

As Children Lost

By Breck LeSueur

I

From the sky it fell caught up on windy wings. Twice it passed and flashed its eyes, growling deep disturbing curses. Save us winged beast. May you grant us rest from this demon's disease. Heal our children of its fatal sores. Afraid but with wondrous praise we worship you new creature. Adoration quickly turned to terror. Horror and wonder filled their hearts as they watched it swing low, coughing against the soft summer sky. It has come to save us. It has come to destroy us, one says. It has come to punish us. A monster sent from the gods to devour us all.

"Humanity took one big step forward and left them behind."

"Unbelievable."

"As children lost and orphaned to a forgotten age."

Burton reached into his pack and handed a tall envelope to Jack. Jack slid the photographs out and held them to the window. Lost children of another age. Bewildered stares and hands outstretched to welcome the airborne beast.

"I can't decide if they are frightening or fascinating?" Jack said.

"Frightening?" April was toying with one of her blond braids. "They are lambs -- pure, undefiled lambs."

The village was a wide rift in the thick tangle of jungle green; scattered throughout were small, gray thatched huts and an occasional indigenous onlooker who stared skyward, bewildered at the spectacle swooping down from above.

Jack flipped to the next photo. "Almost alien."

"But who are the aliens?" Burton asked. "Us or them?"

"They are frightened."

"They are curious," April said. "Not frightened. They have something to teach us and we have something to learn from them."

"They are confused," Burton said scribbling some notes into a pad on his lap. The helicopter had begun jarring about so he sat the book aside. He took his glasses from his nose and rubbed them on his shirt. "They've never seen anything like us before. We may as well be an extraterrestrial spaceship descending upon their village. To them we are strange gods, heavenly manifestations. Fascinating--"

"Or frightening?" Jack handed the photos back to Burton.

"When will we fly over the village?" April pressed her head against the window and looked down.

"We won't be," Burton said holding out a map. He traced his finger along the route. "We'll follow this river and approach from the south to avoid being seen. We can't be sure of how they'll react to the chopper and don't want to risk frightening them."

Jack rifled through his pack, double checking the medical supplies and other emergency gear. Several bottles of water. Two ready-made meals. A small tranquilizer pistol.

"You won't need that, you know," April said spotting the pistol. "They're a peaceful people. They only want our help."

"We don't know anything about them. They don't know who or even what we are," Jack said tucking away the pistol. "No one has ever made contact with them. We could be welcomed as great white gods or hunted as pale-skinned demons."

"They're hurt and in desperate need," April said. "We'll be welcomed as saviors."

Burton was checking his sack. Two notepads. A voice recorder. A camcorder with three blank tapes. Falling back into his seat he buckled his safety belt and April and Jack followed suit. Decreasing altitude the chopper flew deeper into the barbarous heart of the rainforest. Sailing through a cool blue of sky, skimming low and fast across the forest's skin. Beneath the glitter and green the true organ slept. A heart so old and savage; capricious as the storm-tossed sea. Governed by ancient laws which know no mercy. Cruel as nature intended. Merciless as survival demanded. Jack saw an opening in the forest and tightened his seat belt. Slowing speed, the chopper dropped into the jungle's waiting jaws.

"This place will eat you alive," Burton said, shouldering his pack. "Here you are food. Nothing more than another meal." He saluted the pilot as they plunged into the forest's maze. The misty breath of the jungle overtook them.

"Nonsense," April said. "This is what the world was like before *man* and *his* fruit brought humanity to its knees. Nature in its pristine and undefiled state."

"It was God's fruit," Jack said. "And here lions eat the lambs."

"Nature in its purest state is the fiercest," Burton said. "Innocence is the cradle we've created with our pampered civilization of concrete jungles. We've cut back, contained and built over the wilderness, despoiled all the woodlands and buried the grass with asphalt. We've harnessed a wild, unpredictable environment and created one that can be controlled. We've transcended the natural state and defied the merciless laws of selection that governed our primitive forebears. Nature in its pure, undefiled state is a vicious

world only for the strong. Here we are inferior. Here we are food."

"This is the world as the Creator intended," April said. "A beautiful, natural world where man works alongside nature in perfect harmony."

"Just watch your step," Burton said pushing a branch from his face. "This isn't the local zoo. There are no bars between you and the beasts."

They hiked further into the jungle, leaving any sign of civilization behind. The deeper they ventured the less inviting the forest became. Low branches blocked their path. Thick vines entangled their arms and struggled to hold them back. Deep roots grabbed at their boots and all of the bugs and beasts seemed to voice their warnings. An ancient smell permeated the air – of damp mold and rotting wood. With each footprint stamped and branch cut away they felt as trespassers on sacred soil. Hopping from stone to stone, they crossed a small stream and tread up another long stretch of trail to a landing where the sky poured through dripping trees. Jack was following up the rear at a good pace, impressed at Burton's vitality despite his age. April was still young; sun-baked and small, yet strong and breathing easy.

"This isn't the hot sands of Kabul is it, Jack?" Burton said sucking down a bottle of water.

"More like the sweaty jungles of Manilla. I was there, too."

"I know," Burton said. "I read your file. As long as you can suck poisonous snake venom from my arm I don't care where you've been."

"I'd rather leave you for dead. Or put you under the scalpel before sacrificing my lips to your skin."

Burton laughed and continued on.

Something small and black flashed in front of Jack and plunged into a patch of ferns.

"What was that?" April shrieked stepping back.

Burton rested on his staff. "Looked like a monkey." April chased after it and watched it hop over a mossy boulder and sit up against an embankment. Burton and Jack followed close behind. April squatted down and then scooted toward it.

