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BHENATU

John Smick

ROBERT MANTZ SAT motionless in the tiny hut, trying to rest himself and maintain his composure. Somewhere in the darkness behind him he could hear his hunting partner Gerald Cimmeri saying Hail Marys and Our Fathers hoarsely under his breath. When the beating of the jungle drums crescendoed Cimmeri would stop, and, for a brief moment, the two were forced to listen only to their own heartbeats.

They had been tied together for nearly a day after being captured in the lands of the savage and allegedly cannibalistic tribe of Mugaeru. The hunting party was after an albino leopard, called Bhenatu by the natives, because Mantz wanted her so badly. After three days of tracking her across the savanna they followed her to the edge of the Succunga River where she crossed and went into the jungle. She had chosen the protection of the jungle over the wide spaces of the veldt. She was frightened of the man-smell, never far off, that would not dissipate.

The Succunga was a wide, shallow river that cut a rift separating jungle from savannah. Humbal, the expedition's head tracker, had pursued her to the river's edge, and through the coercion of Mantz, the safari crossed into the sacred lands of the Mugaeru. The night of their first camp, the Mugaeru came.

Suddenly, out of the darkness of the hut, Cimmeri spoke. "Do you honestly think they would kill us, Robert? I mean, wouldn't they turn us over to the authorities or something? I mean, really . . ." The voice was tired and frail.

"Hard to tell. I wouldn't count on any miracles." Mantz knew the Mugaeru would never turn them over to the authorities in St. Daniels. He knew the Mugaeru were above any white man's law.

"What do you suppose they've done with the Gawani and Humbal?" Cimmeri asked.

After a long silence, Mantz answered, "I think they've killed them."

An even longer silence followed. Not even the village hunt drums made a sound as the two sat there. Mantz could hear a flying insect buzz by his head to land on Cimmeri, who slapped savagely at it with bound hands.

The animal skin cover across the door was suddenly flung aside and a Mugaeru warrior came into the hut, his white chest paint glowing ghoulishly in the light that poured in behind him. The crescent of raised bumps on his purposely disfigured forehead shone as specks of light in the shape of a frown of contempt. He stood haloed in the light for a few moments, surveying the two blinking prisoners; then, satisfied, untied Cimmeri, shoving him outside with little trouble. The warrior left the hut, and Mantz heard Cimmeri begin to plead, "Aburu, naka lek! Aburu!" in a high-pitched tenor. Mantz was disgusted that the white hunter would so humble himself begging like a frightened child. He remembered the Gawani, the nineteen black equipment bearers for the expedition, begging their captors for mercy and freedom. "Uburu nakleka. Uburu nakleka!" But this only made the Mugaeru warriors more insolent, and they hit the Gawani with the shafts of their whip-wood spears as they marched along the trail that led up and out of the Succunga valley and deeper into the their own territory.

Mantz was alone in the hut now, except of course, for the stagnant darkness. The sounds of Cimmeri petitioning for mercy faded as he was dragged down the narrow trail toward the heart of the village. The drums began to throb, their monotonous, unchanging reverberations echoing throughout the jungle, carrying with them the threat of the hunting Mugaeru. The drums had voiced a warning to the safari long before they had ever crossed the Succunga, but Mantz paid it no heed, against the word of his trusted tracker Humbal. He now wished he had listened.

There was some feeling deep at the root of Mantz, gnawing at him. He didn't know what it was, but it had been a while since he last felt it, that much he knew.

Mantz's legs ached to be stretched, and his back had stiffened considerably from the constant sitting. Small black ants crawled on his body, but Mantz paid them no heed, staring defiantly at the cover of the hut door. The lack of movement only added to the frustration of being held prisoner.

"Bhenatu," Mantz whispered aloud. "Bhenatu," he said again, louder this time, hanging his head wearily and closing his eyes.

He imagined the leopard sitting in a low tree of the veldt, licking one paw after a noon meal while the other hung lazily over the tree branch in the air. She would preen for a while, and then settle down

for a siesta in the shade. Mantz would find her, belly full and sleeping. He would creep silently up beside her, carefully, cleverly, and stroke her pale fur, running his hand over the speckled, taut flank of the beast. He didn't want to kill her, only to possess her, but on the African plain a man was left with little choice in that matter.

Mantz awoke with a start when the door cover was flung aside for the second time that day. Or was it night? Mantz was not sure how long he had been sleeping. It was bright outside, and a native woman left a bowl of food on the earth in front of him, within reach. When she had gone Mantz leaned over to inspect the contents. He found strips of meat with some kind of fine hair clinging to it, as though . . . Mantz kicked the bowl out the door, showering his leg with a dark broth that had an unpleasant tangy odor. He would not eat.

