

A dense, lush tropical jungle scene. The foreground is dominated by a path or stream bed covered in fallen leaves and small plants. The middle ground shows a variety of tropical vegetation, including large ferns, palm trees, and other leafy plants. The background is filled with tall, slender trees and a thick canopy of leaves, creating a sense of depth and mystery. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of green, from deep forest greens to bright, sunlit greens.

J.J. STEIN

KEEPER  
OF THE  
PLANET



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J.J. (Jeffry John) Stein

# KEEPER OF THE PLANET



**J. J. STEIN**

BookLocker, Bradenton, Florida

*KEEPER OF THE PLANET*

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Cover Design by Todd Engel, Engel Creative

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013904645

ISBN: 978-1-62646-344-8

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida

*for*

*Pachamama  
and her sisters  
Yaku and Sacha*

*Mothers of us all*





# CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>PART I: (PRIORS).....</b>                       | <b>1</b>  |
| 1: Upstream (Introductions)                        | 1         |
| <b>PART II: (CRIMES) .....</b>                     | <b>16</b> |
| 2: Adam (at the Beginning)                         | 16        |
| 3: Lana (Gets Involved)                            | 19        |
| 4: Zarika (Plays Burakkian)                        | 23        |
| 5: Adam (Interrupted)                              | 27        |
| 6: Coursier (Named)                                | 35        |
| 7: Adam (Hooked)                                   | 41        |
| 8: Lana (Dancing)                                  | 50        |
| 9: Adam (Reeled In)                                | 53        |
| 10: Ruiz (Alerted)                                 | 55        |
| 11: Lana (Baptized)                                | 59        |
| 12: Tasman (Recruited)                             | 70        |
| 13: Wiley (Special Delivery)                       | 76        |
| 14: Adam (Clarified)                               | 78        |
| <b>PART III: (EVIDENCE).....</b>                   | <b>81</b> |
| 15: Iquitos (Re-Connecting)                        | 81        |
| 16: Iquitos (Assembling)                           | 91        |
| 17: The Amazon (Getting to Know You)               | 98        |
| 18: The Amazon (Getting to Know No More about You) | 120       |
| 19: Leticia (New Friends)                          | 135       |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>PART IV: (TRIALS)</b> .....                   | <b>157</b> |
| 20: Solimões (Fireworks Redux)                   | 157        |
| 21: Going Downstream (with Black Flies)          | 172        |
| 22: The Confluence (Crossing Over)               | 181        |
| <b>PART V: (EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES)</b> ..... | <b>188</b> |
| 23: Copatana (Metaphors)                         | 188        |
| 24: Finding Moses (with Mascado)                 | 198        |
| <b>PART VI: (DELIBERATIONS)</b> .....            | <b>210</b> |
| 25: Upstream (The Keeper Retold)                 | 210        |
| 26: Jutai (Stepsisters)                          | 216        |
| 27: Further Upstream (Fishing)                   | 222        |
| 28: Shallows (Debarking)                         | 225        |
| 29: Jungle (Talk)                                | 232        |
| <b>PART VII: (VERDICTS)</b> .....                | <b>241</b> |
| 30: Howling (Sentences)                          | 241        |
| 31: Daevas (and Demons)                          | 260        |
| 32: Prophets (Born Again)                        | 263        |
| <b>PART VIII: (EFFECTS)</b> .....                | <b>269</b> |
| 33: Coming (Attractions)                         | 269        |
| <b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....                    | <b>273</b> |
| <b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b> .....                    | <b>275</b> |

*The natives claim she is too big to meet altogether. After all, how do you meet a mountain, a river or a forest? Only piece by piece, this tree or that insect; a boulder here and a butterfly there. Some claim she is the great Yakumama, the anaconda so huge the rainforest floats on her back. Others say the riverbeds were carved out by her wanderings ages before man learned to paint in caves. Honor must be paid and special care taken not to anger life-sustaining Yakumama.*





## PART I: (PRIORS)



### 1: Upstream (Introductions)

The leathery brown face of Juan Julio Ruiz floated against the violent sunset sky. His eyes peered off up river as if hearing the screams of centuries past. The external sinews of massive strangler figs and banyan trees slid by on the shadowy banks seemingly starved for another hanging. Finally he looked back at the arrogant clients who had brought him and his rust bucket river boat up this endless tributary. He was ready, at last, to tell them about the host of similar fools that had gone before them.