"It's a tamarin," Burton said, watching from a distance. "A saddleback tamarin." The dark-furred monkey clawed at its white snout and hopped up and down. April stepped closer and the tamarin began shrieking.

"It likes me," she giggled. The monkey began swinging its paws and growing more frantic. April held out her hand and moved closer. The tamarin was spinning and swinging, screeching and clawing.

"It's frightened," Burton said. "Give it some space."

"Nonsense," she laughed. The tamarin's shrieking reached a horrifying crescendo and suddenly it lunged at April. April fell backward and screamed as it pounced over her and scurried up a tree. Jack reached down and helped her up.

"What were you thinking? It was scared to death. You corner a wild creature like that and of course it will attack you."

April dusted off her pants and yanked her hand away.

"I was trying to make friends with it."

"Friends?" Jack laughed.

"They didn't do that at the zoo," April said, stamping on through the brush.

"The zoo is an illusion," Burton said. "A fabricated world of no consequences where fat and lazy animals are served meals on silver platters. A place where man actualizes his narcissistic desire to control the natural world and play lord of the earth; a magnanimous caretaker who names the animals. That's the real Eden, April, not this place. The monkey -- your friend." Burton laughed.

April was pretending to ignore him.

"Don't harm the tiger," Burton said.

"What?" she shot back.

"Don't harm the tiger. That's what Roy said in the emergency room after being attacked by one of his exotic white tigers."

"Siegfried and Roy?"

"Who are they kidding?" Burton chuckled and swiped a spider from his arm. "Not much further to the village."

Scooting on his stomach to the edge of the hill, Jack brandished a pair of binoculars and glassed the village. Strange prehistoric place. If this was the past, the jungle had been a time-traveling portal into a lost and forgotten world. Two women, a child. Another child. Two older children were splashing in the stream. A thin line of smoke rose from a hut where a woman was scraping the hide of an animal. Living, working, and playing like a thousand years had never passed. Left behind. Abandoned by humanity.

"Do you see them?" Burton asked. Jack handed him the binoculars and turned to April who was standing on the hill shielding her eyes from the sun.

"Get down."

"I am not afraid of them--"

"Get down."

"--and they're not afraid of me."

Burton spotted what he was looking for and handed the binoculars to Jack. "Follow the stream west and look near the foot of the big hut." Several native women were stretched out on their backs. An old man was rattling a gourd over their bodies and chanting. Jack saw one woman breathe. Another woman was contorting and wailing as her little child wrapped its arms around her neck. Further down the line were a pile of bodies covered by a shallow layer of dirt and leaves. Dead.

"Some of them are alive. From what I can see ten or twenty others have already died."

"We're not too late," April said peering down into the village. "We need to act quickly or half of the village will be dead by the end of the week. The tribes up north weren't so fortunate."

Jack rubbed the sore on his arm where he had been vaccinated earlier that day. "Do we have enough vaccinations for the entire village?"

"Yes," April said. "There should be enough. We need to head back to the chopper as soon as we can."

Jack made another sweep of the village. "Something isn't right. I see lots of women and children." He handed the field glasses to Burton. "But where are all of the men?"

II

"My daddy was one of those corporate big-shots back in the day," April said climbing over a fallen tree. "He started a little business selling spark plugs and built it up until he was swimming in millions. We had cars, boats – beachfront property. Daddy sold his business and partied like there was no tomorrow. Europe, the Caribbean, cruises, lots of big parties and alcohol. They lived it up. For us kids it was cars, clothes, and plastic cards with no limits. We had everything we thought would make us happy. Then one day the highway patrol found daddy on the side of the road with the exhaust hose stuck in his window. They rushed him to the hospital and he sat in a coma for three weeks. We gathered around him and cried over him day and night. We thought he was gone for good. Then one morning he sat up and said 'I'm going to buy us a farm.' Daddy purchased a thousand-acre ranch in west Texas and filled with cows, horses, chickens, goats, and plenty of crops to be harvested. 'Back to the simple life,' he said. He gets up every morning and rides his tractor around all day long. A real farmer. 'Man was meant to live in the soil', he said. If everyone lived

and worked on farms we wouldn't have all the crime and drugs we do. It's those cities that corrupt people. Cities and industrialism. Commercialism and corporations. People haven't been happy ever since they started moving into the cities."

Jack clambered up a ridge and reached down for April's hand. "Did you ever milk a cow?"

"No."

"Well, I did. And I milked enough to know that I didn't want to do it the rest of my life. Ever brand cattle?"

"No."

"Feed the pigs?"

"Of course not," April laughed. "We had farmhands for that." She ducked below a tether of vines and pushed past a web of tangled leaves. "What about you, Professor? Ever lived on a farm?"

"No. But my parents grew up on one in Oklahoma. They nearly starved to death during the depression. 'Dirty thirties' -- ever heard of them?"

April shook her head. Jack was in the lead now and could see the clearing ahead. Through the foliage he spotted the red body of the helicopter sparkling against the sun. April jogged toward the clearing but stopped when Jack grabbed her by the arm.

"What's wrong?" She yanked her arm from his hand. Jack put a finger to his lips and crouched down.

"Sit down."

"What's wrong?" She was whispering now. Burton stumbled up from behind and rested on his walking stick. Jack scanned the clearing and struggled to see into the cockpit of the helicopter. No movement.

"He was playing the radio when we left," Jack whispered. "It's off now."

"Maybe he turned it off."

"Where is he, then?"

"Maybe he wandered off to take a leak?" Burton said smiling.

"Or maybe you're paranoid," April said.

"They pay me to be paranoid."

They sat crouched for several minutes watching the clearing. A slight breeze was stirring the grass and the sun had begun to fall in the west. Jack heard the drip of the jungle leaves and the talking of the birds but otherwise silence. April was pulling at her braids and edging closer to the opening in the trees.