A few hours later some Mugaeru warriors came for him. Outside, his eyes slowly began to adjust to the bright orange African sun as he was dragged from the safe darkness of his hut. He was carried down a steep path toward the center of the small village. Mantz was sure that he would be dropped several times along the way and kept putting his hands out to catch himself. The natives that surrounded him as he bounced uncomfortably down the track tore at his hair, yelling in their feral tongue the words "Rikkal bu, rikkal bu, rikkal bu!" Their eyes leered savagely, huge roundels of ghostly white set against coal black skin that glistened with sweat.

He was thrown to the ground in the middle of a clearing, the entire Mugaeru population encircling him, spears upraised, in a fury of dance and song. Mantz slowly raised himself to his feet, stretching the sore muscles that had been cramped into the same position all night. It was good to feel such pain, and Mantz welcomed it. He rolled his shoulders and kicked his legs out, loosening them for what he thought might come; a fight to the death with one of the Mugaeru warriors.

Mantz rubbed his wrists, ankles and eyes and looked about him to discover the perimeter of the village center picketed with long poles, on the end of which sat the heads of the nineteen Gawani and Humbal. Gerald Cimmeri was nowhere in sight. Zanbakun, the fat chieftain of the Mugaeru, was in full battle attire wearing red and black paint, the colors of the hut.

One of the warriors threw a whip-wood spear at Mantz's feet. The crowd became quiet and Zanbakun spoke a few unintelligible words to the white hunter, motioning toward the spear. Mantz pulled the spear out of the red earth and weighed it carefully in his hands, bracing himself firmly into the sandy soil. His eyes remained fixed on the chieftain, expecting at any moment to be attacked from all sides. Zanbakun spoke a few more words and began gesturing towards the

low gateway that led out into the jungle and towards the west: freedom.

Mantz did not understand. His look of confusion prompted fat Zanbakun to throw an object towards Mantz. It landed with a hollow thump and rolled through the red dust to stop at Mantz's feet. He regarded the object for a moment and then silently returned his haughty stare towards Zanbakun. The object was a pallid, bloodless head, cruelly hacked off its body by native nazeta skinning knives. From the look of the sunken cheeks Mantz guessed that the teeth had been removed for jewelry. Although the nose was mutilated and the eyes removed, Mantz recognized Cimmeri. The empty eye sockets stared heavenwards as flies crawled about the stinking head, gathering in a mock funeral for the man. The chieftain seemed disappointed that Mantz's reaction was not more gratifying. Mantz only stared, expressionless.

"God damned bastards," said Mantz, eulogizing Cimmeri. He now understood; the Mugaeru wanted a hunt. They wanted him to be the quarry, to run like a scared animal through the jungles of Africa and play the life or death game. Some miles to the west, lay the Succunga and the freedom of her west bank.

He turned to Zanbakun and said, "If I make it out of this alive, I'm coming back for you, King of Cowards." Although the natives did not understand, they rushed him at spearpoint from the enclosure.

Before he had even made it to the edge of the clearing and the sheltering safety of the rain forest the hunting drums started up. He knew that when the drums stopped the hunt would begin.

Mantz reached the edge of the clearing and plunged into the darkness of the jungle, engulfed by the viney tangle. He threw his spear into the underbrush with a great heave. A spear will be next to useless in the bush decided Mantz. It'll only slow me down in this dense stuff. It wouldn't be of much help if old Zanbakun cornered me either. My arm's made to hold a rifle.

He jogged warily down a track shrouded on all sides by the dense undergrowth of the jungle. This is the path they brought me up on the way to the village, though Mantz as he dodged great sprawling leaves and thick tangles of bush. His arms and legs ached from having been unused for so long. As he ran Mantz felt the pain of sore raw muscle give way to the ache of blood pumping through them, replenishing the tissues with invigorated blood. The soreness lessened. Crossing dry streambeds and jumping over fallen trees, he started to feel better. Once again he felt as if his fate were in his own hands, controllable.

Mantz's bare feet were unaccustomed to the rough terrain of the

rain forest floor, but he paid little heed to the pain. His feet were calloused from the years they had spent in his hunting boots, which were now in the possession of the Mugaeru. He wanted to put as much space between himself and the hunters as possible. As long as the drums throbbed in the distance he was gaining time and miles.