“There are many tales of expeditions, of whole armies going out,” he began, “always only one survivor returning. The claim is insects, disease, starvation, snakes...”

“Head-hunters?” an excited adolescent voice interrupted.

“Yes, head-hunters.” Ruiz nodded sadly at his fourteen-year-old son about whom he realized he had made the biggest mistake of his life. It was his summer of custody. Still, he should have known this particular journey was not the time to take Diego into the jungle as a means of weaning him from playing silly video games on his mother’s couch in Lima. Maybe he could have waited another year to show him the actual amazements of nature in their most inimitable embraces. Even so, that would assume he would return alive from captaining these assassins on their obsessive quest.

"Yes, head-hunters," Ruiz repeated. "But legend counts them and the snakes and starvation as insignificant against something beyond description, something that will let only one witness return."

"Tall tales. Native mumbo-jumbo," said a harsh, unsubmitting voice.

Ruiz looked at Wiley, the unclean speaker whose vicious scar disappeared into his unkempt beard as if he carried on his face a relief map of this very river. "I wonder if Cordoba thought so," Ruiz said.

"Cordoba?" Zarika asked.

Here was the most curious customer of all. Ruiz turned from the ugly Wiley to this ageless lady whose nature he had tried to pin on the walls of his dreams until he found himself in bed with a panther. So seductive. So removed. So sleek. So sure. So deadly. "Cordoba, the conquistador," Ruiz said as if pacifying her with a skinned capybara. "He had three hundred men in armor searching for El Dorado. Only a single yeoman survived to rant the tale."

Zarika just waited. It was clear she wanted the entire carcass of the story on a platter, butchered in tasty nuggets for all to share. So Ruiz served it up with all the juice he had intended from the beginning.

"The crazed survivor always tells of it beginning with a high-pitched threshing noise that starts as a whisper of warning, but when ignored increases like an approaching swarm of giant locusts. The sound appears to incite the very earth to ripple up in waves as if being awakened to join the fiendish noise in some kind of maelstrom of salvation."

"Must we?" Wiley interrupted. "He sounds like a Baptist minister back in Natchitoches spinning end of days from the Book of Revelation. I've had enough of this kind of bullshit for one lifetime. I don't care if it's some kind of jungle permutation or not." He looked to Tasman for concurrence.

Tasman was hard to see since darkness was setting in and he was black as the deepest shadows. His presence was

huge, however, overflowing his hammock like maybe the Titan Lelantos would have, blending into the dark air marked only by the blade of the bowie knife with which he taunted the fireflies. "What else have we got to do," Tasman said matter-of-factly, clearly pissing Wiley off.

"I want to hear," Diego said.

"Go on," Zarika said.

Ruiz looked from one to the other, and then continued weaving the tale with all the embellishments that the Mestizo oral tradition had accrued:

Zarantes was nothing but bones and terror rattling around in his rusty armor as the threshing howl grew louder. He slashed wantonly at the surrounding fronds that grabbed him at every turn like rapacious hands. "Cordoba?!" he screamed. "Cordoba?!"

Cristabo, another skeletal conquistador weighed down by steel, broke through the brush beside Zarantes. Then others, many others, staggered out of the undergrowth.

"Madre de Dios!" Cristabo wailed. "What is that sound!"

Valaga tore off his helmet to hold his ears, and then saw it coming toward him, the entire earth rising up like a wave, trees and vines flowing toward them like flotsam on the ocean. "The end of the world!" he rasped, throwing his helmet at it and trying to run. But roots snatched at his shin guards, sending him headlong into the undertow.

Cristabo, instead, found his last ounce of courage and faced the crashing earth-wave. He raised back his spear and yelled, "El Diablo! In the name of God and Spain!" He threw the spear with all he had, briefly experiencing hope as he saw it embed in the curling earth. Then, as if paralyzed by the

wonder of it, he watched as the back side of the spear crashed toward him, puncturing right through his armor into his heart.

Valaga saw it happen having pulled himself up from the muck hugging tight to a young mahogany as if mercy might be squeezed from its youth. "We have found hell, and we deserve it," he whispered, seeing the impaled Cristabo sweep by on that first immense wave.