"He's probably napping. It was a long flight."

"Wait here." Jack slipped off his backpack and pulled the tranquilizer pistol from one of its pockets.

"What are you doing?" April motioned to the pistol. "The agreement was no weapons."

"Wait here. I'll motion from the chopper if all is clear."

Jack backtracked a few yards and then crept around the edge of the clearing. He watched the opposite end of the forest for movement and saw nothing beyond the rustle of birds high in the trees. No pilot. Surely, he knew better than to wander off. Jack circled the clearing and hurried into a patch of tall grass near the fuselage of the chopper. He crouched and could see April and Burton watching from across the way. Creeping around the fuselage he knelt at the door of the chopper and popped it open. Something heavy tumbled out of the doorway and knocked him onto his back. April screamed. A wave of sickness rolled through Jack's stomach as he shivered beneath the heavy corpse. He shoved the pilot's body off his chest and reached for the artery in his neck. No pulse. Rolling the pilot onto his stomach, Jack found a broken arrow protruding from his side. Several other black and purple bruises were on his neck and head with knife wounds to his chest and stomach. Jack spun around and scanned the jungle for any movement. Nothing.

From behind the tangle of turgid roots and broad-leafed trees he imagined eyes. Not the eyes of human foes but the savage stare of a bestial wood who loathed their intrusion. *Breach my walls and I'll spit you out.* His heart began racing and he clambered into the cockpit. A flare-gun and two flares. He rifled through a stack of boxes in the back and found the large plastic bags of immunizations. He stuck his head out the window.

"Bring me my pack!"

Burton grabbed April by the arm and they bolted across the clearing, taking cover under the helicopter. Jack grabbed his pack and began stuffing in needles and the flare gun.

"Give me your pack." Burton tossed his pack up to Jack's waiting arms. Jack emptied the camcorder and other items onto the floor of the helicopter and began filling his pack with more immunizations.

"What are you doing?" Burton saw his camcorder roll out the door and splash into the mud. Jack shouldered the two backpacks and hopped out of the helicopter. He handed one of the packs to Burton and pulled the tranq pistol from his belt. April started crying again and Burton clapped his hand over her mouth. After handing the second pack to Burton, Jack climbed back into the cockpit and fumbled with the radio. It hummed to life and he grabbed the headset from off the seat.

"Listen!" Burton said from under the chopper. Jack took the headset from his ears and peered through the dingy glass of the chopper. A flock of bright-red birds took to flight. Creatures stirred in the trees. The sound of a hundred fast bodies moving through the leaves. The blood-curling cry of a wounded animal. Jack jumped from the cockpit and grabbed April by the arm. They circled around the back of the helicopter and hurried into the open mouth of the jungle.

The jungle closed its eyes. A wood once frightening turned despairing. Jack stared into the cloak of blackness and thought if he reached out he might touch it; and if he could touch it he could pull it away like a curtain. What lurked behind the darkened void? The unknown more frightening than any real enemy. Rational thought gave way to imaginations that played out in hypnotic horror; conjured monsters and beasts bred by a wilderness so old. Boredom and the wandering thoughts of the night watch. Jack closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He tried to rub the soreness out of his upper arm. Soft and pale. Arms once taut and bronze. You're soft, Jack. Too many carbs and not enough cardio. The wilderness will decide your fate now. Rivulets of water were streaking through the dirt and soaking his jeans. He could feel the cold seeping in around his legs; clods of mud caked his boots. April was curled up and sleeping at the roots of a tree. Burton was sitting nearby smoking a pipe.

"I can't believe you threw out my camcorder."

"You don't need it now."

"And my voice-recorder -- and notebooks."

"We needed room for the vaccinations. That's why we came here."

"That is why you and her" he waved his pipe at April. "--came here."

Jack stood up and scraped the mud from his boots on a tree root.

"Do you really plan on going back to the village?" Burton said.

"Of course."

"You're almost as crazy as her."

"We're going to finish what we came to do."

"Like a good soldier."

"Yes," Jack sat back in the mud. "Like a good soldier."

"I thought it was a bad idea from the start. From the time she approached me I warned her and told her it was a bad idea. I told her. I told the university. I told the journalists. Contact will ruin everything fascinating about their culture. No longer will we understand how their lifestyle and culture existed before us. We will frustrate everything. Our presence contaminates the entire study."

"We can't sit and watch them suffer -- and die. This disease is eating them alive. Do you want to watch from the distance as they slowly waste away? If it was your neighbor, your brother, or your son -- would you help them?"

"Of course I would."

"Well, what is the difference?"

Burton paused and took a long suck from his pipe. He gazed off into the slumbering dark of the faceless wood.

"What is the difference?" Jack was shouting in a whisper now. "They're human aren't they?"

"I don't know what they are." Burton was thinking deeply now, lost in the miasma of tobacco smoke.

"They're human, doctor -- just like you and I," Jack said sitting back down.

Burton tapped his pipe and turned away. "No. No, they aren't. They are animals, Jack. *My* animals for *my* book. The book I've waited my entire life to write. The book that will give me the attention I deserve. And you and your careless, dirt-worshipping friend will ruin it all."

Angrily, Jack yanked the pipe from Burton's teeth and tossed it into the mud. "You're gonna get us killed."

At first light Jack woke April and Burton. They ate energy bars, drank bottled water, and buried their trash before heading out toward the village. Jack stuffed the tranquilizer pistol into his pants and made sure the flare gun was ready in his pack. He gave Burton a spare knife he had brought along and made them both promise to keep quiet or speak in whispers the remainder of the hike. They set out early so it

was light enough to see but dark enough to move undetected. A drizzle in the night had turned the black earth to mud. Each step was a struggle and frequently they had to stop to scrape heavy clods of mud from their boots. They skirted around boggy holes and climbed on tree trunks and matted grass to avoid the sucking soil. The jungle would swallow them whole if it could. Within a half hour they reached their destination. April rested in the shade while Burton and Jack crawled to the top of a ridge where they watched the activity below through their binoculars.

