

The Hybrid Discovery Series

THE KOMODODO

A Field Journal from the Impossible Islands

Book One

How to Read This Book

This book has four kinds of pages. They look different on purpose.

Regular pages tell you what happened.

Journal pages are from Hermes's field journal. They're in his voice. They look like handwriting.

Letters are what Hermes sent to Dr. Joyce Raman, a scientist on the mainland.

Replies are what Dr. Raman sent back.

Hermes and his friends sailed to the Impossible Islands to find animals no one had ever seen. Hermes drew them. Ruby got close to them. Leo reported back to the mainland. Eli tried to name them. So far, nothing fit in any book.

The boat was small. The waves were not.

Hermes held his journal in one hand and the railing in the other. The island came up slow—first just a dark shape, then trees, then a beach so white it hurt to look at.

“That’s it,” said Ruby. She was already standing at the front of the boat.

Nobody said anything else. The engine cut off. The waves pushed them in.



Ruby jumped off before the boat stopped moving.

“Ruby!” Leo called.

She was already on the beach, walking fast. Her boots left deep prints in the sand.

Hermes climbed down slower. He opened his journal to a blank page and wrote the date at the top. He wrote *Island One* underneath.

Then he saw the footprints.

They were already there—not Ruby’s. Something else. Something with claws. The tracks came out of the jungle and went down to the water and came back again. They were big. Bigger than Hermes’s whole hand spread out.

He knelt down and drew one.

“Hermes, come on!” Ruby was at the tree line.

He drew faster.



They followed the tracks into the trees. The shade was sudden and cool. Vines hung everywhere. The footprints pressed deep into the soft ground—whatever made them was heavy.

Eli looked at the shape of the prints, then looked at his field guide, then looked at the prints again.

“Not in any book,” he said.

Leo unclipped the radio from his belt and held down the button.

“Base, this is Leo. We’re on Island One. We’ve got tracks.

Unidentified. Big. Moving inland from the beach. Over.”

Static. Then: “Copy, Leo. Document and report. Stay together.

Over.”

Ruby was already twenty steps ahead.



They came out of the trees onto a second beach. A smaller one, curved like a bowl, with rocks at both ends.

Ruby stopped.

She said, "Oh."

Nobody moved.



The Komododo stood on the sand.

It was the size of a grown-up lying down. A thick, heavy body, low to the ground, with strong legs and a long tail that dragged a line behind it. Scales covered its back and sides—rough, gray-brown, like wet stone.

But its head was wrong. Wrong for a lizard. It had a beak. A real beak, curved and pale, like something that belonged on a bird. And across its shoulders and down its back, where scales should have been, there were feathers. Soft, gray feathers, layered like a cape.

It turned its head and looked at them with one round, dark eye.

“BRRRRK,” it said. Low and deep, like a drum you feel in your chest.

“BRRRRK-BRRRRK.”

Nobody spoke. The Komododo looked at them. Then it turned and walked—slow, heavy steps—to a tree at the edge of the beach. The tree had round purple fruit hanging low.

The Komododo stretched up on its back legs. Its feathered cape fanned out. It pulled a fruit down with its beak and ate the whole thing in two bites. Juice ran down its chin.

“It eats fruit?” Ruby whispered. “A thing that big eats *fruit*?”

Hermes was already drawing. The beak. The cape of feathers. The thick claws gripping the sand. He drew as fast as he could because the animal was right there and it might leave.

He labeled things as he went. *Feathers—gray, soft, layered.*
Beak—pale, curved down. Scales on legs. Claws—four on each foot.
He underlined *four* because he wasn’t sure and would need to check.

The Komododo ate three more fruits. Then it found a crab near the rocks. It cracked the shell with one snap of its beak.

Ruby’s mouth fell open.



“It’s a reptile,” said Eli. “A big lizard. The beak is just—weird. But it’s cold-blooded. Look at it sitting in the sun.”

“Reptiles don’t have feathers,” said Ruby.

“Some dinosaurs did.”

“It’s not a dinosaur, Eli.”

“I’m just saying. Feathers aren’t only for birds.”

“I know that. But you can’t put it in ‘reptile’ and ignore half of what it looks like.”

Hermes didn’t say anything. He was drawing the way its front legs bent. The angle was familiar, like something he’d seen before, but he couldn’t think of what.

He wrote in the margin of his sketch: *front legs bend same as??*

He’d figure it out later.

The Komododo cracked another crab. It ate the legs first.



They sat behind a rock and watched for a long time. Watching was the job, and it was also boring sometimes. That was okay.

