunters. "You want a picture?"

"What?"

"We can't take a piece of it back to the Future. The body has to stay right here where it would have died originally, so the insects, birds, and bacteria can get at it, as they were meant to. Everything in balance. The body stays. But we can take a picture of you standing next to it."

The two men tried to think, but gave up, shaking their heads.

They let themselves be led along the metal Path. They sank into their seats in the Machine. They looked back at the dead Monster, where already strange birds and golden insects were busy at the thick skin. A sound on the floor of the Time Machine made them turn. Eckels sat there, shaking.

"I'm sorry," he said at last.

"Get up!" cried Travis.

Eckels got up.

"Go out on that Path alone," said Travis. He had his rifle pointed, "You're not coming back in the Machine. We're leaving you here!"

Lesperance held Travis's arm. "Wait..."

"Stay out of this!" Travis shook his hand away. "This fool nearly killed us. But it isn't that so much, no. It's his shoes! Look at them! He ran off the Path. That could destroy our business! We'll lose thousands of dollars. We have a contract with the government that says no one leaves the Path. He left it. Oh, the fool! I'll have to report it. They might not let us travel anymore. Who knows what he's done to Time, to History!"

"Take it easy, all he did was kick up some dirt."

"How do we know?" cried Travis. "We don't know anything! No one knows! Get out of here, Eckels!"

Eckels felt for his shirt. "I'll pay anything. A hundred thousand dollars!"

Travis looked angrily at Eckels' check book and spat. "Go out there. The Monster's next to the Path. Stick your arms up to your elbows in his mouth. Then you can come back with us."

"That's not fair!"

"The Monster's dead, you fool. The bullets! The bullets can't be left behind. They shouldn't be left in the Past; they might change something. Here's my knife. Dig them out!"

The jungle was alive again, full of the old movements and bird cries. Eckels turned slowly to look at the hill of nightmares and fear. After a long time, like someone walking in their sleep, he walked off slowly along the Path.

He returned, shaking, five minutes later, his arms were covered in blood to the elbows. He held out his hands. Each held a number of steel bullets. Then he fell. He lay where he fell, not moving.

"You didn't have to make him do that," said Lesperance.

"Didn't I? It's too early to tell." Travis pushed the still body with his foot. "He'll live. Next time he won't go hunting game like this. Okay." With a tired movement of his thumb, he gave the signal to start the Machine. "Switch on," he said. "Let's go home."

1492. 1776. 1812.

They cleaned their hands and faces. They changed their dirty shirts and pants. Eckels was up and moving around again, not speaking. Travis gave him an angry look for a full ten minutes.

"Don't look at me," cried Eckels. "I haven't done anything."

"Who can tell?"

"Just ran off the Path, that's all, a little mud on my shoes... what do you want me to do... get down and pray?"

"We might need it. I'm warning you, Eckels, I might kill you yet. I've got my gun ready."

"I've done nothing wrong. It'll be O.K.!"

1999. 2000. 2055.

The Machine stopped.

"Get out," said Travis.

The room was there as they had left it. But not the same as they had left it. The same man sat behind the same desk. But the same man did not quite sit behind the same desk. Travis looked around

quickly. "Everything okay here?" he said sharply.

"Fine. Welcome home!"

Travis did not relax. He seemed to be looking through the one high window.

"Okay, Eckels, get out. Don't ever come back." Eckels could not move.

"You heard me," said Travis. "What're you looking at?"

Eckels stood smelling the air. There was something different about it, a difference so slight that he could not identify it. The colors, white, gray, blue, orange, in the wall, in the furniture, in the sky outside, were not quite right. And there was a strange feel. His body and hands did not feel right. He stood, sensing the oddness in every part of his body.

Somewhere, someone must have been blowing one of those whistles that only a dog can hear. His body screamed silence in return. Outside this room, away from this man seated at this desk which are both not quite the same desk, lay a whole world of streets and people. What sort of world was it now? There was no telling. He could feel them moving out there.

But the immediate thing was the sign painted on the office wall, the same sign he had read earlier today on first entering. Somehow, the sign had changed:

TYME SEFARI INC.
SEFARIS TU ANY YEER EN THE PAST.
YU NAIM THE ANIMALL.
WEE TAEK YU THAIR.
YU SHOOT ITT.

Eckels felt himself fall into a chair. He looked at the thick mud on his boots. He broke off a piece of the mud and held it up, shaking, "No, it can't be. Not a little thing like that. No!"

Stuck in the mud was a brightly colored butterfly, very beautiful and very dead.

"Not a little thing like that! Not a butterfly!" cried Eckels.

It fell to the floor, more delicate and colorful than anything seen in this world. A small thing that could upset balances and cause small changes and then big changes and then huge changes, all down the years across Time. Eckels mind raced. It couldn't change things. Killing one butterfly couldn't be that important! Could it?

His face was cold. He asked in a frightened voice: "Who... who won the presidential election yesterday?"

The man behind the desk laughed. "You joking? You know very well. Deutscher, of course! Who else? Not that weak fool Keith. We have got an iron man now, a man who isn't afraid of anyone or anything!" The official stopped. "What's wrong?"

Eckels gave out a long, low cry as if in pain. He dropped to his knees. He tried to pick up the green and gold butterfly with shaking fingers. "Can't we," he pleaded to the world, to himself, to the officials, to the Machine, "can't we take it back, can't we make it alive again? Can't we start over? Can't we..."

He did not move. Eyes shut, he waited, shivering. He heard Travis breathe loudly. He heard Travis lift his rifle, click the safety catch, and raise the weapon.

There was a sound of thunder.