"More bodies." Jack pointed to the south where a shallow hole had been dug. The same old man was dragging the bodies into the grave and covering them with broad leaves and dirt. Children were crowded around the desperate scene, watching and crying. An older sibling was trying to comfort the smaller ones.

"Do you want to see more bodies tomorrow?" Jack asked angrily. Burton was still furious they had decided to return. Jack watched for another hour and was yet to see any of the men.

"They're sleeping -- and eating," Burton said swatting at a mosquito. "The women have been busy all morning cooking around small fires and hurrying food into the thatched huts. Apparently they didn't sleep much last night. Within the next hour they will be out on the warpath again."

"That's when we'll move in."

"You and April can go into the village if you'd like to get yourselves killed -- but I'll watch from here--"

"--and get killed later, instead," Jack smirked. He scooted down the hill next to April who was counting out the vaccinations.

"Enough?"

April nodded and looked at Jack. "You're right. This is what we came here to do and not leaving until we've helped them."

"You really care, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I put this mission together to save these people; and I'll die doing what I came here to do."

Jack rested beside her against the tree. "If you care about them so much then why didn't you bring in an army of relief workers and give them the aid they really need. Or try and modernize them a little. Dig a few wells. Help them build proper shelter. Put them in schools north of the river?"

"I want to protect them, Jack."

"Protect them from what? Proper healthcare? A higher standard of living? This is a brutish, barbaric life they lead. They are at the mercy of unpredictable elements, dangerous animals, famine; the ongoing wars between neighboring tribes. It is a violent, ferocious world they live in; not some enclave of Edenic virtue --"

"But look at our world," she shot back. "I want to protect them from a world gone evil. A world of drugs, cold-blooded murder, and depression. A world of polluted skies and urban sprawl – of backstabbing and greed. A world where parents murder their children and children their parents. A violent and confused world!"

Jack watched a pair of colorful birds pick at the bark of a tree above; through the thick canopy he could see a soft sky, milky and blue. "There's the crux." He picked himself up. "And which world is worse?"

April stuffed the vaccinations into the backpack and zipped it up. "Honestly, I don't know. This wilderness was a world I hoped in but now I am confused. Two violent and unpredictable worlds at war. Perhaps the more violent one wins."

"Perhaps."

"They're leaving." Jack was at the top of the ridge watching the village below. The tribal males had emerged from the huts, picked up their weapons, and disappeared into the wood. Strong, black bodies. Nimble and red-painted.

Sharp-bone horns and feathered spears. "Gather everything up. We're moving out."

"This is where I stay behind," Burton said.

"At least follow us to edge of the village," April said pulling on her pack. "It's more dangerous for you to stay here alone."

Burton looked around and thought of the warrior males moving through the jungle below. He picked up his backpack and followed Jack, navigating the mud-sucking jungle floor. When reaching the edge of the village they decided to skirt around to the south where Jack had seen the bodies of the infected. Most of the natives were busy to the north tending crops or gathering water from the small stream that partitioned the village. The south end only occupied by the old man, the sick, and the dead. Crawling up behind a tall, rotted log, they could hear the old man chanting. Seeds rattled in his musical gourd, as he splashed the sick with a sticky solution of fruit and herbs. Skin like stretched leather on sharp ribs; and a necklace of teeth and polished stones jingled as he danced. He had built a small fire and was slapping at the smoke and cursing the sky.

"Bad spirits," Burton whispered. He laid hiding behind the rotted log while Jack and April moved in. Keeping their heads low, they jogged to the outermost hut and sat against its thatched wall. Jack peaked inside and saw that it was empty. He crept past the door and looked around the wall where the old man had ceased dancing and was smashing some leaves and purple berries in a stone dish. Jack took a step closer and pulled a syringe from his pocket. In one swift movement he spun around the hut and grabbed the native around the neck. Before the old man could respond Jack plunged a syringe into his shoulder and dragged him backward. He kicked and tried to scream through Jack's clapped hand, but soon went limp as the sedative took effect. After Jack pulled the sleeping medicine

man into the hut, April stuck him in the arm with the vaccination.

"If the dosage is right he'll sleep for another hour or two," Jack said as he laid him in the back corner of the hut. They hurried out the door and jogged past the shallow plots of the recently buried villagers. A few yards further the sick were sleeping on straw mats. Small boils and rashes had begun to form all over their bodies, and Jack immediately recognized the symptoms.

"They've contracted the same disease as the tribes north of the river," April said, crouching down over one victim. "Just as we suspected. This is the right vaccine and should take care of the infection."

"Okay, let's get to work," Jack said taking a handful of syringes. They went down the line taking turns sticking each of sick villagers. By the time the first patient woke, Jack and April had disappeared behind the next hut.

"Wait here," Jack whispered. He rolled into the space below the stilted hut, and belly-crawled through a thick layer of mud to the opposite side. Across the village common area he could see women clubbing some sort of fruit and emptying the pulp into clay bowls. A handful of children chased each other around a tall tree and a few boys practiced shooting arrows from a small bow. Another knot of women were spreading leaves out to dry and preparing cassava roots for the evening meal. Jack spotted the warrior male approaching for the north end of the village. Apparently, he had been left behind to guard the women and children. He was smaller than Jack had estimated in his observation from the hill; but was wiry and tight-skinned, strong and decorated in small yellow bones, shell bracelets and a jaguar pelt. Two quetzal feathers hung from his hair and paint masked his face and chest. In one hand he carried a crude-bladed spear and the other a short hatchet.