The conquistadors like Valaga, who were not taken by the wave, flailed in all directions in a panic to escape. Instead, they found the earth rising up on all sides, the mucous of ground drooling down as trees rotated inward like teeth. These men sank into the ooze, their armor dissolving in fumes that calcified their skeletal bodies and strangled their last screams.

Zarantes clung to a branch of a tooth-tree above this petrifying army. "Cordoba!" he howled as the oozing began to swirl below. A gigantic serpent tongue shot upward out of the ooze hanging an alabaster figure between its forks. The tongue moved the figure toward Zarantes until he could look into its opalesque eyes. "Cordoba, you fiend!" Zarantes spit. "Is this your El Dorado, at last?!"

With one final angry effort, Zarantes plunged his sword toward Cordoba's alabaster heart. The sword broke on impact, barely scratching the conquistador's stony breast. "Ah!" Zarantes sighed, dropping defeated into the swirling ooze. As the lips of earth closed over him the last lights of life he saw were the burning eyes of the alabaster Cordoba.

Ruiz ended there and looked directly at Wiley, waiting for response. The two lanterns now ablaze in the dark behind



Wiley could easily be taken for Cordoba's burning eyes. Wiley chewed on his deadly cigar butt and spit over the side.

Instead, it was Adam Lund who spoke. His words seemed to be channeled from another life rather than from his own lungs and vocal chords. "Cordoba's failed expedition was in the Yucatan," he said. "Not the Amazon." Lund was an archeologist who until recently was a sure-footed and testosterone-filled academic. Now he was wrapped in a blanket grasping for any life-preserving factoids of history that had once appeared so substantial.

"Does it really matter, Adam, whether this Cordoba was that Cordoba?" Ruiz said. "Or whether he assumed Cordoba's name, or was another Cordoba, or whether he was confused with Cordoba?"

"Matters as much as bullshit!" Wiley finally snipped. "What is this? Halloween? Time for scary tales? Here's what matters about the dumbass conquistadors. They were dumb as the stone they became in your fairy tale. They were never prepared. Their fucking armor was enough to kill them. Who goes into the jungle weighed down by ten tons of armor? Dumbasses."

"They didn't even have guns," Tasman added, poking with his knife at a firefly as if putting a period to Wiley's summation.

"Oh, they had guns," Ruiz said. "But they rusted after one month in the jungle.

"Like I said," Wiley humphed.

"But Becker, he had better guns. Times had changed. Mankind had advanced."

"Becker?" Zarika asked.

Ruiz looked at her, having set yet another hook, dangling his stories like foreplay, knowing they were the only titillation he could offer her. He took his time gazing at her Eurasian features and pure white skin framed by jet black hair. Her tantalizing smile was all that was needed to bury the spider silk of lines at the corner of her eyes. "The rubber

baron," Ruiz finally said. "He planned to pave the jungle with Italian tile."

"He must have been something," Zarika said.

"Yes he was. He murdered my great-grandfather in molten rubber."

"Now it's getting good," Tasman said

"Nice touch," Wiley said. "Your great-grandfather."

Ruiz looked at Adam Lund, who just rolled over with his back to him in his hammock. Then he looked to Moses, the bushy-bearded octogenarian that had been watching them all from the stern of the boat. Moses just nodded.

"So tell it!" Diego demanded. "Tell it already."

Ruiz looked at his son sadly and took a deep breath. "Manuel told it this way again and again at the circus in Manaus. They were the only words he ever spoke. It was as if he would die if he stopped telling them. Just another sideshow."

"Manuel? Circus sideshow? I thought you were talking about Becker," an irritated female voice said. "Who the hell is Manuel?"

Ruiz eyed the final member of the river boat party. Lana was her name. No doubt, she had once been a bombshell. But on this trip she had exploded so many times that some serious pieces were missing. Voluptuous, yes, still; but in ragged bras and too much paint. "The lone survivor," Ruiz said. "The messenger. The way we know."

"Okay, now you got me," Wiley mocked. "I'm really into clowns."

