

Zombie Raptors
BY Nate Worrell

Sergeant Jacob Hunter had three different tears coming down his face.

The first tear was hot and salty. This morning, Manny Coldheart had lived up to his surname, crushing Jacob's childhood dream of learning to fly Pteranodons. Manny disrupted Jacob's admissions interview with phony trophy hunting photos. Of course, Jacob would never have done such a cruel thing. If he saw Manny flying around, however, he might be tempted to take a shot skyward.

The second tear was large and heavy, but also in no hurry to drop to the ground. Flight school wasn't Jacob's only loss today. His grandfather had passed away. It wasn't an unexpected death, but somehow the finality of it all had an acute sting. His head swam in memories. His grandpa taught him how to read the signs left by passing dinos. The prints in the mud, the angle of a broken branch, and even the buzz of insects all told stories about recent travelers. Today, those signs were blurred by Jake's longing.

The third tear was not because of anger or sadness. His eyes watered because Fiona, the Centrosaurus he rode while on patrol, had consumed a rather large amount of rancid berries. The flatulence of the one horned dino could be used as a chemical weapon.

"My God, Fiona, you're killing me." Jacob tried to cover his nose and mouth with his uniform as Fiona's stomach rumbled followed by a release of gas that sounded like a tuba player with a sneezing fit. Fiona turned her head, large dopey brown eyes looking up at Jacob as if she was slightly amused. Jacob sighed, and resolved himself to a long day of wallowing in rage, grief, and stink.

Perimeter Patrol was as fun as watching paint dry, or grass grow, or spotting cliché comparisons in short stories. Occasionally, a sonic emitter might have been damaged by a recent storm and require a replacement order. But the weather had been calm for a while, so Jacob wasn't expecting anything exciting.

Between the tears and boredom, he almost missed the breach in the perimeter fence. Almost. Jacob's observational skills were best in his class, in large part thanks to gramps. He caught motion in the corner of his eye. He steered Fiona over for a closer look. The wire fencing was frayed. Something had broken through. But somehow no alarms had gone off. On closer inspection, Jacob found out why. The fence was coated in sort of brown slime, and the goo seemed to conduct the electric currents through the rift.

Like an image coming into focus, the woods and plants faded away and bits and pieces of what had happened began to be revealed. Literally, bits and pieces. A chunk of skin hung on a branch. A claw rested on the ground. Drops of brown goo speckled the fauna. The three inch tooth in the trunk of a tree completed the scene. The skin, claws and teeth meant one thing, Raptors. The only thing that didn't fit was the mysterious brown ooze.

“Well, Fiona,” Jacob rubbed the sappy substance between his fingers, “we got a bit of a sticky situation here.”

The dino groaned, maybe because of stomach pains, maybe because of Jacob’s bad joke. Regardless, the reaction released a lot of the tension Jacob carried, and he laughed until a fourth kind of tear, a very happy one, rolled down his cheek.

Three weeks later, Jacob’s battalion sat in a classroom as Commander Spark went over the latest plan.

Spark could crush walnuts with his teeth. His muscular body seemed to be trying to escape the confines of the tan uniform, as if it were two sizes too small. He had a mustache that looked like a juvenile sasquatch taking a nap on his upper lip.

Jacob was trying to concentrate, but every few minutes a wet glob would splat against the back of his neck. Manny snickered a couple rows back as the spit wad hit his target. Manny was irritatingly effective with his annoyances. Jacob flipped his collar higher to get a little more protection and tried to focus on the commander’s words.

“Raptors are normally intelligent, coordinated creatures. The Raptors that permeated the perimeter are clueless and clumsy. But the little buggers don’t die. The citizens are calling them Zombie Raptors.”

Manny whistled a spooky soundtrack tune. Commander Spark cleared his throat. It sounded like sandpaper in a blender. Manny clammed up real fast. Spark continued his briefing.

“Cooper decapitated one the other day and it still kept clawing forward. Kip set one on fire, but that just became a walking barbecue. Cappy got one to swallow dynamite and that actually worked. But while effective, blowing them to bits is quite messy and the citizens don’t like all the fireworks. So do any of you numbskulls have any bright ideas?”

The classroom resounded with suggestions. *Time travel? Too dangerous. Cyborg raptors with laser beams? Too expensive. Duct tape - it fixes everything! Next. The Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch? Cute, but no. Close our eyes and hope they go away? Get the hell out of here!*

Jacob raised his hand.

“Yes, Sergeant Hunter, please shine some wisdom of this dark pit of idiocy.”