"He is just protecting his children," Jack thought to himself. "I would do the same." He crawled back to April

and pulled the tranq pistol from his belt. After screwing on the barrel he popped a dart into the chamber. He peaked around the corner and watched the warrior standing idly at a neighboring hut. The native sat his spear against the thatched wall and ducked inside the door. Bolting across the grass, Jack burst into the hut and fired the tranq pistol at the native's back. Shocked, the warrior spun around and unsheathed his knife, lunging at Jack. Jack grabbed the warrior's wrist and rammed an elbow into his neck. Struggling to breathe, the warrior dropped his knife as Jack dropped him to the floor. While Jack held the struggling native down, April rushed in and stuck him with the vaccination. Jack laid all of his weight into warrior until the sedatives set in and he stopped thrashing. They ducked out of the hut and moved to the next one where several small children were scratching pictures into the soft soiled floor. Jack closed the thatch door as April chased the children about injecting them with the vaccination. The mothers outside heard their babies cries and came running to the hut. Jack pulled the crude door open and let them in. Before they had a chance to respond April had inoculated them, too. One woman raised a club but Jack knocked it from her grasp and darted out of the hut with April close behind. They ran to the next hut and inoculated the children and the protective mothers in the same way they had the previous villagers. By the time they reached the last hut in the row most of the other villagers had heard the children's cries and had retreated into the surround woods.

"We need to leave," Jack said tossing away the spent syringes. "They'll hear the cries and be returning soon." April nodded and followed him along a back trail of to the brush where Burton was hiding.

"How did it go?"

"We vaccinated at least five or six families, plus the old man, the sick, and one warrior on guard."

"What about the rest of them?" April was looking into her backpack. "We have at least thirty other needles and vaccinations we can use."

"Do you want to die?" Burton barked, stabbing a finger at her. "Because if we stay around much longer that is exactly what will happen. You think your efforts will save this people. If they don't die from the disease they'll die some other way."

"We're their only hope," she screamed, zipping up the pack. "We need to save just a few more." April shouldered her pack and darted off toward the second row of huts. She reached the outskirts of the common area and crouched behind an overturned canoe carved from a hallowed tree.

"Get back here!" Jack jammed another dart into his pistol and followed April. Up ahead he could see April motioning to the north end of the village. Jack couldn't see what she was looking at but from her face he knew. He motioned for her to get down and follow him. She shook her head and waited.

"You are going to get killed," he mouthed. April watched as the warrior males stalked into view; tall and proud, skeletal and soaked red like blood. All were armed with longbows and arrows, spears, and crude clubs. True children of the wilderness. Born and bred to here survive. Hard-bodied and cut like mountain coal. One native ruffled the black hair of a little boy and scooped him up into his arms. The little boy was crying and the father attempted to soothe him. April crept out from her hiding place and approached the warrior males. Jack was waving to her frantically but she did not see. Shocked, the males stepped backward and watched her curiously, speaking in low, guttural sounds. For several seconds it was very quiet. April stretched her arms toward them and took a step forward.

"Come, nature's children. We are here to save you. We have come to rescue you from the disease. We --" An

arrow sprung through April's back and she fell to her knees without a cry. The warriors let out a chilling scream and converged on her with crude weapons raised. Jack backpedaled into the brush where Burton was hiding.

"Go! Go!" They ran further into the wood past a shower of arrows that snapped into trees around them. Through the dense vegetation Jack could see the natives heading down a ridge and racing in their direction. Jack was shoving Burton from behind now and grabbed his arm to help quicken his pace. A stray spear flashed overhead smacking into the ground in front of them. Jack tucked the tranq pistol into his pants and picked up the spear. One native sprung from behind a tree to cut off their retreat and Jack rammed the spear into his side letting the momentum drive it home. The warrior toppled backward grabbing at the spear as they stumbled past him. The jungle foliage was growing thicker now and the warriors were able to slip through it with surprising ease. Burton and Jack were grabbing at the vines and ferns and felt as though the long fingers of the forest were trying to hold them back. The natives were closing the distance now and in a few more yards would overtake them. Jack pulled the tranq pistol from his belt and turned and fired at the closest warrior. The warrior flinched when the dark stuck him in the chest but continued to run. After a few second he fell to his face and tripped two others behind him. They clawed their way up a small hill and after reloading the pistol Jack turned his head to fire another tranq dart. He lifted the pistol to fire but the ground beneath his feet gave way and he tumbled down a steep ravine. Somersaulting head first he smashed into a tree and then flipped onto his back cracking his shoulder against a rock. Tucking his head low he flipped again and plummeted into a muddy stream. Burton was lying on his back a few feet away, groaning and holding his head. His hat and beard were black with mud and a thin line of blood trickled from his mouth.

"Get up!" Jack barked. "We have to keep moving." He looked up the hill to see the natives taking aim with their long bows. Several others were venturing down the hill screaming hysterically with clubs raised. Jack grabbed Burton under the arm and lifted him up. They slogged down the stream and then hurried up the opposite bank.

"I recognize this stream," Jack said. "We stopped here for water yesterday. Following it should lead us to the chopper where we can radio for help."

Burton nodded and was still trying to regain his bearings. He was breathing heavily and leaning on Jack for support.

"But we must keep moving." They jogged alongside the stream for several hundred yards and could already hear the natives approaching through the brush.

