

## **Scavenger** **by Mike Waugh**

Up until this point, the trip had been a gruelling waste of time. Olav had hacked his way through the verdant Costa Rican tropical rainforest and found nothing but a cacophony of monkeys, sloths, frogs and bats and had leech wounds to prove it.

The cloud forest expedition didn't fare much better either, with a nasty encounter with one of the areas many wild-cats; in this case, an angry ocelot that felt Olav was intruding on her space. She pounced on his backpack and started clawing into his back until he had the quick thinking to throw off his gear and spin around at the same time, flinging the cat into the bushes she was so keen to protect.

The dry forests had proved less hazardous but each of likely target locations he had identified had been over forty miles apart from one another, with no roads and often no paths. His feet bore the blisters of the incessant trudging, searching but never finding, looking but never seeing.

The mangroves were a blazing array of red, black and white forests but turned up nothing. While the lowland rainforest was full of clumps of American tourists wearing identical base-ball caps, tramping through the forests moaning about humidity.

The very last, and to Olav's mind, the least likely of the possible locations were the Riparian forests, always found next to flowing water. But today was special - he was visiting the last spot, in the last forest, itself the end of a year-long expedition, which in turn was the latest in a lifetime's search to find something that existed only in folklore; a 3,000 year-old burial site the Costa Rican Naso tribe claim to be their direct descendants.

Olav had visions he'd be able to take a leisurely canoe down the Rio Chirripo but the raging torrents and churning water made it obvious to him he'd have to slog it by foot, again. Today had been especially gruelling with a dawn start, a hiking boot heel that was currently held on by rubber bands and a deep gash from a rogue branch that was causing him to limp badly. There was less than an hour of sunlight left, and although he knew he needed to find a good pitch for his hammock, this was the last stop of the forest and his GPS told him he was within a 200-metre radius of the right spot.

As Olav had done with every spot, he tied bright yellow dayglow string around one of the trees and then reeled out a shape approximately 400 metres wide. Vegetation was dense and it was heavy going work just staking out the area. Olav set about looking for clues along the forest floor, examining the subtle differences in growth patterns for any sign of human disturbance or man-made structures. It was an inexact science but surprisingly effective. Nature worked in spirals, man worked in straight lines. The structures may have been covered up but the clues remained, even tens of metres

below undergrowth. However, today turned up nothing. There was less than 15 minutes of light left so, reluctantly, Olav headed to the edge of the forest near a clearing.

He spotted two trees that looked like good candidates for the hammock; dense canopy, solid branches and close to one another. As he approached he noticed a large lump in the ground. Too perfect for a tree stump, too sharp edged for earth. He gently kicked it, and was greeted with a clunk. Olav stared for a moment in sheer surprise before kneeling and scrabbling the mound of earth. He pulled off moss and grass and gasped. A rusting cast of an iron vulture stared back at him. In the last dying moments of sunlight, as if on cue, a King Vulture flapped above his head, its enormous wings beating the air and its red, orange and black head catching the fading rays in the sky.

Unquestionably he had found it.

That night, Olav lay down in his hammock, willing the night make way for the day of discovery. The iron vulture corroborated what he'd learnt from the Naso tribe. Back in the early 1500s, when Costa Rica was part of new Spain - Mexico - the Spanish had taken land and possessions from the indigenous people. But they hadn't expected the fierce resistance they received at a site they called Chuba, which roughly meant centre of the edge in their Teribe language. The invaders had wanted to build on the burial site, whereas the Naso put their lives on the line to defend the ancient burial grounds of their ancestors. Hundreds of Naso people were slaughtered in the ensuing argument over this land, much of their blood shed on the very spot Olav now lay. Allegedly stone relics of vultures that dated back nearly 3,000 years were smashed. Eventually word got to the King of Spain who was so impressed with the resistance shown by the Naso people that he ordered his troops to restore the land back to its former glory and leave it alone. The troops were so angry with this lack of support from above, they killed all but a handful of the Naso's, and replaced the stone vultures with one final insult; sculptures made of a thin iron layer which they knew would rust rapidly in the humid environment.