“When my gramps had a Consthinothus infestation, the most effective solution was trapping them and transporting them to another spot, far from his farm. We can track them down, one by

one, secure them, and then transport them outside the boundaries for detonation. Having fliers in the sky will help us find them.”

“Very good. Commence Operation Grab and Blast. No one rests until the vermin are exterminated. Dismissed.”

The room resounds with an emphatic ‘Yes Sir’ and the troops shuffled out of the room. Manny sent one more spitwad at Jacob, but he dodged it in time. It continued on its course until it zinged right into the grizzly fur of Commander’s Spark’s mustache.

“Captain Coldheart!” the commander barked. Manny’s foolhardy grin vanished. “If you here half as good at taking a piss as you are at launching spitwads, my latrines wouldn’t smell like a barn. You’ve got two weeks of bathroom duty.”

Manny slumped his shoulders and left the room. Jacob glanced back at the commander, who winked and almost smiled.

Jacob sat in a field picking clover while Fiona grazed. He had made sure to avoid areas with berry bushes for Fiona’s pasturing. The scent of rotten cabbage combined with skunk vomit still haunted his memory.

The radio buzzed. *Report of Raptor attack. Iguanodon farm, northeast sector, delta quadrant. Sergeant Hunter to respond. Over.* Jacob acknowledged the call.

As he approached the farm, Jacob felt Fiona’s muscles twitch nervously. “Easy girl.” He soothed her by stroking her head plate.

Jacob found the farmer in the field standing over a dead male Iguanodon.

“This was my champion bull,” the farmer spat, the tobacco swill landed inches from Jacob’s boot. “Gonna take me years to get another one as good as Titan was.”

“What’s your name sir, and can you tell me what happened?” Jacob asked as he started to inspect the Iguanodon’s wounds.

“I’m Ben. I was inside looking at my breeding charts. It’s not easy breeding Iggies you know. The females only come into season once a year, and each one at a different time, and then they are quite picky about their suitors. Males gotta be able to dance like a teen popstar and show they are strong but at the same time gentle. Titan could do it all. He’d knock trees over while holding flowers in his teeth. Not to mention the size of his...”

“Please get back to the incident.” Jacob interrupted.

“Anyway, I was looking at my chart when I heard a sound I ain’t ever heard before. I grabbed my shotgun and ran outside, but I was too late. One of them zombie raptors was hanging on old Titan’s throat. I blasted it four times! Chunks of raptor hide flew this way and that, and didn’t fall off until I shot his jaw apart. The damn thing just up and limped off. Titan was in agony, so I took one more shot to save the poor fella from a slow and painful death.”

Farmer Ben dropped to one knee, and gave the Iguanodon a few pats on the nose. Jacob offered his condolences and set off to search for the Raptor. It wasn’t hard to find at all.

It had gone about 2 miles north of the farm. Jacob saw it hobbling down a country road. The beast had blotchy skin, and without a lower jaw, had a slimy saliva trail behind it. Jacob felt a bit of compassion for the decrepit dino. It had no idea what it was doing.. Yet, he knew his job, and moments later, the raptor was encased in a steel mesh net and tagged for transport and termination.

Jacob came back to the farm to find Farmer Ben yelling at a woman. She stood unfazed, as spit and tobacco juice sprinkled around her while the Farmer raged.

“Why would I want to kill my own bull? It was attacked.” Ben’s cheeks were as red as his flannel shirt.

“Lots of people killing off dinos these days, hoping to get some insurance money. You wouldn’t be the first to try to cheat the insurance company.” The woman turned and took a picture of the dead Iguanodon.

“I ain’t cheated nobody in my life! The only people cheating anyone here is your blasted company.”

Jacob could feel the heightened tension and gave a whistle to grab their attention.

“Excuse me , ma’am, mind telling me your business here?”

“I’m Avery Twist, a claims investigator with Zen Insurance. Just trying to do my job.” She handed him a business card. *A. Twist. Investigator.*

“Well, Miss Twist, I captured a Raptor about two miles north of here. You can probably still get to it before it gets removed. My guess is that you’ll find it has Iguanodon blood on its claws.”

Avery nodded and headed to her truck. Farmer Ben flipped her off. Jacob puzzled about her. She had a lot ferocity and snap for a claims investigator. Her truck was unmarked, and the camera she had used seemed to have more fancy gadgetry than simple documentary tools.

As Jacob left the farm he wondered how many more Raptors were still out there, how many more random attacks were going to happen. At least the Raptors kept their focus on other dinos and weren't eating people.