"I can see the chopper from here," Burton said pointing ahead. They burst into the clearing and sprinted to the helicopter where the pilot's body was still outstretched near the skids. Jack hopped into the cockpit and fumbled with the radio. It squawked to life and he pulled on the headset. Outside the cockpit Burton heard the woods come to life. An arrow whistled through the air and stuck into his pack. Crying out, he clambered into the body of the helicopter and slammed the door. Jack was talking to someone on the radio and could see commotion in the trees. The natives sprung from all sides of the jungle and converged on the chopper screaming and unleashing a volley of arrows and spears. The first warrior to reach the chopper smashed his club of jagged bones against the window. The rest of the natives began beating their crude weapons against the body and windows of the chopper. The back window shattered and one of the warriors cut his hand trying to reach through. Burton climbed into the cockpit next to Jack and started flipping any switch he could find. The helicopter glowed to life and after toying with the controls the rotors

coughed to life and beat angrily overhead. Burton looked around for the collective lever but saw that it had been damaged. A large rock smashed into the window and Burton reached over to hold the door closed. The warriors were climbing on the skids now and hammering the door of the helicopter.

"A few seconds longer and they'll be in!" Burton shouted above the thump of the rotors.

"I made contact and they've given me the rendezvous coordinates," Jack said.

"The collective's damaged." Burton pointed at the lever. Jack jammed his foot on it anyway and the helicopter lunged forward careening across the clearing. The natives on the skids tumbled off and several others rolled out of the way as the chopper plunged into the jungle, tearing away obstructing vines and branches. Jack kept his foot on the collective as both of them buckled into their seats. The chopper flipped around and lunged backward for several more yards striking a tree and spinning again. Colorful birds and monkeys burst across the windshield and snapped in the rotors as it chopped at the foliage and bent in the trees. Suddenly the chopper plunged over a short drop and careened into a put of mud below. Jack unbuckled himself and grabbed a map from a compartment above his head. He used his knife to pry the compass from the console of the helicopter and stuffed it in his bag. Seeing that his door was wedged against a tree, he climbed into the backseat and kicked open the window. Burton tumbled out beside him and got up from his knees. Pulling his thin jacket off, Jack tore it in half and soaked it in gasoline. He unscrewed the chopper's gasoline cap and stuffed the rags of his shirt into the tank.

"Give me your zippo!" Burton fumbled in his pocket and tossed it to Jack who lit the end of the gasoline soaked shirt. He grabbed Burton by the coat and they bolted away from the chopper. Seconds later the helicopter erupted in

flames, blowing apart limbs and trees and showering burning debris across the jungle floor. Jack heard the natives scream in terror and turned to see them running the opposite direction.

Ooh-rah, devil dog.

"That should buy us enough time to regroup and wait out the rescue party," Jack said as they jogged further north searching for an adequate place to hide. After several minutes of searching they found a sharp embankment with a large hole washed out below it. Vines and ferns hung over the space providing temporary shelter. Burton scrambled into the hole and rested his back against the dirty wall. He reached down and pulled up his jeans wet with blood from a branch that had cut his leg. Jack pulled some gauze and tape from his pack and ripped the pants away from the wound. He applied the gauze and wrapped up the wound. Burton's breathing finally slowed and he sucked down a bottle of water.

"In all of my years of studying indigenous tribes little did I realize how ferocious they could be. Did you see how they attacked the chopper? Like animals, Jack. Like animals! How could a people so simple and primitive be so violent and hateful?"

"It's not hate, Doctor. It's fear. They are scared to death of this new world flying over them, dropping down on them; growling at them from across the mountains. Spreading diseases, eating their trees. Their wives and children are back in those huts; and they'll keep hunting and killing until we are gone and they can go back to planting their crops. We represent everything terrifying happening around them--this new, frightening world. We are the beasts, Doctor. We are the animals." Jack paused and scooted further into the hole. "This isn't two cultures at odds. This is two completely different species at odd -- two species separated by thousands of years. We're frightened to death

of each other leaving no alternative but to kill. In the end it will be us or them.”

"I don't want to hurt them," Burton said, wiping the mud from his silver beard. "I came to study them. I came to study how they live, interact, and struggle to survive. Ironic that I'm here trying to survive them, instead."

"I don't want to hurt them either. I came to help them, hoping to give them a second chance at survival. But at some point you must choose -- your life or theirs."

"To choose theirs would go against all natural instinct," Burton said. "And to choose mine -- immoral. I am the intruder and unknowingly threatened them. I am to blame."

Jack pulled a photograph from his wallet and handed it to Burton. He smiled at the young wife and daughter smiling together in a swimming pool. "For me it's not my life or the tribe's to choose between. I can't leave them alone. I choose their life. I came here to save these people but I can't abandon my family. I simply cannot."

III

Jack unfolded the map and spread it across their little space below the embankment. He pulled the helicopter's console compass from his pack and set it on the map. Burton crouched next to him and listened as he explained the escape plan.

"The coordinates of the clearing place it about here." He touched a space on the map. "Considering the direction we took in the chopper and on foot I would place us about here." He pointed to another space on the map. He moved his finger northward to the rendezvous coordinates. "Here is where they said they would pick us up --"

"By chopper?"

Jack nodded. "Here's the catch. We'll need to either pass through the village or swim across this river." His finger followed a winding blue line on the map.

Burton chuckled. "I'd take my chances with a native's blade before I got in that river."

"Why's that?"

"Piranhas. Anacondas. Caimans. Food, Jack -- that is all we are."

"We'll need to go through the village then; preferably after dark. The rescue party is supposed to arrive at twenty-one hundred hours. If we wait until then we should be able to pass undetected. For now we rest and wait."

"Did you ever have to kill anyone -- in the war?"

Jack's breathing went silent.

"Sorry, I --"

"I joined to save lives not to take them. I never wanted to kill anyone."

