

Jungle

John looked out the window at the lush, seemingly endless sea of green below. "I still can't believe we're actually doing this," he said.

The surprisingly loud engine of the small, rickety plane roared over his comment so he repeated himself after leaning towards his friend Matt.

Matt shook his head and smiled mockingly. "Last chance to back out," he said.

Charlie was sitting on the other side of the plane but heard what Matt said and sprung over his two friends to peek out of the window. "Holy shit there it is. Are we ready boys?"

"Look at all that green... Never seen anything like that," John said.

"Well that's because all you do all day is sit in the basement, never even looking outside," answered Charlie.

"I'm here, aren't I?" said John.

The three friends kept pushing and shoving each other to be able to take a look out the window at the far-reaching, emerald green forest that they were flying over. 'The Shitbox', as the boys aptly called it, made a turn towards the East before starting to slow down and make an unsteady landing on a small landing strip at the edge of the forest. As the fifteen or so passengers unloaded from the plane, the guys could barely contain their excitement as they took their backpacks from the small luggage compartment of the plane.

To the southeast there was a tiny hotel that looked quite run down, deserted, but seemed to still be operating as there was an elderly couple waiting for the passengers on the porch. As the tourists walked towards the hotel with their huge suitcases and clothes that were clearly not suited for the weather, the three friends looked at the herd of people, then each other, and laughed gloatingly before turning right around and starting to walk towards the tree line.

"It feels damn good knowing all our actual valuables are left in the city hotel and not in this dump," Charlie said.

"As dumb as you are, I actually agree with you on this one. Good job!" said Matt and playfully pat Charlie's head.

"Yeah, this might be the first time you actually came up with a good plan", said John as he caught up with the other two. "Can we all have a quick check on our equipment in case we still miss something important?"

"I mean, all we need is our tents," said Charlie, "for any other need, the forest will provide for us."

"Shut up Charlie, or we might accidentally lose you on the way" said Matt.

Charlie began to pout and pretended to be offended. However, the jolly atmosphere vanished once the three reached the trees and the gravity of their current situation hit them. They were on their own now as the guide stayed back with the tourists at the hotel and weren't due to leave on their trip until after noon the next day.

"Anyone else shitting themselves right about now?" asked John.

"Oh yes," answered the other two, almost in unison.

"It's like three in the afternoon right now so we should be good for some hours before finding a place to sleep for the night," said Matt reassuringly while looking at his watch, "so let's just go at our own pace and see what's in there."

"Please," said Charlie, and motioned for Matt to take the lead. Matt begrudgingly dug out his machete from his backpack that he had bought before jumping on the plane to their final destination.

"What do you guys think, would I be able to board a plane back home with this thing?" he asked as he toyed around, slashing at the air and low-hanging branches with his new purchase.

"Yeah you could board a free trip all the way to Alcatraz," snorted Charlie, "but let's get going."

With Matt in the lead, the group started making their way into the jungle, heading northwest. The first hour was spent in silence, with only the odd remark of the surrounding plants and habitants, never-before-seen by the travellers. The group decided that John should be in charge of their whereabouts so they can

find their way back. John spent the majority of the trek nervously scouting their surroundings and trying to keep them on the map that they bought from the tourist guide on the plane.

"I feel like those Spaniards when they were exploring South America, you know?" said Matt while letting his machete clear a path through the thick vegetation and drooping leaves and branches. "Just hope we won't run into any crazy jungle people."

"Calm down Cortés, we're not even on the right continent," Charlie said.

"How about break, guys?" said John.

"Good idea, we should let this madman calm down before one of us loses an arm," said Charlie, "look, there's even a nice clearing at that fallen tree."

"Where?" asked Matt.

"Right there man, with the pile of bones-" Charlie started, but his voice escaped him.

"What did you say?" said Matt.

"Okay, I think it's time we got out of here," Charlie said with a shaky voice and started slowly walking backwards.

"What is it?" asked John, with his face buried in the map as he kept track of their movement.

"Shut the fuck up," Charlie snapped with a lowered voice and whispered, "there're bones all over the place over there and I say we get out of here before we join the pile."

Matt and John looked where Charlie was pointing and after seeing the bones, color flushed from their faces and they started taking cautious steps backwards. After a few steps John stepped on a loose branch that snapped loudly, leading to all three being startled and let out a yelp before turning around and running as fast as they could towards the way they came from. After a good dozen minutes of running, stopping for air due to the poor physical condition all of them were in, and running again, Matt finally saw an opening behind the trees.

"This is stupid, we're running from nothing," he said as he stopped and fell to his knees from exhaustion and tried to catch his breath.

After a few minutes of lying down in the foliage and calming down, Charlie sat up with a thinking expression on his face.

"I mean, monkeys have burial grounds where they travel to die, must have been that, right guys?" he said.