Ruiz smiled and began telling Manuel's story:

The body was hoisted up out of the bubbling vat, hanging by its neck. The molten rubber quickly congealed, encasing it from head to toe. An angry Franz Joseph Becker held tight the rope he had drawn through the pulleys. He was a blond god of a man dressed in white linen with bandoliers

crisscrossing his chest. Turning to the company of natives he had forced to watch, he pointed at the hanging body with his trusty Mauser. "You'll all be rubber Indians," he said, "if you don't tell me where the fabulous ivory blooms!"

Quili, a small Juruna from Mato Grosso State, finally stepped forward. "Keeper," he said, pointing back through the jungle.

"Keeper...," a number of the other natives murmured reverently.

Becker smiled triumphantly. "Pack the Gatling Gun," he ordered.

So Becker, rubber workers and native bearers slashed deep into the rainforest, driven ever closer to insanity by the constant mosquitoes and the incessant shrieks of howler monkeys jumping along with them in the treetops.

Somewhere they crossed a line and the monkeys stopped shrieking and jumping. They just watched.

"Halt!" Becker said.

Manuel, Becker's fidgety foreman, coned the treetops. "The monkeys take your orders," he said, even though it was the silence of the monkeys that had caused Becker to issue his command.

"Quiet! Listen! Do you hear something?"

They all listened. The natives listened, looking at each other, hoping for a leader to initiate a break. Pedro and Burto, two rubber workers, unslung their rifles. "It's the mosquitoes," Pedro said.

"You look," Burto said. "The slapping has stopped. The mosquitoes are gone."

"Quiet!" Becker barked.

The sound got louder. It was like a threshing, a harvesting, an inexorable oncoming, filling their minds with the horror tale of the conquistadors. And

then the earth moved. A small wave rolled beneath their feet.

"The Keeper," Quili whispered.

"Keeper! Keeper!!" the natives panicked and scattered, dropping their burdens.

"Come back here, fools!" Becker yelled, pumping a stream of bullets after them. One of the natives took it in the back, moaning as he went down.

"Maybe they are right to run," Manuel said.

"Spooks and goblins is what they know," Becker said.

The threshing howl kept coming, louder, louder. The jungle floor began to rotate, imperceptibly at first. Soon it was unmistakable that the trees were moving centrifugally outward leaving the rubber workers in a wider clearing.

"The trees are running away!" Burto said.

"Set up the Gatling gun!" Becker yelled. "Quick!"

The terrified workers stumbled toward the packs that Manuel was already downloading from the mules. They worked feverishly to connect the swivel mount to the special tripod, lock the rotating barrels to the mount, and load the cartridges into the hopper. Then they moved in back of Becker as he took up his position, grabbing onto the firing crank. It was clear they now prayed their tyrant-master could deliver them from evil.

Strangely, the earth seemed to wait throughout this activity, as if wondering what the plan was. Or maybe it was just to give them all false hope. For several minutes the ground had stopped moving, and the horrendous threshing noise had receded. Then suddenly the entire clearing dropped downward about two feet.

One of the workers screamed, "El Diablo!" and ran.

Becker got to test the Gatling gun by swiveling and cranking. He cut the worker down at ten yards. "Hold your ground, cowards!" he yelled, though the rest were already too paralyzed to move.

"Señor," Manuel said, "something unnatural..."

"Shut up!" Becker demanded. "Look! Look there!"

The threshing noise reignited, more like the amplified buzz saws of angry rattlesnakes. Things pushed up through the ground like teeth around the perimeter. Soon they were revealed as huge, carved fangs.

"Ha!" Becker gloated. "We found it! The ivory!"

"Or it has found us," Manuel said.

"Pedro, get me one!" Becker ordered

"Please, no, Señor. They are the death."

Becker swiveled and leveled the gun at Pedro. "I'll show you who the death is," he said.

Pedro backed away from Becker and the Gatling gun and turned to stare at one of the fangs that rotated toward him. He saw it wasn't a fang at all, but instead an alabaster figure of an emaciated human being with burning, opalesque eyes. Already terrified by the legends, he screamed, "Cordoba!" and mindlessly fired three bullets. The bullets nicked the figure's chest near the existing sword scratch before ricocheting back into Pedro. Staring first at the blood coming out of his body and then at the figure, Pedro collapsed to his knees and fell forward, dead.

The ground dropped away again, becoming swampy as the iconic teeth kept rising and closing in with their burning eyes.