Burton rolled onto his side and swatted at a mosquito. "During Vietnam I went north. Crossed the border into Canada with my friends. Spent those years camped out in Vancouver smoking weed while my buddies lost limbs. I never stopped feeling guilty for that. My close friend from middle school came back with a prosthetic leg and asked where I was served. I was so ashamed, I told him I was in India on a Catholic sabbatical. I don't know if I regret not fighting. Maybe I just regret not fighting with them."

"Nobody wants to die far from home," Jack said. "Over there I wasn't scared to die. I had joined prepared to sacrifice my life. I was just scared to think of them calling up my wife eight months pregnant." Jack looked down and took a deep breath. "She is what I thought about when that *muj* came at me. I was thinking about my pregnant wife and her raising that little girl all alone." He turned away from Burton as if ashamed. "For five minutes I was all animal. Afterward I just cleaned myself off and cried. I wasn't even

sure what had happened. All I knew is that my wife wasn't going to be getting no phone call."

Burton laid back and seemed to think for several seconds. "I choose me."

"What?"

"My life. I choose my life over theirs."

Jack nodded.

"Surely, it's a strange species which must decide survival. What have we become?" Burton asked.

"There is something noble in it."

"Yes, I suppose."

"Did you really think you could observe them without changing them?" Burton asked shifting his elbow in the black mud. They had planned on napping but the flow of adrenaline was keeping them awake. "We have been changing them for a thousand years, Doctor. We started changing them when we harnessed electricity. We started changing them when we invented the internal combustion engine. You started changing them the first time you flew in taking pictures. For all we know they were a peaceful people before that? Our mere existence changes them. You can't be so naive to think you can keep them caged in this little preserve forever – studying them like apes in a zoo. And what right do we have to withhold our privileges from them? What right do we have to keep them in this barbaric state? Is it pride? Or maybe some subconscious competitive desire to keep them ignorant while we progress?"

"I wanted to write my book, that's all."

"It was your book at their expense. Do we think of them as fellow humans? Or to us are they some fascinating, unevolved subspecies who someone gets to write a nice piece about in the *National Geographic*; replete with color, fold out photos – brain candy for highbrow intellectuals wanting to 'broaden their horizons'."

"I don't know. All I know is that I don't want to die today." Burton had opened an energy bar and was chewing on it. "Maybe I'll write a book about our exploits. Blood-soaked violence always sells more, anyway."

"So be it. Just pray the blood tonight isn't yours."

The white-stone moon cast an eerie glow on the sleeping village as the slow stream glittered under its milky gaze. The cacophonous song of the jungle had slowed to a soothing hum of clicking insects, cooing birds, and dripping water on wood. Jack could hear himself breathing and thought it too loud. It had taken them a half hour to hike cautiously from their hiding place to the village edge. Now Jack was holding his breath and memorizing the aerial photos Burton had brought along. Burton watched attentively as Jack traced their projected path with his finger. When the timing felt right, they crept on their hands and knees closer to the village and waited again. Three of the armed males were keeping watch while the rest of the tribe slept. Jack tried to find some pattern to the warrior's movements while deciding which path to take. He popped a tranq dart into the pistol and made sure a flare was loaded in the gun. He handed the flare gun to Burton and unsheathed his combat knife.

"Only use this if you absolutely have to," Jack whispered. "Follow me."

Crouched low, Jack and Burton stalked into the village, hiding behind the first thatched hut. Jack peaked around the corner and saw one of the sentries walking towards them. They ducked under the hut and laid in the cold mud which seeped up under their arms and into their jeans. Once they could no longer hear his footfalls Jack crawled cautiously out from under the hut. He looked both directions and then motioned for Burton to follow. They bolted across an open area and took cover behind another hut. An infant started to cry, startling both of them.

Someone rustled from their bedding and a soft, sweet voice sang and lulled the child to sleep. The infant's cries soon stopped and were followed by low breathing. Looking along the row of huts, Jack saw that they were nearing the mouth of the jungle. Only thirty more yards and they would be safe. They hurried to the next hut and waited. Suddenly a small, brown monkey burst from the entrance of a nearby hut, screeching and darting in their direction. A little boy came tumbling out of the hut, chasing after it. Burton and Jack froze. The little boy stopped and stared as his eyes adjusted to the moonlight. Two terrifying mud-creatures of unbelievable height. Forgetting his pet monkey, the boy stumbled backward and began to scream. His high pitched shrieks stabbed the night like an ominous alarm. Every hut in the vicinity came alive with shouts and screams and jumbled cries in the native tongue. Jack grabbed Burton by the arm and they hurried past the horrified boy. Plunging into the wet foliage, they stumbled down a hill and ripped past trees, tearing down vines and shoving past low-hanging branches. They heard the natives close behind, their fast feet skimming across the mud. He saw a tangle of tree branches and shoved Burton into them.

"Hide!" Burton scrambled under the brush and laid still. Jack dashed a few yards further and rolled behind a tree. Staring below the leaves of an low-hanging branch Jack saw their feet approach. He stopped breathing and tapped the safety of the tranq pistol. Most of natives continued running leaving three behind to investigate the trail. Jack could hear the soft pad of feet on the wet dirt and watched as the broad leaves parted a few yards in front of him. He held his breath and rested his chin on the ground. The native knelt down and touched Jack's boot prints in the mud. He dabbed at it and sniffed his finger. Raising his head, the warrior looked up to meet Jack's cold, determined stare. Before he could react, Jack pulled the trigger of the pistol. In a hiss of air, the dart whistled from the barrel and

sunk deep into the native's chest. He toppled over backward, grabbing at the dart and shrieking in fear. The second warrior lunged at Jack and drove a spear into his leg. Jack swung his knife into his attacker's shoulder and kicked him on his back. Ooh-rah. He looked up in time to see the third warrior drawing his long bow and taking aim. In an explosion of red sulfuric light the warrior caught fire and toppled over into the mud. A shower of red embers lit the quiet forest and floated to the ground. Burton stood shaking -- the smoking flare gun still clenched in his hands. Putting his head between his legs, Jack took a long breath and yanked the spear from his upper leg. Blood streamed from the wound and soaked his boots. If they could find a place to hide he would mend the wound before moving on.