The radio crackled. *All troops, be advised, Raptors also eat people. Repeat, raptors are now attacking humans. Over.*

Jacob sat in front of the elementary school, atop a fully armored Ankylosaurus. The battle dinos were referred to as numbers instead of names. This lunk was 219. He had a cranky disposition and wasn't much for idle chatter. But like Fiona, he had a fondness for fermented berries that turned his intestines into the sewer system from the lowest regions of Hell.

Jacob wrapped a third handkerchief around his face and tried to pay attention to the kids at recess. He hear a few of them sing a jump rope song.

*One, two, Raptor coming for you
Three, four, it's at your door
Five, six, get away quick
Seven, eight, you're too late
Nine, ten, chomp chomp - the end!*

Despite the morbid nature of the chant, the kids giggled and chased each other. Perhaps they had a better way of processing things than the grown ups did. Jacob had been struggling to handle the latest developments.

There had only been one human casualty so far. Poor Maggie Finklefoot. She was an actuary who had uncovered a way to predict Raptor hotspots. But because no one listened or maybe just didn't understand her methods, she was mostly ignored. Fed up with being blown off, she decided to demonstrate the accuracy of her approach. She filmed herself standing in the center of one the hot spots. She was deadly accurate. Within minutes, a zombie raptor burst through the bushes, and *nine, ten, chomp, chomp, the end.*

Her death wasn't in vain, as a team of actuaries now led the Zombie Raptor location and tracking efforts.

Complicating matters, the Zombie Raptors had spread their infection. The biologists studying the disease had compared it to a kind of fungus that killed ants, but took control of their bodies. The muscular skeletal system would operate, but any other brain activity seemed absent. After a week of dormancy, anything that had been bitten, reanimated into a vegetative state.

Prior to school duty, Jacob had experienced the phenomenon at the Iguanodon farm. Farmer Ben needed help with Titan.

The dull eyed Iguanodon wandered through the fields and forests until it bumped into something. Then it would try to mate with it. This was bad news for a few trees, a couple boulders, and Farmer Ben's favorite tractor. Iguanodons are not graceful lovers when they are fully conscious. A half dead one is as gentle as a pile of bricks in a tornado.

Eventually Farmer Ben created a makeshift female Iguanodon costume. He doused himself in dino pheromones and pranced around until he caught Titan's attention. He successfully lured the beast into a containment cage, only to find three very excited Iguanodon bulls waiting for him. Farmer Ben only escaped by getting the males to fight with each other, which was eerily similar to a tactic that a woman used at the pub last weekend to avoid some misguided soldiers.

The school bell rang and Jacob turned his attention back to the job at hand as all the kids ran inside. Jacob scanned the playground to make sure no kid had been left behind. All clear. A shadow in the sky caught his attention. The shape grew bigger, and as it approached, Jacob recognized it as one of the Pteranodon patrol.

But it was flying quite irregularly. It jerked and wobbled through the air, and a couple of times Jacob thought it might fall out of the sky. Eventually it descended on the street, tumbling into a dumpster. Its driver emerged covered in garbage, and it was no other than Manny Coldheart.

"Nice flying, Manny!" Jacob called. "Nailed the landing. You are about as good at flying as you are at cleaning toilets."

"Shut your hole." Manny glowered as he picked wet bits of refuse off his uniform.

"I'll get right to it. Commander sent me to give you a message." Manny patted his pockets, looking for something. "Bronto-balls, I think it fell out when I landed."

"You mean, crashed into a dumpster?" Jacob corrected.

"Go sit on a Stegosaurus. Find it for yourself." Manny mounted his reluctant steed and with a complete lack of grace took to flight, cursing at the Pteranodon as he flew away.

Jacob dismounted from 219 and ran over to the dumpster. It didn't take him long to find the commander's letter, a bit damp, but still readable.

Sgt. Hunter,

I want to apologize for the mishap during flight school admissions. The intelligence team has confirmed the pictures were doctored. Please proceed to the hangars immediately to commence accelerated flight training.

Jacob flicked a tear off the corner of his eye. It was a small, yet beautiful tear. It contained rainbows after storms, sunsets and starry nights. It's the tear a mother sheds when she hears her baby's first cry. It was the taste of love's sweet kiss and the high of victory. It was the kind of tear that comes from plucking your dream out of a dumpster.

The flight training, well, flew by. Jacob had been prepping for this moment all his life. He'd already memorized the textbooks, knew all the protocols, and had even spent hours in the brooding rooms raising young. The only thing he hadn't done was actually fly. Mere hours after arriving in the hanger and after three successful runs in the simulator he was sent to the airfields.

The commander was there, and so was his mustache. He stood next to a weathered Pteranodon. Behind them both was an enormous Quetzalcoatlus, more than five times the size of the smaller flyer.