"You have brought us to Satan!" Manuel wailed

"Then Satan's got a fight on his hands!" Becker let fly in all directions with the Gatling gun. There was no need to swivel the gun anymore because the ground began to whirl, turning to ooze. The eyes of the stone figures fired back laser rays that seared the flesh. The workers screamed in pain as they sank deep into the mire, shooting blindly everywhere, killing nothing but themselves. Finally, a gigantic forked tongue shot out of the ooze, spiraled around the maniacal Becker and pulled him under. He cranked the Gatling gun all the way down.

Ruiz went silent and observed all the lantern-lit faces that had turned to watch the fireflies still flitting about Tasman's tantalizing knife. Along with the ripples of moonlight now on the gurgling river, the fireflies could not help but sustain a picture of Becker's Gatling gun still sparking in the black belly of some all-consuming beast.

"Why are you all looking at me?" Tasman said. He peevishly stowed his big knife in its scabbard. "What are Gatling guns against today's rockets, gases, or chemicals?"

"Yeah," Wiley said. "This Becker may have been mean, but that didn't make him smart."

Adam Lund rolled over in his hammock and eyed Wiley. This kind of statement coming from Wiley would have made him laugh out loud if he was still in his old, right mind.

"Wait a second," Lana said. "It's just a story, right? This Manuel at the sideshow couldn't be the Manuel in the story because he went down with Becker."

"One witness always returns," Ruiz said.

"But he went down with Becker," Lana persisted.

"He was found lying in the mud of a river bank. Just like the conquistador's yeoman."

"Deus ex machina," Zarika smiled. "Lovely."

"What?" Lana asked.

"A neat contrivance the boatman has concocted to give truth to these lies," Wiley said.

"Really now, Captain Ruiz," Zarika said, "Does anyone really know what happened to these men?"

"It is as I have told you," Ruiz said. "It is as it has been told."

"The Keeper, huh?"

"Yes, The being at the center."

"Well, what is it?" Lana demanded. "And what's it keeping?"

"The most precious things on earth."

"The ivory?" Lana said.

"Powdered heaven, more likely," Tasman said. "It's all probably just a cover for some drug kingpin protecting his turf by scaring everyone away."

"For five hundred years?" Ruiz said.

"But Coursier brought an icon out," Zarika said. "So whatever they are, they can be had."

"Ah, Coursier," Ruiz said, looking toward Moses who was silhouetted at the stern by the spotlight of the moon.

The others followed Ruiz's gaze. They waited for Moses to speak. It was obvious the stories had all been a build-up to this moment of revelation. But all Moses did was nod as he had done before, seeming to give Ruiz permission to continue.

"It was just after World War II," Ruiz said. "Coursier had been seeking a place far from the madness. He found the very soul of madness, instead."

"Let me guess," Wiley said. "They found him in the mud."

Ruiz eyed Wiley almost pleasurably and grinned. "Yes," he said, and went on:

Coursier fell smack into the scummy mud of the riverbank clasp a large, stained canvas bag. Though only in his early twenties, he appeared as

old as Moses. His clothes were torn and it was clear he had not shaved or bathed in months.

"No! You're not getting away! I found you! You're mine!" Coursier implored the canvas bag as if it was a discontented lover trying to wriggle free. Trash and lights from barges downstream suggested he was near a jungle village. "Shush! Be quiet now. Just rest." He tried to calm the bag and its contents, curling up with it in a fetal position.

White patent leather shoes squished into the mud beside Coursier's head. They belonged to Dietrich Paul van der Hoeven, a fat man with greased hair and a German accent. "He's drunk," van der Hoeven said.

Nuñez, the most unrelenting opportunist in the little river town, stepped beside van der Hoeven. "No, Señor. Coursier never drinks. He is so crazy he doesn't have to."

"What could he possibly have in such a bag?"

"Some say it is the death. Some say his brains. I say no. It must be more valuable than both of those."

"In a dirty old bag, I'm sure." van der Hoeven turned to go. "I don't have time for riddles. The man is a drunk."

"Nuñez grabbed van der Hoeven's sleeve. "What can it hurt to find out, Señor? If it is a bottle, you lose nothing. But if it is the ivory..."

"The ivory?"

"The white teeth of the Keeper."

"What is this nonsense?"

"Nonsense, yes. Coursier's nonsense. But what can it hurt to see?"