"We're going to die," Burton said, as he watched the blood seep into Jack's pants.

"No, no. We're not going to die. The rendezvous isn't far from here. We must keep moving."

Darting back into the brush, Jack and Burton jogged in the direction of the extraction point which lay several hundred yards north. Jack pulled the compass from his pocket and slowed for a second to get their bearings before jogging again. His leg was throbbing in pain but fear kept him pressing forward. He took the gun from Burton and loaded in another flare. Checking his watch, he saw that the rescue party would be arriving in twenty minutes. They would have to find a way to stall the natives until then. After jogging for five more minutes they reached the base of the hill where Burton began to climb to the top.

"You head to the top and I'll wait down here. They'll be following my blood trail and aren't far behind," Jack said tossing the flare gun to Burton. "Use this if the choppers have trouble finding our position."

While Burton climbed to the top, Jack waited at the base of the hill in a secluded grove where he could mend his leg, and watch and wait. Unscrewing a bottled water, he

poured half of it on his wound and drank the rest. Reaching inside his pack, he pulled out a roll of gauze and began wrapping it around the wound. When it was tight and thick enough he tore the gauze off with his teeth and stuffed the remaining roll back in his bag. And then he listened. Sifting through the trees came the deep, throaty call of the jungle; the raw breath of rotted wood. A cool drizzle played against the leaves and formed puddles at his feet. He wiped a wet lock of hair from his eyes and continued to watch the woods. Before long the rain was crashing heavy and hard upon his head. Leaves and vines churned in the downpour making it difficult for him to discern natural movement from danger. A torrent of implacable rain dicing leaves and mixing mud, breaking branches and flooding streams. Brown water filled his boots and his t-shirt clung to his back. *A shadow.* He jerked to attention. *Was it someone?* A dark body through the rain. Squinting, he struggled to see through the blinding downpour. He lowered his head and tightened his grip on the knife.

"Please God no more killing." He had come to save these people not destroy them. But he had no other choice than to fight for his survival. The body -- or phantom had disappeared and Jack wiped the rain from his face to get a better view. Cupping a hand over his eyes he peered deeper into the jungle and saw nothing but the relentless barrage of rain. Not so different than the sultry, rain-soaked jungles of Manila, he thought. *But in those jungles I was doing the hunting.*

A scream erupted from the top of the hill. It was Burton begging desperately for his life. Instinctively, Jack stepped forward and then froze. He knew he had made a mistake and knew he would pay dearly for it. His hunter had been watching patiently from behind a nearby bush; waiting for Jack to respond to Burton's plea. Ducking low, Jack vaulted over a fallen tree and stalked around it. He heard the native move through the wood and then lost him in

the clamor of pounding rain. *If only he could speak my language. If only he could understand.* Two foes confused and frightened, and ready to kill each other for no other reason than misunderstanding; both fighting for what they loved most. Jack peaked around the fat roots of the fallen tree and saw nothing. He heard a shift in the foliage behind him and turned to face the hunter's bone-chipped club. Jack caught his arm but the momentum knocked him backward into a gaping hole of muddy rainwater. Thrashing to gain control, Jack gripped the warrior's wrist and struggled to wrench the club from his hands. The warrior grabbed Jack's neck and shoved his head under the water where a mouthful of mud filled his throat. Jack's vision went black as he coughed on the water and lost control of the attacker's wrist. He could feel his strength slipping away under the warrior's knees and iron grip. The energy drained from his body and he could no longer breath. His last thoughts went back to home. To his wife. To a little girl smiling under a shady oak. A good life that was meant to be. A long silence and then strength. In a strange surge of energy and feral scream Jack kicked both legs upward tossing the warrior headlong into the muddy pool. Before he could respond, Jack had rolled onto his knees and grappled the warrior around the neck. The native kicked and scratched and grabbed at Jack's ear, struggling for control. Jack tightened his grip and remembered the last tranq in his shirt pocket. With a free hand he grabbed the tranq dart and plunged it into the warrior's neck.

Ooh-rah, devil dog.

The warrior screamed and shook and fought until the sedative kicked in and he went limp in the water. Jack dragged him up out of the hole and laid him on his side before racing up the hill to find Burton.

The churn of the rain drowned out the sound of the chopper waiting above. Jack saw it through the storm and

ripped open a flare, waving it for the pilot to see. He dropped blazing flare on the ground and turned his attention to Burton who was a pin cushion of enemy arrows and spears. His skin was cold and his clothes and beard were sodden to the skin. Jack searched desperately for a pulse. He cried and shook him and lifted up his head. When the chopper landed six armed commandos bolted into the clearing and created a perimeter. A medic helped Jack drag Burton into the helicopter and wrap him in a blanket. Motioning with hand signals, the commandos piled back into the chopper before it lifted up into the rain-soaked night.

Sitting back in his chair, Jack dropped a stack mail onto his desk. He rifled through the bills and paused at an envelope, which looked strangely familiar. He ripped open the envelope and pulled out a stack of glossy photos dated 'last week.' Peering up from a row of mud-thatched huts were a congregation of indigenous onlookers, pointing to the sky in bewildered amazement. Tall warriors. Strong women. Healthy children. Jack tucked the photos back into the envelope and smiled.

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