

Title: Standard Operating Procedures for the Uncharted and Underpaid

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Word Count: 1,935

The worst part about being hunted by hyper-intelligent prehistoric apex predators wasn't the looming threat of agonizing death. It was the fact that Toby's corporate polo shirt was 100% polyester, and the uncharted Amazonian humidity was doing zero favors for his skin.

"Move, Toby! Faster!" Dr. Vance hissed from ahead, her expensive, state-of-the-art machete hacking wildly at a wall of ferns.

"I am moving, Dr. Vance!" Toby gasped, clutching a heavy, waterproof case of soil samples to his chest like a newborn child. "But structurally speaking, my ankles were not built for a tactical retreat!"

They had been in the jungle for three days on a privately funded botanical expedition. They were supposed to be looking for rare ferns. Instead, they had found things that ate rare ferns, along with anything else that had a pulse.

A low, rhythmic clicking sound echoed from the dense canopy above them. It didn't sound like a bird. It sounded like two polished stones being struck together in a sequence that felt dangerously like code.

"They're flanking us," Vance whispered, freezing in her tracks.

Toby stopped too, his lungs burning. He looked up. Through the thick layer of prehistoric leaves, he caught a glimpse of it. It wasn't a lumbering monster from a museum. It was sleek, feathered in iridescent blacks and deep greens, with eyes that didn't hold the blank stare of an animal. They held calculations. It was a raptor, but smaller, more refined. A *Velociraptor osmolskae*, if Toby remembered his freshman paleontology elective correctly before he panicked and changed his major to marketing.

The creature tilted its head. It didn't roar. It just blinked, making that awful clicking sound again.

A second later, an answering click came from the bushes directly to Toby's left.

"We're dead," Toby stated, remarkably calm now that the adrenaline had maxed out his nervous system. "If I die, please tell my mom I didn't steal her Netflix password, it was my brother."

"Shut up, Toby," Vance muttered, though her hand was shaking so badly she almost dropped her machete.

Then, the world changed.

It didn't start with a sound, but a feeling. The ground beneath Toby's mud-caked sneakers vibrated, a deep, sub-audible hum that made his teeth ache. The clicking above them stopped instantly. The iridescent raptor in the trees stiffened, its feathers puffing up as its attention snapped away from its human prey and toward the mountain ridge towering over the valley. The air grew suffocatingly hot. A smell hit them a second later, sharp and chemical, like burning copper and ozone.

"Is that... a volcano?" Toby asked.

"There are no active volcanoes in this sector," Vance said, her voice dropping into a register of pure terror. "That's not smoke."

A sound tore through the jungle, shattering the silence. It wasn't a biological roar. It sounded like a massive, metallic grinding, followed by a screech that tore through the air like tearing silk. Up

on the ridge, the trees didn't just sway; they snapped like toothpicks as something massive descended.

Toby squinted through the sweat stinging his eyes. Through the foliage, he saw a silhouette that defied every law of nature. It was huge, easily the size of a three-story building, shifting and undulating with an oily, liquid-black surface that seemed to absorb the sunlight. It didn't have legs; it slid and pulsed forward, leaving a trail of withered, smoking black sludge in its wake. Everywhere its shadow fell, the vibrant jungle plants literally melted into gray ash. It was a localized, living extinction event.

"What is that?" Toby yelled over the rising screech of the anomaly. "Dr. Vance, what is that?!" He turned around, but Dr. Vance was already gone. She had bolted back toward the riverbed, her machete abandoned in the mud.

"Brilliant. Great leadership," Toby muttered to himself.

He went to turn and follow her, but his foot caught on a hidden root. He went down hard, the waterproof sample case flying from his grip and sliding into a ravine. He scrambled to his feet, but the air was growing heavy, making it hard to breathe. The black anomaly was moving down the ridge with terrifying speed, its metallic screeching vibrating in Toby's chest cavity. The heat radiating off it was blistering.

He was trapped. The anomaly was coming from the north, the river was too far, and the jungle to his right was a wall of thorns.