Van der Hoeven looked at Nuñez and then back down at Coursier. After a moment's consideration, he spoke loudly to Coursier. "Hello," he said. "This



river rat says you might have something I would want to buy."

Coursier rolled over and looked up a van der Hoeven, only now appearing conscious of the man. "I found it. I live with it," Coursier whispered, and curled back into his fetal grasping of the bag.

"If I could just look," van der Hoeven said. "I have plenty of money." When Coursier did not respond, van der Hoeven grew impatient. "Get me the bag!" he said to Nuñez.

"Sí, Señor," Nuñez said, grinning. As deftly as a rodeo roper, he pushed Coursier over with his foot and hoisted the bag away from him.

"No!" Coursier whined. "You can't!"

"I could be doing you a favor," van der Hoeven said. He took the heavy bag from Nuñez, cradled it and stuck his hand down into it only to pull it out quickly. "Gottverdammte!" he yelped, staring at fingers that were blistering. "It's on fire," he said. Undeterred, he began to inch the canvas down, pushing the hard heavy contents up out of the bag. In doing so, he revealed the top half of Cordoba with its burning eyes and bullet and sword nicks on its chest. Somehow the alabaster figure had shrunk to where it could fit into the bag. "Mein Gott!" van der Hoeven said, dazzled by the eyes.

"I find you something good, eh, Señor?" Nuñez said. "You pay me now?"

"You fools!" Coursier said, reaching up for his prize. "Give it back!"

Van der Hoeven wasn't about to do that. Instead, he pulled out a wad of Reichsmark banknotes and threw them at Coursier without even counting them. He squished hurriedly away, caring little about how his white patent leather shoes got completely covered with mud.

"Give it back!" Coursier yelled after him. "Give it back!"

Nuñez knelt down to gather up all the banknotes as fast as he could, looking at them curiously. Coursier latched onto him. "Tell him he will die."

Nuñez pulled away. "We all die someday," he said.

"Not like he is going to die."

Nuñez stood up, still eyeing all the foreign bills he had gathered in his hand. "You know," he said to Coursier, "you really should try drinking." He took a couple of the banknotes and let them float down to Coursier before he turned and followed after van der Hoeven.

Coursier watched him go, then watched as a puff of wind carried the Reichsmarks to the river's edge where they floated away downstream. A devilish little smile seemed to emerge from his mud-caked face.

Ruiz went silent again when he had finished telling this tale. As before, it took the others a moment to realize he was done.

"Another nice touch," Wiley said. He looked around at the others for confirmation. "A devilish little smile," he repeated. "And who reported that fact? Coursier, himself? Just stories. Embroidered stories. But I like the idea of having a drink. García must have packed more of his Milagro on board somewhere."

"No Milagro," Tasman said crisply. "No more Milagro now."

"What? Did García turn you into a tequila-hater, Tas?" Wiley said.

Milagro held no interest for Zarika, either. But these tales were very much like tequila for her. She wanted more. "So van der Hoeven had the figurine?" she said.

"His real name was Von Hessen. A Nazi war criminal," Ruiz said. "His experience in using Jewish slave labor as executive administrator for Krupp Industries was put to use enforcing the Mayoruna of the Javari to clear whole swaths along their river searching for more statues. They say he went blind and died a terrible death. His skull was filled with worms."

"But we are not on the Javari," Lana said.

"It doesn't matter," Ruiz said.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?"

"It just doesn't," Ruiz said.

"And so it goes," Wiley said, disgustedly. "I've had enough." He got off his barrel and walked forward toward the bow.

Adam Lund watched Wiley go. Then he leaned back in his hammock and gazed at the tin roof over the covered deck. "The museum got the figure from what we later learned was Von Hessen's bankrupt mining company." He said this as if to the corrugations of the roof. "It came with only one condition: that we never uncover its eyes."

"The archeologist speaks again," Tasman said.

"Its eyes were covered then?" Zarika said.

"With lead," Adam said.

## PART II: (CRIMES)



### 2: Adam (at the Beginning)

The hardy, clean-shaven senior citizen in the khaki bush outfit stood with Adam Lund in front of a glass case on a pedestal at the Museum of Natural History. They were staring at the uncanny fifteen-inch-tall, white sculpture of a conquistador with lead covered eyes. The odd, old fellow had insisted that the curator accompany him to the exhibit. Once there, he spoke calmly, albeit with the air of having stepped from the pages of the Old Testament. "It is time," he said.