"That's elephants, you dumbass," said John, "although, it's probably just some feeding area for animals or something."

"Either way, I'm not going back there," said Charlie.

"Come on man, finally you get some excitement in your life and immediately you start being a little baby," laughed Matt. "We've come this far and I won't let some animal buffet scare me away. How about we go strictly west or something this time?"

"Animal buffet or not, that shit is creepy as hell. But I'm with you Matt, I'll just mark the area on my map so we know to avoid it," said John.

"Alright fine," said Charlie, "but if we run into some cannibal tribe, I'm letting them feed on you while I run along home."

A couple of hours passed while the now slightly cautious group made their way through the thick jungle, recoiling at any loud noise that echoed in the treetops. Darkness started to fall and the friends decided to find a nice place to prepare for the night.

"John, be a dear and shine the light over yonder amidst the trees," said Charlie, giving his best effort at attempting an English accent.

"As you wish sir Attenborough," said John and chuckled while he swung the flashlight he was holding to their left.

The beam of light revealed a perfect opening for the tent they were carrying. Matt took it out of his backpack and the group pitched it as well as they could as it had got dark fast and working in the light of one measly flashlight proved to be quite difficult. After about twenty minutes of bickering and focusing, the tent was standing on its own. All three let out a sigh of relief and climbed into the tent to settle for the night.

The first couple of hours pass by peacefully with the odd noise here and there but Matt's snoring drowns most sounds out. Suddenly, Charlie is awoken by a cracking noise, presumably from the twigs and branches that were cut down by Matt's machete.

"What was tha-" whispered Charlie, before realizing the other two were still sleeping and muffling his voice.

He carefully grabbed the flashlight John was still clutching onto in his sleep.

"Aww, poor John," Charlie whispered in a mocking tone, "always so scared of the outside world."

"What? Is it morning already?" said John as he woke up from the sound of Charlie's voice.

"No, no, go back to sleep I just need your flashlight. Going for a piss," Charlie answered.

He waited a few minutes for John to fall back asleep while straining his ears, trying to hear if there's any other strange noises coming from outside, but Matt's snoring was enough to drown any possible sounds. Charlie debated going back to sleep but curiosity got the best of him and he carefully climbed out of the tent, straightened up and turned on the flashlight. The beam of light revealed all the leaves and plants scattered in the forest and bounced off the various bugs and reptiles as their shells or eyes found the right position to send the light back. Charlie was visibly nervous at this point, sweating partly due to the sheer humidity in the forest as it must have rained while he was asleep and partly due to the now noticeable sounds coming from the direction he was facing. Charlie could distinctly hear sounds of branches snapping under pressure and still-attached branches hitting each other almost like they were being pushed against each other.

"Anybody out there?" Charlie whispered as loud as he could without actually raising his voice, but there was no answer.

He then decided to walk towards the sounds and as they got louder due to being closer, he kept staring more and more intently at the light-revealed areas as he pointed the flashlight's beam straight ahead. After a few more steps, some of the leaves rustled right in front of him and he froze in place. As he kept staring, from the foliage a pair of eyes emerged, looking back at him. Charlie shrieked and ran back to the tent, stumbling on branches and mud on the way.

"Guys wake the fuck up right now there's something in here with us," he yelled as he approached the tent.

But as he reached the tent he saw both Matt and John outside with their hands on their heads with dark figures behind them, armed with what looked to be a spear and a bow. Charlie shined the light to reveal two menacing-looking men with no clothes on, with paintings made with white and red paint across their faces, arms and torso. They had wicked grins on their faces as they communicated with each other while playfully poking his friends with their spears. These men were strangely short, standing at around a meter and a half in height.

"Yeah we figured as much," said John.

"What do you want?" asked Charlie and pointed the flashlight in the face of one of the men.

The man just stood there, staring at Charlie with a puzzling look on his face and a wide grin, showing his yellow teeth. The men seemed more curious than dangerous, examining the three friends and poking them with their spears with a clear intention to get a reaction rather than cause harm. The man behind John spoke up in a language no one in the group had heard before.

"What do we do? They don't seem to want to harm us," said Matt.

"I don't know, give them something so they let us go?" answered John with a scared inflection in his voice.

Charlie walked up slowly and attempted to calm down the situation by repeating short words and phrases with a reassuring voice, such as "relax" and "it's okay". The men looked at the group curiously and pointed at the flashlight that was held by Charlie. Charlie picked up on this and reached his arm out to hand it to one of the men. The man snatched the device from his hand and shook it around, making the beam of light dance sporadically between the trees. The men seemed delighted by this until they smashed it on a rock on the ground and completely destroyed it. This seemed to amuse them and they laughed and

exchanged a few words amongst each other before reaching out with the palm of their hand, almost like motioning for Charlie to give them something else.