It was 3:23am when Olav woke, sweating. The sonic wall of nighttime wildlife - the croaks, the squawks, the rustles, the scratching and scraping - turned from something comforting to a feeling that something, somewhere, was watching him. He stared out into the darkness, the thudding of his heart drowning out the forest sounds. Olav knew the paranoia wasn't unfounded. Back when he started the expedition, the Naso people had initially been helpful, even offering to help him navigate the forests. That was until his lies about wanting to preserve the site shattered into a thousand pieces when they discovered his government-approved excavation permit. The weeks of goodwill evaporated in moments, and they started raging on to him about cursed bloodlines and malignant spirits.

Olav pulled the knife out the tree bark above his head. Ever since the ocelot incident, he'd slept with a knife within arm's reach. He flicked on his head light and

scoured around the forest and started shaking. Hundreds - no - thousands of tiny eyes shone back at him. From every direction. For what seemed like an eternity, he froze, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. Their eyes were locked on to him. He turned ever so slowly and saw the gap that he knew led to the clearing just metres away. A one metre section without eyes. Leaving all his worldly possessions behind, Olav made a bolt for it, into the clearing, into a vast empty meadow.

He collapsed on the ground panting, and turned to his previous location. He had a powerful pocket torch and he shone it back at the forest. Nothing. He curled up tightly on the ground, facing the forest and for one moment he was sure he could hear a massive sigh. Olav rocked on his heels staring, looking out for the slightest movement until sleep swept over him.

The next morning, Olav went back to his hammock and everything was exactly as he left it. His food box was still hanging from a tree, his possessions untouched. He packed up, dismissing the experience down to exhaustion. Throughout the day, he combed over the land carefully, and found four more iron vultures, some recognisable sculptures, others where just fragments of iron remained. Each one he marked out with bright orange pegs until he'd formed a pentagram across the forest.

For lunch, Olav decided to head into the centre of the circle, as yet unexplored territory for him. The trees had thinned out and there was an unusual bare patch in roughly the centre. A sloth had fallen from the tree and was groaning, clearly injured. It's beautiful big brown marbles eyes stared back at him. But as Olav approached, the beating of large wings made him turn suddenly, as a kettle of vultures approached him. Five of them swooped in, causing Olav to duck as they pounced on the sloth, ripping into its skin. The sloth squealed, as the vultures tore off strips and pulled out its intestines. The sight, while familiar to Olav made his stomach turn.

Vultures were half the reason he was here. The Nasos revered the vulture as their last living connection to their great ancestors, because after every battle, vultures would feed on the dead bodies. The ceremonial wake of vultures would eventually fly off, taking the spirits of the dead with them for their life beyond the material. This point of departure was why the Nasos would bury their dead at the site where they were dropped, together with their most valuable possessions. The battle of the 1500s was protecting something that was far more valuable than just land; it was the ancient burial site of their ancestors. The area was a treasure trove of incalculable value.

Olav watched the vultures - some turkey vultures and one brightly coloured King vulture, the messenger of the Gods. They hissed and whined as they tore strips off the squealing sloth, spilling its guts all over the ground. Olav couldn't look any more and returned to the open clearing to make the call he'd been waiting to make all his life. Using his satellite phone, he called his investor and set the wheels in motion to bring in the cavalry.

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Three weeks into the dig, Olav and his team of 12 men had found many bones, and the odd trinket. Most of them came from the 16th century battle but there was evidence of some stone carvings which suggested the ancient site. The atmosphere in the camp was one of contained excitement. But that night, everything changed.

It was a moonlit night; the tent and the whole excavation site was bathed in soft shimmering silver. As was customary, they'd had a few shots of Fanal - harsh sugar cane alcohol that put all but the heaviest of insomniacs to sleep. Olav was one of them and he woke with a start at 3:23 am. He lay there for a few minutes, listening to the snores but there was something else. That feeling of someone watching returned. He opened his eyes to see two eyes staring down at him.

Olav blinked, unsure of what he was seeing. It was Hassan, one of the diggers. A jolly, fun-loving Indian guy but tonight his face had changed. He stared at Olav, and then at the other men, scanning them. His eyes devoid of humanity, just an empty shell with murderous purpose. Hassan let out a guttural roar which woke the tent up. Everyone started to rise and Hassan moved to the centre of the room.

"What's up? Hassan! Hassan! HASSAN!". Olav shouted at him, hoping to break his trance. But Hassan's movements quickened, as if an animal trapped by its prey. Without warning he pulled out a knife and went for Amil; the alpha male amongst the diggers. He plunged the knife deep into Amil's stomach before the others pounced on him, beating him, kicking him until all his body went limp.