He began to think of ways to lose his captors. Mantz knew that the Mugaeru were excellent trackers in the jungle and the savanna. Humbal had told the story of a Mugaeru warrior that followed a giraffe he had shot for over thirty miles before it finally fell.

The path that he had been following was beginning to become obscure and many side trails began to appear. The Mugaeru were expecting him to head straight west; the shortest possible path to the Succunga. Mantz remembered looking at maps of this area with Humbal just after Bhenatu had crossed the Succunga. Not far to the north was the French mission of New Athens, just outside of the Mugaeru's territory. It had been in operation since the 1820's, nearly one hundred years. Mantz hoped it was still in use.

Towards early evening, when the sounds of the jungle were at their peak and the hunting drums had finally ceased their throbbing, Mantz stopped briefly to rest and rinse his mouth in a small watercourse that wandered lazily through the dense jungle. The stream was not much wider than a spear length, but its water was clear and running, and Mantz's throat burned with thirst. As he knelt in the soft ground and lowered his hand to the gently rippling water he noticed many sets of animal tracks, both old and new, about the stream bank. As he briefly scanned the soft ground his eyes fell to a distinctive set of prints.

Bhenatu. The left outer pad on both forepaws had the characteristic spread that Humbal had pointed out the first time they had seen the cat's prints. There could be no mistaking the familiar footfall of Bhenatu.

Mantz sat upright, suddenly aware of his alien presence in the jungle. He felt alone, naked without a gun to protect himself. He was nervous. The darkness of the jungle seemed to concentrate itself wherever Mantz looked. At that moment he would have given anything to have seen more than ten feet in any direction.

There was no guarantee the water was safe, and no time to boil it now. The thought of contracting malaria passed through his mind, but his thirst won over logic and he drank the refreshing liquid from a cupped hand. Mantz wished there was some way he could take the water with him. Unfortunately, the only means available was his stomach.

He would have to stop for the night soon. Mantz looked for a high tree to sleep in, feeling it would be unsafe to sleep on the ground with

Bhenatu prowling on her nocturnal hunt. There was less chance of her smelling him if he were high in a tree, away from the scent absorbing ground. Besides, thought Mantz, she would never climb a tree to get at me even if she knew I was here.

He followed the stream a little way and began searching for a suitable tree. He chose one well away from the stream to avoid the animals that come out of the jungle to water at night. Mantz was little concerned by this, however, because he knew that most of the dangerous carnivores stayed on the savanna where the view was far and wide. Bhenatu would prefer the savanna to the jungle, reflected Mantz, had I not chased her here.

He climbed into the boughs of the tall tree, carefully choosing a sturdy branch to rest on. He tore the legs of his brown khaki pants into strips. They no longer afforded protection from the dense undergrowth of the jungle floor, having been shredded by the thick bush. He knotted the strips together and fashioned a rope with which to tie himself into the tree.

When he was settled he began to formulate a plan of action. Tomorrow, early, he would turn northwest, away from the Succunga and toward the French mission, New Athens. That would throw his trackers off his path and buy some time. Mantz was glad for the darkness because not even the Mugaeru would track through jungle at night.

It seemed little time passed before it was pitch black, and soon the animals of the jungle would be about. Mantz had never known night to be so completely devoid of light. The jungle swallowed all things that might have brought comfort to the hunter. He was out of place. He thought Bhenatu or the Mugaeru would track him by simply following the sound of his breathing.

Sometime in the night Mantz was hurled from an uneasy sleep by the scream of a leopard. He searched the blackness for some sign of the great beast, but saw nothing. Bhenatu knows where I am, thought the man as he began a night sweat. He didn't sleep the rest of the night. It passed slowly, and at every sound he saw a ghostly white form lurking in the bush below. He dismissed these visions as tricks of an overexerted mind. Bhenatu would never have the courage to stalk me to my sleeping tree in the night. Or would she?

He quietly climbed from his bower in the morning when he heard in the distance the sounds of the hunters. It was no longer the deep throb of the drums, but the sharp rapping of spear on shield. They sounded distant, but the jungle, he knew, often swallowed sound, twisted it and mangled it so one could never be sure of distances.

I'm a man twice hunted, thought Mantz as he lighted on the ground

beneath his tree. If Bhenatu doesn't get me the Mugaeru surely will.

His muscles ached again, not from their hard use the previous day, but from sleeping in a tree. The ground became firmer as he approached the top of the bluffs separating the highlands from the deep valley of the Succunga. The rocky soil enabled Mantz to pass with greater stealth, making his trail difficult to follow. He continued west for a short distance, looking for a tree that would fit the plan he was formulating. He found one and then continued on past it for a short distance.