Adam looked at the strange man who didn't say anything more. He pondered various reasons for the statement and then checked the hour on his cell phone. "Closing time?" he asked. "Is that what you mean?"

"Time for it to go home," the man said.

Adam teetered between confusion and evaluating the man as possibly senile. He opted for the later. "You mean time for you to go home?"

"Cordoba," the man said, calmly.

"Who?" Adam asked. Then he realized the man had given the figurine a name. "You know this statue?"

"I thought I came to get it. It's gotten so small."

"I can't just give it to you, you know."

"But I see I am only here to facilitate."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I haven't a clue what you're talking about and it *is* closing time." Adam waited for the weird man

to argue or persist in some way. Instead, the man just nodded his head and repeated, "Yes, it is closing time. Thank you," he said, and walked off.

Adam watched him go, even more mystified than before.

Adam didn't see the man again until he watched the security videos of the burglary. The frame rate of the videos made the action all the more surreal. In the dimmed night lighting the camera fixed on the conquistador statue showed its eyes glowing dully right through their leaded coverings. Out of nowhere, the surrounding glass case shattered. A black, leather-covered arm wrested the statue from the pedestal. Other cameras showed the thief, completely cloaked in black leather and hooded mask, dashing through the exhibit halls. Red alarm lights flashed all the while. The thief almost ran into the tusk of a woolly mammoth before side-stepping and darting past saber-toothed tigers and a Tyrannosaurus Rex en route to the service exit. Just before the door, Albert, the septuagenarian night guard, appeared. He raised his creaky arm and clearly mouthed, "Stop!" This greeting was met with a roundhouse crack on his head, the statue being used as the weapon. Albert went down and the thief disappeared through the door. It was then that the old gent in the bush outfit stepped into view from out of the shadows and looked down at the blood seeping from the guard's cranium. The old gent raised his hands, palms up, and stared off at the opposite wall. Then he shook his head and walked calmly through the door the thief had taken.

"What was that?" Detective Millstone said.

"What?" Adam said.

"That gesture. What was that about? Some kind of sadistic benediction?"

"Looked more like resignation to me."

"And what was he looking at before he left?"

"There's a poster on the wall in that direction advertising our planetarium show on the evolution of the Earth."

"Great!" Millstone said, disgustedly. He looked around the security booth for somewhere to spit his tobacco juice. "Can I use your coffee cup?" he said to the video operator.

"You got to be kidding," the operator said.

"Shit!" Millstone said. "Fucking habit." He pulled a soggy handkerchief out of his pocket and spit into it. Adam and the operator each watched with their own reactive grimaces. "So this old white hunter consecrates the poor dead guard to the evolution of the Earth? You think he's some kind of twisted Earth Firster or something?"

"I don't know anything about the man. I never saw him before yesterday. I guess he hid in the gallery after closing."

"And you didn't get his name?"

"A failing of mine. I rarely ask because I never remember."

"Jesus, you're a great help!"

"He ain't Jesus," the operator said.

Millstone looked at the operator, a little bit of spittle still creeping down the groove of his chin. "What?"

"He ain't Jesus."

"Jesus! Okay! He ain't Jesus, for Christ sake!" Millstone was one very unhappy policeman. The humor he saw on Adam's face didn't make him any happier. "So what was so all important about that statue?"

"We don't know. Our grant didn't allow invasive study."

"Invasive, huh? So why did you have it?"

"Because there is nothing else like it in the world?"

"Really? You couldn't study it, but you could tell that?"

"You saw the eyes glowing."

"Fucking time bombs tick off their seconds with amber readouts!"

"It wasn't my choice to have it here. I didn't even know I wanted to be an archeologist when the former director accepted the offering."

"And where is he?"

"Dead."



*An anthropologist is called to journey down rivers of legend in Amazonia to discover the source of the most enigmatic object on Earth, only to realize he has been drawn inescapably into league with an assortment of deadly characters because of his own need to find a cosmic purpose. Keeper of the Planet combines action-adventure with magical realism as it divergently impels human hubris to come face to face with Nature's creative judgment.*

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