Suddenly, a heavy weight slammed into his shoulders, knocking him flat into the dirt again. Toby braced for the teeth, closing his eyes and waiting for the end.

Instead, a sharp, violent tug snapped at his backpack strap.

Toby rolled over. The iridescent raptor was standing over him. It wasn't biting. It had its jaws clamped firmly onto the top loop of his backpack, pulling him backward with surprising strength. Two other raptors were flanking them, their eyes fixed entirely on the black mass sliding down the mountain.

"What are you doing?" Toby shrieked, scrambling backward on his hands and knees to help the creature pull him. "We are not friends! I am a tier-three subscriber to your downfall!"

The raptor let go of his bag, gave a sharp, high-pitched whistle, and nudged Toby's shoulder violently with its snout, pushing him toward a narrow, hidden crevice in the limestone cliffside behind them.

It wasn't an act of mercy. It was tactical.

As Toby scrambled into the narrow cave, the three raptors squeezed in right behind him. The space was incredibly tight. Toby was pressed flat against the damp stone wall, while the largest raptor's feathered flank was shoved directly against his chest. He could feel its heart hammering like a machine gun. It smelled like wet bird and old leather.

Outside, the darkness arrived.

The entrance to the cave went completely black as the anomaly slid past. The metallic screeching was so loud Toby had to cover his ears, screaming just to relieve the pressure in his eardrums. Through the cracks, he could see the liquid-black mass pulsing. A stray tendril of the substance lashed near the cave opening, and the rock itself began to hiss and dissolve into bubbling liquid.

The raptor pressed against Toby let out a low, terrified whine, its intelligent eyes wide with panic.

In that moment, the absurdity of the universe washed over Toby. He was a nineteen-year-old college student, trapped in a hole, cuddling a resurrected killing machine to survive an eldritch horror.

Without thinking, Toby reached out his hand and placed it flat against the raptor's side. "Hey," he croaked, his voice barely audible over the roaring outside. "Easy. If we survive this, I won't tell anyone you whimpered."

The raptor's eyes snapped to his. For a second, Toby thought it was going to bite his face off. Instead, the creature lowered its head, leaning a fraction of its immense weight against him, stabilizing them both as the cave rattled around them.

For ten agonizing minutes, the world outside dissolved. The heat inside the cave rose to sauna-like levels, and Toby was convinced they were going to bake alive. But the limestone held.

Slowly, the screeching began to fade. The suffocating heat dissipated, replaced by the cool, damp draft of the deep cave network.

The raptor was the first to move. It slid out of the crevice cautiously, its claws clicking softly on the floor. Toby crawled out after it, blinking against the returning sunlight.

The jungle was unrecognizable. A massive, sixty-foot-wide swath of pure, sterile gray ash cut straight through the valley. Trees, bushes, insects, everything had been wiped clean, as if a giant eraser had been dragged across the earth. Down by the riverbed, Toby could see the charred, smoking remnants of Dr. Vance's bright orange windbreaker.

He swallowed hard. "Guess the internship is over."

The iridescent raptor stood at the edge of the ash path, looking down the trail the anomaly had left. Its two companions joined it. They looked at the destruction, then turned their heads simultaneously to look at Toby.

The leader made a soft, inquisitive clicking sound. It looked at Toby, then pointed its snout down the path of destruction, then looked back at him.

Toby understood perfectly. The thing was still out there. It was heading toward the coast, where the main research base and the evacuation boats were located. The raptors couldn't outrun it forever, and they couldn't kill it alone. Neither could the humans.

"You want to hunt it," Toby said, a breathless laugh escaping his lips. "You have got to be kidding me."

The raptor just stared, its tail twitching with lethal intent.

Toby looked down at his ruined sneakers, then back up at the three apex predators waiting for him. He reached down, picked up Dr. Vance's abandoned machete from the mud, and wiped the blade on his pants.

"Fine," Toby sighed, adjusting his backpack. "But if we die, I'm writing a terrible review of this whole ecosystem on Yelp."

The leader let out a short, approving chuff, turned, and melted into the remaining shadows of the jungle. Toby took a deep breath and followed right behind them.