Leo ate a granola bar. Ruby tried to see how close she could get. (Answer: fifteen steps. Then the Komododo made the BRRRRK sound and she backed up.) Eli wrote “UNCLASSIFIED” in capital letters in his notebook and underlined it twice.

Hermes watched ants carry a piece of the purple fruit across the sand. Regular ants. Regular fruit. Regular sand. Everything on this beach was normal except for the animal with a beak and a feather cape eating crabs.

He wrote that down. *Everything else is normal. Just the animal is impossible.*

“We need a name for it,” said Ruby.

“Komododo,” said Hermes. It came out before he even thought about it.

Ruby grinned. “Yeah. Okay. Komododo.”



The sun got low. The Komododo stood up.

It walked to the water, slow and heavy, and kept walking. It waded in up to its belly. The feathered cape spread out and floated on the surface like a gray cloud, and the Komododo just stood there, still, its beak pointing out at the open ocean.

What was it looking at? Hermes didn't know. What was it listening for? He couldn't hear anything except the waves.

They watched from the tree line. Four kids and their notebooks and a radio. The Komododo waded deeper. Its cape floated wider.

Hermes sat with the Komododo until the sun went down.

Then he opened his journal and started a new page.

He had a feeling the Komododo was not the only one.



HERMES'S FIELD JOURNAL

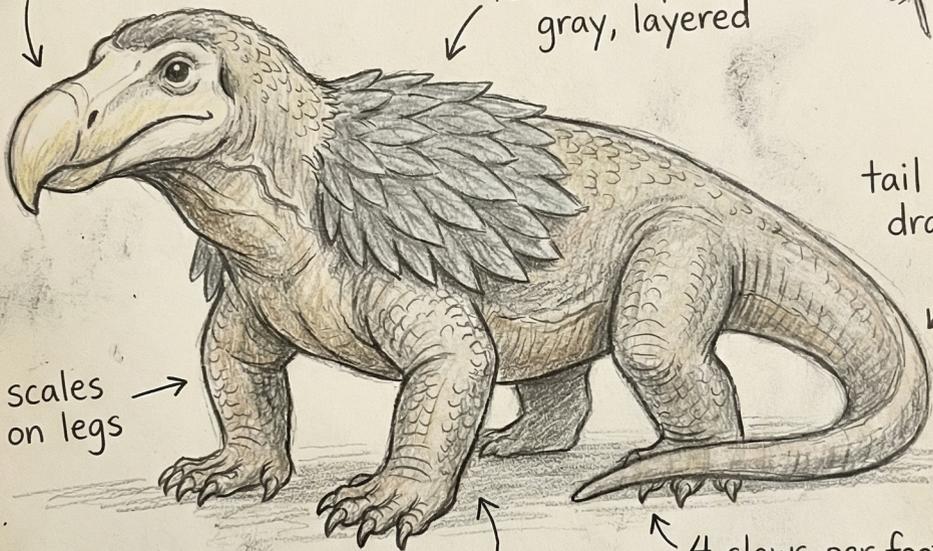
Day 1. Island One.

Komododo



beak -- pale, curves dark, one on each side
down

feather cape --
gray, layered



tail
drags

scales
on legs

4 claws per foot
(checked ~~twice~~)

front legs bend
kind of like my
arms??



huge
footprint!



Komododo

Day 1. Island One.

We found it on the second beach.

I'm calling it the Komododo. Part Komodo dragon. Part dodo. I think.

It's big. Bigger than me for sure. Maybe as big as a car No. Not that big. Bigger than a dog. Smaller than a car.

Its body is like a Komodo dragon. Thick and low. Strong tail. Scales on the legs and belly. It walks slow and its claws make marks in the sand.

But it has a BEAK. Not a lizard mouth. A beak, curved down, pale colored. And feathers on its shoulders and back like a cape. Gray feathers, soft looking.

Sound: *BRRRRK-BRRRRK. Really low. You feel it more than hear it.*

What it eats: *Purple fruit from the trees AND crabs. It cracked a crab shell like it was nothing. The beak is STRONG.*

I don't think the beak is for crabs though. It's shaped wrong for cracking. More like it's for something else and the crabs are just easy.

