



Amazonia

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To John Petty and Rick Hourigan friends and co-conspirators

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Prologues

JULY 25, 6:24 /pM.

AN AMERINDIAN MISSIONARY VILLAGE

AMAZDNAS, BRAZIL

Padre Garcia Luiz Batista was struggling with his hoe, tilling weeds from the mission's garden, when the stranger stumbled from the jungle. The figure wore a tattered pair of black denim pants and nothing else. Bare-chested and shoeless, the man fell to his knees among rows of sprouting cassava plants. His skin, burnt a deep mocha, was tattooed with blue and crimson dyes.

Mistaking the fellow for one of the local Yanomamo Indians, Padre Batista pushed back his wide-brimmed straw hat and greeted the fellow in the Indians' native tongue. "Eou, shori," he said. "Welcome, friend, to the mission of Wauwai:"

The stranger lifted his face, and Garcia instantly knew his mistake. The fellow's eyes were the deepest blue, a color unnatural among the Amazonian tribes. He also bore a straggled growth of dark beard.

Clearly not an Indian, but a white man.

"Bemvindo," he offered in Portuguese, believing now that the fellow must be one of the ubiquitous peasants from the coastal cities who ventured into the Amazon rain forest to stake a claim and build a better life for themselves. "Be welcome here, my friend:"

The poor soul had clearly been in the jungle a long time. His skin was stretched over bone, each rib visible. His black hair was tangled, and his body bore cuts and oozing sores. Flies flocked about him, buzzing and feeding on his wounds.

When the stranger tried to speak, his parched lips cracked and fresh blood dribbled down his chin. He half crawled toward Garcia, an arm raised in supplication. His words, though, were garbled, unintelligible, a beastly sound.

Garcia's first impulse was to retreat from the man, but his calling to God would not let him. The Good Samaritan did not refuse the wayward traveler. He bent and helped the man to his feet. The fellow was so wasted he weighed no more than a child in his arms. Even through his own shirt, the padre could feel the heat of the man's skin as he burned with fever.

"Come, let us get you inside out of the sun:" Garcia guided the man toward the mission's church, its whitewashed steeple poking toward the blue sky. Beyond the building, a ragtag mix of palm-thatched huts and wooden homes spread across the cleared jungle floor.

The mission of Wauwai had been established only five years earlier, but already the village had swelled to nearly eighty inhabitants, a mix of various indigenous tribes. Some of the homes were on stilts, as was typical of the Apalai Indians, while others built solely of palm thatch were home to the Waiwai and Tirios tribes. But the greatest number of the mission's dwellers were Yanomamo, marked by their large communal roundhouse.

Garcia waved his free arm to one of the Yanomamo tribesmen at the garden's edge, a fellow named Henaowe. The short Indian, the padre's assistant, was dressed in pants and a buttoned, long-sleeved shirt. He hurried forward.

"Help me get this man into my house."

Henaowe nodded vigorously and crossed to the man's other side. With the feverish man slung between them, they passed through the garden gate and around the church to the clapboard building jutting from its south face. The missionaries' residence was the only home with a gas generator. It powered the church's lights, a refrigerator, and the village's only air conditioner. Sometimes Garcia wondered if the success of his mission was not based solely on the wonders of the church's cool interior, rather than any heartfelt belief in salvation through Christ.

Once they reached the residence, Henaowe ducked forward and yanked the rear door open. They manhandled the stranger through the dining room to a back room. It was one of the domiciles of the mission's acolytes, but it was now unoccupied. Two days ago, the younger missionaries had all left on an evangelical journey to a neighboring village. The small room was little more than a dark cell, but it was at least cool and sheltered from the sun.

Garcia nodded for Henaowe to light the room's lantern. They had not bothered to run the electricity to the smaller rooms. Cockroaches and spiders skittered from the flame's glow.

Together they hauled the man to the single bed. "Help me get him out of his clothes. I must clean and treat his wounds:"

Henaowe nodded and reached for the buttons to the man's pants, then froze. A gasp escaped the Indian. He jumped back as if from a scorpion.

"Weti kete?" Garcia asked. "What is it?"

Henaowe's eyes had grown huge with horror. He pointed to the man's bare chest and spoke rapidly in his native tongue.

Garcia's brow wrinkled. "What about the tattoo?" The blue and red dyes were mostly geometric shapes: crimson circles, vibrant squiggles, and jagged triangles. But in the

center and radiating out was a serpentine spiral of red, like blood swirling down a drain. A single blue handprint lay at its center, just above the man's navel.

"Shawara!" Henaowe exclaimed, backing toward the door.

Evil spirits.