This is where I turn north. I can backtrack to the tree and swing to the next tree over and not leave a path on the ground. I might have better luck in losing the bastards. The firm ground will hide my tracks well. I'm gaining time.

He backtracked to the tree, covering the signs of his movement through the jungle. He climbed the tree with some difficulty and found a vine sturdy enough to hold him. The jungle was strangely silent as he gauged the distance to the next tree, nearly fifty feet away. The dense undergrowth beneath the first canopy of the jungle was far below, and he had a clear path to the branches of the next tree over. With a wince of hope, Mantz leapt from the woody precipice and out into the damp air of the jungle. The vine carried him across fifty feet to the next tree, and he grabbed with one arm for branches. Mantz was able to catch some vines and right himself, letting go of the vine that trailed off behind him. He left the old path now, and headed on a north-west tangent, towards New Athens.

He decided to try and cover his tracks more carefully. The time he felt he wasted swinging from trees would have to be made up by leaving an obscure path. He walked in a dry stream bed, hoping for a rain that would wash his tracks away. He watched the sun frequently, ensuring his path was a constant direction.

I need to bear closer to west now. I can come out south of the mission and work my way up the coast to find it. I don't want to end up too far north. I wonder if old Zanbakun knows about New Athens. I wonder if he knows that's where I'm heading.

He came across another stream soon after he had altered his course to the west. It was out of his way to follow the valleys to the water source, but he was desperately thirsty. He dropped to the ground to drink, sucking the cool water in until his stomach hurt. It had been several days since he had eaten and as he pushed onward he began to look out for fruit trees of some kind. He eventually came across a banana tree and ate his fill of the unripe fruit. There was also a tree with green fruit that was very pulpy and filling. Mantz picked several of these and stored them away in his pockets for later use.

The sounds of shield beating subsided by mid-morning. Mantz figured they had probably reached the place where he left the old path in the trees. He travelled for several hours, walking down the middle of a running stream for a short distance. Mantz was intimidated by the intelligence of the Mugaeru. He thought the jungle, or perhaps even Zambakun, was playing tricks with sound, making him believe they were farther away than they really were. I'm not going to be fooled, he thought. Keep moving, keep a steady pace westward.

Mantz travelled until nightfall. He ate the last of his green fruit and roped himself snugly into the branches of a tree. Although he was doggedly tired and thirsty, he had trouble falling asleep that night. The jungle was unusually quiet. In the dark hours of the morning the sky opened up and it rained so hard Mantz thought he might be washed out of his tree. He was glad that it was raining. The streams would fill again and hopefully his tracks from the day before would be covered. The rain felt good; it was warm and he scrubbed his hair. The saltiness of sweat found its way into his mouth, slowly losing its taste. He rubbed the sweaty grime from his blackened, stubbled face, and for the first time in nearly a week Mantz was white again.

The rain lasted for two hours and then passed to the east as suddenly as it had come. The jungle echoed with the sound of water drops falling to the thirsty earth. The air would take on a liquid quality as the sun heated the thick foliage in the morning. Mantz shook the upper branches of the tree and pointed his opened mouth skyward, catching little reward for his effort. It will be humid and hot today, thought Mantz. I'd better get moving in a few hours and cover a lot of ground before it gets too uncomfortable.

Mantz awoke with a start when he thought he was falling from his bower. It turned out to be only a nightmarish trick of the imagination, but it scared him just the same.

It was dawn when he awoke again. This time he thought he heard the scream of a leopard. When he became fully conscious he dismissed the sound as part of another dream. He watched the sky turn pale with the anticipation of sunrise. The hunter wondered if Bhenatu had his scent and was following him through the bush. He wasn't sure whether he liked the company or feared her prowess as a hunter.

He dreaded having to climb out of the tree, for the jungle floor would be wet from the night rain, making foot imprints deep and easily followed. The only alternatives were to swing from trees or fly away in a Spad aeroplane. Neither solution was realistic.

"She must be following me . . ." he said aloud as he walked briskly through the wet undergrowth. Bhenatu had left a set of prints beneath his tree. She had been there in the night, sometime after the

rainstorm, stalking . . . or guarding. She was very close by, Mantz could feel it.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and he ran across some more fruit trees and filled his pockets. Although the bush was damp and hard to travel through, it kept his clothing wet and he didn't sweat as much. The need for water was not so acute. Still, his agitation and preoccupation with his pursuers pushed him ever onward. He heard the drums only once, far off in the distance. His spirits were rising but there was an unfamiliar feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. He couldn't place it now, but as he continued the feeling became more and more pronounced. It was uncomfortable, and Mantz didn't like the feeling when he was so far ahead in the game.