Sketch labels:

- *beak — pale, curves down*
- *feather cape — gray, layered*
- *scales on legs*
- *3 4 claws per foot (checked twice)*
- *tail drags*
- *eyes dark, one on each side of head*

Things I noticed:

- *The front legs bend kind of like my arms? Not like lizard legs usually do. I need to look this up.*
- *It went into the ocean at sunset and just stood there. Its cape floated. I don't know why it does that.*
- *The ants on the beach are just normal ants. The crabs are normal crabs. The fruit trees look normal. The only weird thing is the Komododo.*
- *There might be more. I saw three sets of tracks on the first beach. Three different sizes. So there are at least three.*
- *Three doesn't seem like a lot.*

Questions:

- *Is it warm-blooded or cold-blooded? Eli says cold. I don't know how to check.*
- *What are the feathers FOR? They don't seem like flying feathers. Too soft.*
- *Why does it have a beak*
- *Why does it wade into the ocean?*
- *If there are only three, is that enough?*



ANTS carrying leaf pieces



purple fruit from trees — sweet? sour?



beak did this — one snap



from the cape — soft, not flight feather



BEACH COVE



3 different sizes = 3 animals??

Everything else is normal. Just the animal is impossible.

LETTER FROM HERMES TO DR. JOYCE RAMAN

Dear Dr. Raman,

I am writing to tell you about a amazing creature I found. It is a lizard with a beak and feathers. I call it the Komododo. It has scales on its back and a very long tail that curls up. The ^{Komododo.}feathers are only on its ^{shoulders}~~shoulders~~ like a cape. It uses its front legs like arms, which I think is very strange. I hope you can identify it. Here is a sketch I made.



↑
this is what
it looks like
(my best drawing)

Thank you, Hermes

P.S. The front legs bend like arms. Is that important?

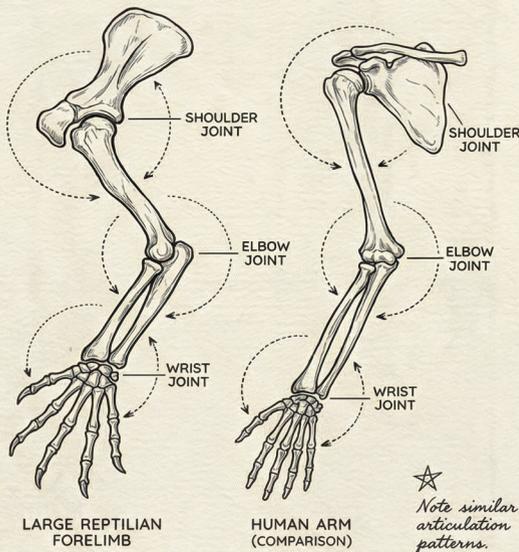
DR. RAMAN'S REPLY

Department of Evolutionary Biology



What in types of tabrents of evolutions?

What are the compliments of anatoptional evolutions?



Dear Hermes,

Thank you for writing to me. Your letter made my whole morning. A beak AND feathers AND scales—that is not something I have ever seen together. I would very much like to understand what you’ve found.

Your drawing is wonderful. I can see the beak shape and the feather cape clearly, and I appreciate the labels. That’s exactly the right instinct—when you draw something new, label everything.

But I need to ask you some hard questions, because that’s my job.

How big is it? You said “really big.” I need a number. Here is a trick: next time, put something next to it that I already know the size of. Your notebook, or a water bottle. Then I can measure in the drawing. Scientists call this a “scale reference.” It matters because if the body is two meters long, that rules out some animals. If it’s one meter, that rules out others.

What does it eat, exactly? You said fruit and crabs. Which fruit? Can you describe the tree? And when it ate the crab—did it hunt the crab, or did it find a dead one? Hunters and scavengers have different beaks. That might answer your question about what the beak is *for*.

You said the front legs bend like arms. This is a very interesting observation. I want you to draw just the front leg, as carefully as you can. Shoulder, elbow, wrist, hand. Label the joints. I think you may be seeing something real, and I want to see if it matches what I suspect.

Three animals. You said three track sizes. That’s good counting. Can you measure the tracks? Press your hand flat next to one and draw both. Three is a small number. It might mean something. Keep counting.

You asked if this could be both reptile and bird. That is a better question than you think. Don’t answer it yet. Just keep watching and writing down what you see.

I'm glad you're the one who found this, Hermes. You look at things carefully. That is the most important skill in science—more important than knowing the names.

Write to me again when you've measured something.

Warmly,

Dr. Joyce Raman

Department of Evolutionary Biology

University of the Pacific

P.S. Yes. The front legs are very important. Draw them.

END OF BOOK 1

In Book 2, Hermes and Leo explore the mangrove coves on the far side of Island One—and find something even stranger in the mud.

Hermes's journal has a new blank page.