Garcia glanced back to his assistant. He had thought the tribesman had grown past these superstitious beliefs. "Enough," he said harshly. "It's only paint. It's not the devil's work. Now come help me:"

Henaowe merely shook in terror and would approach no closer.

Frowning, Garcia returned his attention to his patient as the man groaned. His eyes were glassy with fever and delirium. He thrashed weakly on the sheets. Garcia checked the man's forehead. It burned. He swung back to Henaowe. "At least fetch the first-aid kit for me and the penicillin in the fridge:"

With clear relief, the Indian dashed away.

Garcia sighed. Having lived in the Amazonian rain forest for a decade, he had out of necessity learned basic medical skills: setting splints, cleaning and applying salves to wounds, treating fevers. He could even perform simple operations, like suturing wounds and helping with difficult births. As the padre of the mission, he was not only the primary guardian of their souls, but also counselor, chief, and doctor.

Garcia removed the man's soiled clothes and set them aside. As his eyes roved over the man's exposed skin, he could clearly see how sorely the unforgiving jungle had ravaged his body. Maggots crawled in his deep wounds. Scaly fungal infections had eaten away the man's toenails, and a scar on his heel marked an old snakebite.

As he worked, the padre wondered who this man was. What was his story? Did he have family out there somewhere? But all attempts to speak to the man were met only with a garbled, delirious response.

Many of the peasants who tried to eke out a living met hard ends at the hands of hostile Indians, thieves, drug traffickers, or even jungle predators. But the most common demise of these settlers was disease. In the remote wilds of the rain forest, medical attention could be weeks away. A simple flu could bring death.

The scuff of feet on wood drew Garcia's attention back to the door. Henaowe had returned, burdened with the medical kit and a pail of clean water. But he was not alone. At Henaowe's side stood Kamala, a short, white-haired shapori, the tribal shaman. Henaowe must have run off to fetch the ancient medicine man.

"Haya," Garcia greeted the fellow. "Grandfather." It was the typical way to acknowledge a Yanomamo elder.

Kamala did not say a word. He simply strode into the room and crossed to the bed. As he stared down at the man, his eyes narrowed. He turned to Henaowe and waved for the Indian to place the bucket and medical kit down. The shaman then lifted his arms over the bedridden stranger and began to chant. Garcia was fluent in many indigenous dialects, but he could not make out a single word.

Once done, Kamala turned to the padre and spoke in fluent Portuguese. "This nabe has been touched by the shawara, dangerous spirits of the deep forest. He will die this night. His body must be burned before sunrise." With these words, Kamala turned to leave.

"Wait! Tell me what this symbol means:"

Turning back with a scowl, Kamala said, "It is the mark of the Ban-ali tribe. Blood Jaguars. He belongs to them. None must give help to a ban-yi, the slave of the jaguar. It is death." The shaman made a gesture to ward against evil spirits, blowing across his fingertips, then left with Henaowe in tow.

Alone in the dim room, Garcia felt a chill in the air that didn't come from the air-conditioning. He had heard whispers of the Ban-ali, one of the mythic ghost tribes of the deep forest. A frightening people who mated with jaguars and possessed unspeakable powers.

Garcia kissed his crucifix and cast aside these fanciful superstitions. Turning to the

bucket and medicines, he soaked a sponge in the tepid water and brought it to the wasted man's lips.

"Drink," he whispered. In the jungle, dehydration, more than any-thing, was often the factor between life and death. He squeezed the sponge and dribbled water across the man's cracked lips.

Like a babe suckling at his mother's teat, the stranger responded to the water. He slurped the trickle, gasping and half choking. Garcia helped raise the man's head so he could drink more easily. After a few minutes, the delirium faded somewhat from the man's eyes. He scrabbled for the sponge, responding to the life-giving water, but Garcia pulled it away. It was unhealthy to drink too quickly after such severe dehydration.

"Rest, senhor," he urged the stranger. "Let me clean your wounds and get some antibiotics into you:"

The man did not seem to understand. He struggled to sit up, reaching for the sponge, crying out eerily. As Garcia pushed him by the shoulders to the pillow, the man gasped out, and the padre finally understood why the man could not speak.

He had no tongue. It had been cut away.

Grimacing, Garcia prepared a syringe of ampicillin and prayed to God for the souls of the monsters that could do this to another man. The medicine was past its expiration date, but it was the best he could get out here. He injected the antibiotic into the man's left buttock, then began to work on his wounds with sponge and salve.

The stranger lapsed between lucidity and delirium. Whenever he was conscious, the man struggled mindlessly for his piled clothes, as if he intended to dress and continue his jungle trek. But Garcia would always push his arms back down and cover him again with blankets.

