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Opening extract from

Jaguar Trials

Written by

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The shaman waits for the candle to burn low, then places the necklace of jaguar claws round his throat. Already he feels himself shifting, changing. He takes a fang in each hand and scratches them down his face, drawing blood.

With a quick breath, he blows out the candle and all goes dark.

Slowly, slowly, my eyes see.

I feel my four feet pad the smooth stone of the broad street. Stone buildings tower round me, blotting out the night sky, then open out into a wide plaza.

I stand, tail twitching, tasting the air.

El Dorado! The last great refuge. The one place that still remains pure and untouched. Safe from the plunderings of men.

The stars become points of light on jade water.

I see a boy by a river, and a flurry of yellow butterflies rises up from the jetty as he walks along it. He pauses, looking straight towards me. He does not see me, but I know he feels me. His eyes reflect the green and gold of the river.

And finally, hope comes.

PART 1

AMAZONIA



1
THE RIVER

"Ben here, in deepest Brazil. Searching for the lost city of gold!"

Ben stood on the deck, filming the jade-green water across to the riverbank. He still couldn't believe he was really here. The Amazon! A few weeks into the research expedition with his dad. It was the trip of a lifetime.

Sunlight glinted off the dense line of trees. Ben zoomed out; he was using the video camera on his phone. "Here's our fine vessel. A wooden cruiser. Only fifteen metres long. Bit on the *old* side. Been doing a bit of trading on the way. Got some cargo loaded last night – captain won't tell us what!"

Light sparked off the water. A shoal of silver-backed fish broke the surface, then slipped back into the depths.

"Poisonous snakes in there." Rafael was by Ben's shoulder. "Electric eels and piranhas, too," he added nervously, adjusting the bulging fabric of his life jacket. "I read them fishes can eat a whole man in two minutes – right down to the bones!"

"Don't forget them crocodiles," teased Ben, turning the camera on his friend. "Here's Rafael. Give us a wave, Raffie! Portuguese explorer extraordinaire. Expedition expert on all things that can kill you out here. His dad is paying for the trip, so got to treat him right. . . Leech on your neck!"

Rafael gave a gasp and swatted at his throat.

The video shot shook with laughing. "Oh, sorry," said Ben. "It's just a leaf." He gave Rafael a friendly punch on the arm.

"That's not funny," Rafael puffed. He put a hand up to the lens. "Stop filming me. Now! Who's going to watch that thing, anyway?"

Ben shrugged. "Not been able to get a signal since we got so remote, but nine hundred hits and counting last time I looked!"

"Hmph!" said Rafael, but he looked impressed as he bustled off, scribbling in his notebook.

Ben zoomed in on a man wearing tatty shorts and a T-shirt. "Here's the good doctor of archeology himself! Checking the GPS. Could do with a shave. Hi, Dad!"

Dad gave a small salute. "Hello, my one and only son!"

Ben panned to the wheelhouse – but the captain put up a hand and waved him away with a frown. "There's our Brazilian skipper – laughing and joking as usual."

There was the smell of smoke and, as they rounded a bend in the river, a cluster of thatched huts came into view a way along the bank.

"Espírito," called the captain gruffly from the wheelhouse. "Last village for fifty kilometres."

"Getting some good shots?" Dad clamped a hand on Ben's arm and gave it a squeeze. "This is the life, eh? On the trail of the real El Dorado."

Ben stopped filming and grinned. "Think we'll really find it?"

"We're really on to something, son." Ben felt his heart thud, catching Dad's excitement. "What with the aerial photos, and the new lead I got from that museum in Rio de Janeiro. . ." Dad's eyes glittered. "I think this could be it!"

Ben smiled. He'd not seen his dad this happy in ages. "Hey, maybe we'll find the tons of gold Rafael's dad is after! Beat everyone else to it!"

"*El Dorado!*" Dad breathed. "But I'm not here for the gold, Ben."

"OK, right!"

"No, seriously. It's knowledge I want to find. To understand how the local people lived. Get the place protected. Preserved for future generations."

Ben nodded. He looked over at Rafael, still scribbling in his notebook under the awning. "But when are you going to tell Raffie's banker dad we're off his route?"

"Yeah." Dad looked uncomfortable. "We're due an update call any time from our Senhor Santa Lucia."

The boat gave a lurch, and there was a wave of curses from the wheelhouse.

"O . . . K," said Dad. "Looks like we're stuck on another sandbar."

There was a grating roar as the captain revved the engine

backwards, forwards, churning up mud and silt as he tried to get the boat free.

"Do the emergency canoes have enough supplies in them?" called Rafael worriedly, fiddling with the straps of his life jacket.

"Don't worry, Raffie," Dad reassured him. "That's all taken care of."

There were shouts, and a group of small children ran along the riverbank ahead, laughing and waving. A fallen tree jutted out of the water; Ben saw a girl balance expertly on a branch. She was about his age, with black hair to her shoulders. She had a band of red paint across her forehead, and swirling black lines along one side of her face. The girl ran effortlessly along the branch and dived into the water.

Next moment she was on the surface again, swimming to the boat with gliding strokes. She shouted something to the other children, and there was a flurry of movement as they jumped into the water and swam behind her in a giggling shoal.

Ben got filming again. "Captain's feeble attempts to free the boat failed. Locals coming to help."

"But what about the piranhas?" fretted Rafael.

Ben saw his dad watching in amusement.

Dozens of small hands pushed at the side of the boat, helping the growling engine.

There was an explosive cheer as the hull came free, and as the boat gathered speed the kids came in pursuit.

"Thank you! Thank you!" called Ben, waving.