"Good afternoon Sergeant Hunter. It's a beautiful day for a flight. This here is Ceasar, he's a grizzly old bird, but he's patient and won't spook. Colossus is the enormous beast behind you. I'll be a few hundred feet above you at all times, evaluating your performance. Don't let that intimidate you. The best thing you can do up there is get out of your head. You ready?"

Jacob was. He approached Ceasar with humility and respect, palms up, head bowed. The Pteranodon knelt and allowed Jacob to mount. A few wingflaps later and he was airborne.

The wind tickled his skin. The damp clouds left condensation on his brow. Several bugs ricocheted off his forehead and cheeks. He learned the hard way to keep his mouth shut.

Jacob looked down at the world passing below him and he knew that he could no longer call the ground his home. His place was up here, among the winds, light as air, weaving between the rays of sun.

Jacob's bliss was interrupted by the commander's voice in his headset. "Looking good Hunter. Now execute the required maneuvers."

Jacob coaxed Ceasar into a high climb, then a long dive. He skimmed over the surface of a lake, made tight turns through rock formations, and a series of other turns and loops. At the end, Jacob decided to improvise a little, spinning in a quick corkscrew.

"What the hell?" The commander didn't sound happy.

"Sorry sir, just having a bit of fun." Jacob hoped the little antics at the end wouldn't cost him his wings.

“Not you kid, look down there, where the river takes a large turn.”

They were flying over grasslands and a fat river went across the middle like a leather belt. At the bend the commander had mentioned was a smoking brown smear. To Jacob it looked like someone had spilled a jar of boiling molasses on a tan shag carpet.

“Let’s check it out.”

They circled down. As they approached, it became more clear what they were seeing. It was a field of carnage about several hundred meters long and wide. The field smelled like spoiled milk and burnt broccoli. At the end by the river bank, Jacob saw a woman sitting on a rock. It was Avery, from the insurance company.

Her eyes were red, and her face was covered in ash and sweat. She was crying. Jacob recognized the tears, both the sad ones and the angry ones. And there was one other tear, tiny and fierce, the kind you shed when your dream gets turned into a steaming pile of sludge.

Jacob sat with her for a few moments, and eventually she began to talk.

“They were thriving here. This field was to be our showcase to the world. Dinos that never got sick, that resisted cancer, that would live forever. We’d unlocked immortality. For dinos anyway, humans might not be that far off. Then it all went sour. We thought we had it contained until the Raptor pack came through. Even then, we didn’t think it’d be contagious. Anyway, you know how wrong we were on that one. This was the cover up job, and it look like it’s gone about as good as everything else in this godforsaken experiment.”

Jacob put his arm around her and let her rest her head on his shoulder.

“Do you know how to stop them?” The commander inquired.

Avery pulled out a vial from her chest pocket. “Take this to your chemists. Deliver it through the air, like mosquito repellent. Everything will be back to normal by morning.”

The commander snatched the antidote and flew back to the complex.

Jacob remained with Avery for a while. They threw stones into the swamp of dino gore. It seemed to be a helpful therapy. Jacob kept looking at Avery for microseconds at a time, not wanting to be caught staring. Avery caught him staring.

“I know, I’m a mess. I probably look like a hungover sorority girl who has a bad arsonry habit.”

“Nah, more like an asylum escapee who tried to use gunpowder as eyeliner.”

She giggled. Jacob smiled.

He threw a stone into the ooze. “So I think this is the point in the story where we gaze deeply into each other’s eyes and kiss while epic music swoons in the background.”

“Or I reveal some secret twist. That I’m your sister, or an alien robot, or that you are completely psychotic and have imaginary companions.”

“You do see four of us here, right?”

Then they gazed deeply into each other’s eyes, and with a noted lack of any sort of swooning music, that was all they did.

A few weeks later, the newly promoted Captain Jacob Hunter steered his Pteranodon toward a clearing. There had been a distress call from one of the soldiers on perimeter patrol.

Manny Coldheart was rocking back and forth on the ground. The electric fence sparked and hissed. Manny was covered in a wet slimy film.

“What happened here? It looks like you got sneezed out of an Apatosaurus.”

Manny just whimpered.

Jacob scanned the area. Had they missed some of the raptors? The tarry substance, the chunks of flesh on the forest floor all looked like their calling card, but something seemed different. He had this unsettled feeling, like he was watching a movie that was setting the audience up for a sequel to repeat the same tricks and gags. He kicked something with his foot, and when he picked it up, his worst fears were confirmed. He’d have to live through all the disgusting horror one more time.

A zombie T-rex was on the loose.