Olav, who had stood back until this point, shouted at the men to stop. He rushed in and the others parted and he knelt down. Hassan's eyes had rolled upwards. Frantically, Olav checked for a pulse, his neck, his wrist, leaned in to feel and listen for breathing, but nothing. He was dead. Olav looked up at the others, and was met with equal horror.

On Olav's instructions, they carried Hassan to the centre of the pentagram where the sloth had died. In total silence, they dug a shallow grave, and buried him. The men all returned to their beds without saying a word and pretended to resume sleeping, but Olav knew like him, every one of them was awake.

The next day, Olav and his men resumed the dig. The fun and banter had all but gone and they dug in silence. Olav felt a wave of despondency wash over him, the futility of his quest all the more apparent after last night's events.

In the evening, the men ate in silence and took an early night. People were restless, getting up, wandering outside, smoking. Olav didn't fall asleep until some point after midnight but he woke with the familiar racing heart and the time... Again, it was 3:23am. The other men were now asleep but adrenaline was surging through his body, but for what reason he couldn't say. He pulled on a T-shirt and stepped outside into the warm evening and wandered off to the site where Hassan was buried.

Sat around the shallow grave were three sloths. They turned and gently squeaked at Olav and slowly, slowly wandered off and set about their long climb of the trees. The moonlight lit up a spot where they'd been sat and there lay a crumpled up piece of paper.

Olav kneeled and picked it up. It was a lined sheet, clearly ripped out from a pad scribbled on with biro. Written was a Spanish phrase which roughly meant "Where a tree dies, plant another in its place". Olav had only known Hassan for a few days but in that time, he'd noticed Hassan jotting his thoughts down on a notepad. The irony wasn't lost on him. Olav looked up at the trees, at the three sloths that were making their way up. He decided to join them.

He clambered up branch by branch, hauling himself up with vigour he hadn't known since he was a child. As the branches thinned out he found a spot he could nestle in the tree tops, protected by foliage and enough canopy below that should he fall he'd only endure the odd bruise. Olav lay back, and fell into the most delicious sleep. His dreams a kaleidoscope of colour and vibrancy.

Olav soared above the skies with incredible vision, breathing in the landscape like it was his own body. His senses magnified a hundred-fold and he swooped between mountains and then swept between trees. Olav visited a nest made of the most luxurious cloud-velvet, which massaged his every sinew and there in the corner was Hassan. Hassan was laughing and joking as Olav had remembered him the day before. Olav teased him about his balding head and Hassan laughed at Olav's appalling Spanish. Just as they were enjoying the moment, King vultures swept in and carried Hassan far away before dropping his body into the forest in the distance. Olav woke with a start before remembering where he was, high above the tree tops.

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The next morning, Olav packed up the expedition and told the investors that the dig had been a failure. He'd lose some face among a small crowd of money-hungry investors but this was something he could live with. Over the years that followed, Olav often returned to the site of the dig, dragging with him stone vulture sculptures he'd had commissioned from the finest stonemasons. He hired four locals to create paths through the wood, plant flowers along its edges and to turn the open clearing where

their tent had been, into a beautiful tropical garden which featured Naso ornaments and history.

The only people to know about this place were the four workers who were under strict instructions to never breathe a word about their work, in return for a salary that easily bought their silence.

On Olav's most recent visit, he surveyed his work; the climbing walls of flowers, the meandering tree paths. It had been a labour of love that he could now say was complete. As he soaked up the environment, his work and the journey, he felt someone breathing behind his back. Olav span around. Behind him were several Naso people who had gathered, their silent footsteps catching him off guard. He froze for a minute, fearful of their reaction. He had not spoken to any of them since the stormy meetings seven years ago and honestly didn't know if his actions would be met with protest or acceptance. But from their eyes, Olav could tell they were pleased. An elderly gentleman stepped forward, silently and handed him a small engraved wooden box and bowed gently to him. The others followed suit, bowing. Olav brushed their bows aside and warmly greeted the crowd.

It was only on the plane on his way back home that Olav opened the box. He had tried to open it in front of them but they were insistent that he wait.

He opened it and stared at it incredulously.

Inside was the most intricate tiny wooden carvings of his dream. The spectacular view from the sky, of the forest and glistening lakes, the luxuriant cloud nest. in the middle was a model of Olav, cross-legged looking onto a sun dial, casting a shadow at around half-past three. And his head was represented by the most ornate carving of a king vulture.