"You are welcome!" the girl called back in English.

"But keep to the left!" she shouted as she fell further behind. "The right branch leads to rapids!" Ben could hardly hear her now as the river curved again. "Drowned ghosts!"

He lost sight of her.

Rafael unrolled a map and started peering at it. "What did she mean about *rapids*?" His voice was twangy with stress. "There shouldn't be rapids on our route!"

Ben and his dad exchanged looks. "Just a little change of plan, Rafael," said Dad soothingly. "I'm going to tell your dad all about it when we next talk."

"But white water is totally *lethal*!" cried Rafael. "If you fall out and get stuck in the bottom of a waterfall, you'll go round and round under water till you drown. That's if you don't get your skull smashed open on a rock first!"

"We're going to avoid the rapids," said Dad. "The left branch of the river is completely safe."

"I'm going to check with the captain," said Rafael, clutching the map against his life jacket. "My pa will not be happy!"

As if on cue, the phone's shrill ring cut through the air. Dad fished a bulky satellite phone from a pocket. "Yes. Senhor Santa Lucia. How are you, Senhor?"

"WHERE ARE YOU, MANSELL? WHAT PROGRESS HAVE YOU MADE?" Ben couldn't help but hear the barking voice on the other end of the line, despite the noises in the background – it sounded as if Rafael's dad was in a football stadium.

"We made a slight detour," replied Dad. "And—"

"WHERE ARE YOU?" the voice shouted again. "Come on, referee! You blind? OUR AGREEMENT WAS THAT YOU FOLLOW THE MAP, MANSELL!"

"Well, we're not exactly on the route," said Dad calmly. "We've taken an interesting small deviation to the east, where—"

"WHAT?!"

"Well, as I explained earlier, Senhor, I'm concerned about the authenticity of the map you gave me, and if we widen our search area—"

"THAT MAP IS AUTHENTIC!"

"Well, with respect, several key landmarks have proved to be inaccurate, and—"

"GOOOOOOOAAAAAAAL!"

Dad held the phone away from his ear with a grimace as a loud crackle of cheering poured out.

"YOU FOLLOW – THE – MAP!" went on Senhor Santa Lucia, once the din had subsided. "LANDMARKS CHANGE AFTER FIVE HUNDRED YEARS – IT'S OBVIOUS! CALL YOURSELF AN ARCHEOLOGIST? GET BACK ON TRACK AND CONTACT ME IN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS." The line went dead.

Dad let out a long breath as he put the phone away. He swore, shook his head, then pulled out some maps from a bag and powered up his laptop using his solar battery. "After the fork. . ." Ben heard him mutter. "Eventually rejoin a tributary that will take us back on to the Senhor's route. . ."

"You're kidding, right, Dad?" Ben couldn't believe what

he was hearing. "So we give up – when we're on our way to the right area?"

"He's financing this whole expedition," said Dad, not meeting Ben's eye. "Senhor Santa Lucia could pull the whole project. We can still collect valuable data," he added, sounding unconvinced. "Come back another time and. . ."

And meanwhile someone will have beaten us to it, Ben thought. *Found El Dorado before us!* "Where are you going to get the money to pay for another big trip like this, Dad?"

"Just leave it, Ben!" Dad stood there, fiddling with his gold wedding ring, turning it round and round on his finger.

There was a silence – but Ben knew what they were both thinking about. The cost of Mum's treatments. How Dad had spent everything he had trying to save her. He caught a glimpse of mountains, peaks like ridges of sharp teeth, hazy blue in the distance.

Rafael came over. "What did my pa say? He didn't ask to speak to me?"

"Sorry, Rafael, no." Dad shook his head. "He had to end the call."

Ben saw Rafael's face fall. Dad patted him on the shoulder, then paced away across the deck. Rafael wandered off, flopping into the shade of the awning, then started to write in his notebook as though his life depended on it.

Senhor Santa Lucia not bothering to talk to him like that, thought Ben – was it all part of his toughen-up-Rafael plan? Maybe he should go over and say something. . . But Rafael didn't look much in the mood for talking right then.

"Drowned ghosts!" Ben heard him mutter at one point. "Mumbo jumbo!"

The boat continued, cutting through the mud-coloured river. The miles passed; time dragged. Ben felt the itch of insect bites on his face and neck. He filmed Dad typing rapidly on his laptop, then zoomed out on to the landscape.

The vegetation was more dense on the banks now; a mat of woven shadows. Vines trailed into the water at the river's edges, pulled by the current into dark strands that made Ben think of human hair. A tree trunk floated past like a drowned body.

"Fork ahead," the captain called gruffly, jabbing a finger forward. He eased the wheel round with the care of someone handling a bomb, and the boat veered left.

Ben watched the water, seeing leaves and branches carried by the current. A strange animal cry sounded from close by, a shriek that tailed off into a long echoing wail.

His shirt was sticky with sweat. The heat and humidity pressed down. A hot wind had started up, and steel-grey storm clouds formed overhead. Ben rested his chin on the shuddering edge of the boat. Even the water seemed agitated. Peaks of white quivered on its surface. Small fists of water hit against the sides of the hull.

He stared at the long straight stretch of water ahead. No sign of the river splitting into two yet; no sign of any rapids. He saw a dead butterfly float past, gold wings fanned out on the water's surface.

Ben narrowed his eyes, and his heartbeat speeded up. There was something in the water just ahead. He craned

forward to look. Something was glinting just below the surface – a silver line, approaching fast. *Metal?* Ben shot up. If the propeller went over that. . . "Dad!" he shouted, pointing. "Look!"

But it was already too late.