“Uhh I guess they don’t like technology,” Charlie remarked and let out a nervous laugh.

The men reacted to this and started to laugh as well and the three friends joined them, hoping it would help dissolve the situation, but after a few seconds of laughter, the third man stepped up behind Charlie and poked him with his spear.

“Ouch what the hell man? I believe we’ve met already,” Charlie snapped at him.

This seemed to aggravate the man because he promptly shoved him towards Matt and John.

“Wait what’s going on?” asked Matt as he started to look more and more nervous about the situation.

Suddenly the men behind Matt and John took up a more serious mood, almost as if the third man was somehow in charge. They then shoved the guys forward, expecting them to walk.

“Just do what they want you to do, I really don’t want to die out here,” whimpered John.

“No fuck that, I will not be eaten by these maniacs,” protested Charlie.

“I assume they want to take us to their tribe so we better walk. I like my ribs to be as spear-free as possible,” said Matt.

The three slunk their heads towards the ground as they resignedly started walking, following the assumed leader of the strange men with the other two coming behind them, playing with the broken remains of the flashlight and giggling with each other. After around ten minutes of walking slowly, Charlie, who walking ahead of the other two, noticed a bonfire gleaming from between the tree trunks.

“Holy shit they’re going to actually burn us and eat us. What are we going to do?” asked Charlie, trying to keep his voice in control as to not show his panic to his captors.

“I have a plan,” said John calmly, “I have my phone with me but I need some time.”

“I’m on it,” said Matt and threw himself on the ground, pretending to be hurt.

The two men behind Matt and John signaled the one in front to stop and leaned down to examine Matt who was trashing on the ground and moaning in pain. One of the men poked Matt with their spear but that lead to him screaming even louder in pain. This started to rouse curiosity in the tribe and people started peeking at the group from between the trees. Suddenly, an ear-shatteringly loud sound was heard from around ten meters to the right of the group and it startled everyone that could hear it. The three tribesmen held their arms lowered behind them to motion for the three friends to stay put as they walked towards this loud sound that sounded like some shrieking creature. As the tribesmen reached the source of the sound, John grabbed Matt and pulled him on his feet, grabbed a sizeable stone from the group and motioned for the other two to do the same.

“On three,” he said.

Charlie and Matt both grabbed a stone and aimed at the men.

“One... Two... Three!” roared John and chucked the stone as hard as he could in the air, hitting a tree next to one of the tribesmen, who fortunately did not even hear the following clanking sound as the stone hit the trunk. Charlie’s stone also missed as it whizzed over the heads of the now crouched men who were examining something on the ground while holding their ears as the sound was deafeningly loud. Matt however found success and his stone that was around ten centimeters in diameter, smashed against the back of the head of one of the men, who subsequently crumpled on the ground, lifeless.

“Run!” shouted John who started flying past the trees, shielding his face with his arms as he dashed through the leaves and branches with Matt and Charlie in tow. The three could hear alarmed shouting of the tribesmen behind them and a couple arrows flying striking trees behind them. Fortunately the foliage seemed to offer enough cover to protect the friends from any actual harm. The few arrows that hit, hit Charlie in the back but they were slowed down enough from all the obstacles that they did not even stick to him but rather just gave him a little scrape. After well over half an hour of running for their lives, the three finally reached an opening in the trees and after emerging from the forest, they could see the plane and the hotel at the other end of this open area, approximately a kilometer away.

“Don’t stop now, we’re almost there,” screamed Matt, still pumped up on adrenaline.

The group kept running until they reached the hotel and collapsed on the floor in front of the owner who was sleeping behind the counter. John managed to cough up what had happened and the owner alarmed the pilots who rushed downstairs and told the group they'd take them to the city.

As dawn started to show its early signs, the three friends hopped out of the plane in the small private airport on the outskirts of the city. They then found a taxi to take them to the original hotel they stayed in to pick up their passports and money from the safe before continuing on to the commercial airport where they bought a one-way ticket home. Their flight wasn't boarding until late afternoon so the three had some time to freshen up in the bathroom so they didn't look like they just came from the jungle.

"So, John, thanks for saving our asses," said Charlie, "what do we owe you?"

"Well I do think you guys should pay my rent this month for starters," he answered with a smile.

"What did you do, anyway?" asked Matt.

"Remember that freaky as shit fox scream video you sent me last year? I found it on my phone, turned it all the way up and just chucked my phone in the trees. Can't believe it worked," John laughed.

The three friends kept mostly to themselves during the flight home and they did not exchange many words about the encounter during the journey home. Once they got home, however, they contacted the media to share their story. Charlie was abruptly hospitalized shortly after their return, as some of the arrows contained slow-affecting poison but luckily there wasn't enough in his system to cause serious harm.