As the sun set and night swept over the forests, Garcia sat with the Bible in hand and prayed for the man. But in his heart, the padre knew his prayers would not be answered. Kamala, the shaman, was correct in his assessment. The man would not last the night.

As a precaution, in case the man was a child of Christ, he had performed the sacrament of Last Rites an hour earlier. The fellow had stirred as he marked his forehead with oil, but he did not wake. His brow burned feverishly. The antibiotics had failed to break through the blood infections.

Resolved that the man would die, Garcia maintained his vigil. It was the least he could do for the poor soul. But as midnight neared and the jungle awoke with the whining sounds of locusts and the croaking of myriad frogs, Garcia slipped to sleep in his chair, the Bible in his lap.

He woke hours later at a strangled cry from the man. Believing his patient was gasping his last breath, Garcia struggled up, knocking his Bible to the floor. As he bent to pick it up, he found the man staring back at him. His eyes were glassy, but the delirium had faded. The stranger lifted a trembling hand. He pointed again to his discarded clothes.

"You can't leave," Garcia said.

The man closed his eyes a moment, shook his head, then with a pleading look, he again pointed to his pants.

Garcia finally relented. How could he refuse this last feverish request? Standing, he crossed to the foot of the bed and retrieved the rumpled pair of pants. He handed them to the dying man.

The stranger grabbed them up and immediately began pawing along the length of one leg of his garment, following the inner seam. Finally, he stopped and fingered a section of the cotton denim.

With shaking arms, he held the pants out to Garcia.

The padre thought the stranger was slipping back into delirium. In fact, the poor man's breathing had become more ragged and coarse. But Garcia humored his nonsensical actions. He took the pants and felt where the man indicated.

To his surprise, he found something stiffer than denim under his fingers, something hidden under the seam. A secret pocket.

Curious, the padre fished out a pair of scissors from the first-aid kit. Off to the side, the man sank down to his pillow with a sigh, clearly content that his message had finally been understood.

Using the scissors, Garcia trimmed through the seam's threads and opened the secret pocket. Reaching inside, he tugged out a small bronze coin and held it up to the lamp. A name was engraved on the coin.

"Gerald Wallace Clark," he read aloud. Was this the stranger? "Is this you, senhor?"

He glanced back to the bed.

"Sweet Jesus in heaven," the padre mumbled.

Atop the cot, the man stared blindly toward the ceiling, mouth lolled open, chest unmoving. He had let go the ghost, a stranger no longer.

"Rest in peace, Senhor Clark."

Padre Batista again raised the bronze coin to the lantern and flipped it over. As he saw the words inscribed on the opposite side, his mouth grew dry with dread.

United States Army Special Forces.

AUGUST 1, 10:45 A.M.

CIA HEADQUARTERS

LANGLEY VIRGINIA

George Fielding had been surprised by the call. As deputy director of Central Intelligence, he had often been summoned to urgent meetings by various division heads,

but to get a priority one call from Marshall O'Brien, the head of the Directorate Environmental Center, was unusual. The DEC had been established back in 1997, a division of the intelligence community dedicated to environmental issues. So far in his tenure, the DEC had never raised a priority call. Such a response was reserved for matters of immediate national security. What could have rattled the Old Bird-as Marshall O'Brien had been nicknamed-to place such an alert?

Fielding strode rapidly down the hall that connected the original headquarters building to the new headquarters. The newer facility had been built in the late eighties. It housed many of the burgeoning divisions of the service, including the DEC.

As he walked, he glanced at the framed paintings lining the long passageway, a gallery of the former directors of the CIA, going back all the way to Major General Donovan, who served as director of the Office of Strategic Services, the World War II-era counterpart of the CIA. Fielding's own boss would be added to this wall one day, and if George played his cards smartly, he himself might assume the directorship.

With this thought in mind, he entered the New Headquarters Building and followed the halls to the DEC's suite of offices. Once through the main door, he was instantly greeted by a secretary.

She stood as he entered. "Deputy Director, Mr. O'Brien is waiting for you in his office." The secretary crossed to a set of mahogany doors, knocked perfunctorily, then pushed open the door, holding it wide for him.

"Thank you:"

Inside, a deep, rumbling voice greeted him. "Deputy Director Fielding, I appreciate you coming in person." Marshall O'Brien stood up from his chair. He was a towering man with silver-gray hair. He dwarfed the large executive desk. He waved to a chair. "Please take a seat. I know your time is valuable, and I won't waste it:"

Always to the point, Fielding thought. Four years ago, there had been talk that Marshall O'Brien might assume the directorship of the CIA. In fact, the man had been deputy director before Fielding, but he had bristled too many senators with his no-nonsense attitude and burned even more bridges with his rigid sense of right and wrong.