By nightfall he had covered many miles. He had been moving for over fourteen hours and was well ready for sleep. He situated himself in a tree for the night and just before the sun fell seven little monkeys appeared, moving southeast. They saw Mantz roped securely in for the night, and clamored about the top of his tree gesturing and screaming at him in their savage little way. He threw his breakfast fruit at them as a playful warning and they scattered. Mantz found their antics entertaining, and it took him away from the dark reality for a time. They were like dextrous little men, each one trying to out-scream the other.

When he awoke in the pre-dawn glow, he found one of the monkeys sitting next to him on a branch very close to his head. It sat staring at an insect that climbed the rough bark of the tree, holding the fruit Mantz had thrown in its tiny hands. Like lightning Mantz lunged for the monkey, grabbing it by the head. The small animal bit him reflexively, trying to break his grip. Mantz cried out in surprise and dropped the creature from his grasp. It fell, grabbing desperately at branches that weren't there, screaming in terror all the way down. It audibly impacted with the earth below, obscured from Mantz's view by the leafy jungle.

The hunter quickly untied his makeshift rope and scrambled to the ground. The other monkeys were alerted by the horrific screaming and were themselves raising a clamor.

When Mantz reached the bottom of the tree, he found the monkey in a crumpled heap, its leathery face staring at the sky with dead eyes. Moments ago the beast had peacefully shared his roost. The hunter looked on his newest kill and was sickened. The pelt was useless and he could never have eaten the animal; there was no fire to cook with. The monkey looked too human. Mantz took the limp body back into the tree with him. The screams of the dead animal's companions mocked him from the treetops.

He tied the body of the monkey high in the tree with his rope. At least here, he surmised, the Mugaeru won't desecrate you. "It's the closest thing to a decent burial you're going to get, little man."

Mantz continued on, heading due west. He walked all day through nearly impenetrable jungle, wishing he had the heavy machete that Humbal carried. He remembered the heads of Humbal and the Gawani staring at him from the high stakes of the village. He remembered most vividly the hollow eye-sockets and hollow cheeks of Cimmeri. What would he tell his bride of four months? "At least he died without pain. . . ." No.

Mantz's hopes brightened when, on the shifting breezes of the bluffs, he caught the unmistakable scent of the ocean's salt air. I'm almost there. Now if I can out-think Zanbakun I'll survive this mess. He's stopped rapping the shields . . . Mantz figured they knew where he was heading for by now, and they were using the fastest path possible to cut him off. He felt that his lead was sufficient that he could still outdistance the natives. I'm going to have to move more during darkness if I want to beat them. Even if it means meeting up with Bhenatu.

He continued on, and late in the day Mantz heard the sound of waves crashing against the seacoast. Within a mile of the ocean Mantz turned his trail northward, towards freedom. Moving became easier as the jungle was thinning a great deal, and he could see by the moonlight. He walked until he was exhausted. He was covered in sweat and the muck of the rain forest floor, but it didn't bother Mantz in the least. He hastily chose a tree and secured himself into it with a vine. The jungle noises were fierce near the coast, but he slept on his narrow branch as though he were far away, at home in bed.

He awoke in the morning to a familiar and frightening sound. The shield-beating hunters were back, and closer than ever. Too close.

Where the hell did they come from? thought Mantz as he sat up and looked about for a sign of the native spearmen. They couldn't possibly have followed me this far. I've been careful! How do they know!

He sat for a moment and watched the sparse jungle, catching a glimpse of movements to the south. He could make out the forms of the native warriors moving through the bush, beating their shields in cadence with their stalking walk.

God, no! He hesitated at the thought of dying under the spears of the Mugaeru. He was about to be discovered, and there was nothing he could do about it. He was trapped in the tree with no avenue of escape. If he moved they would surely see him in a second. If he stayed he would be an easy target for a spear thrower. He stood close to the tree, watching and weighing the situation, paralyzed. The

feeling left his stomach and numbed his entire body now. Never had it so completely enveloped him. It felt like primal instinct to him, an urge he could not control. It was a feeling that Mantz thought he could never get used to, but one that he respected.

Suddenly, cutting through the sound of shield beating, there came a scream the likes of which Mantz had never heard before. It shook the trees to their very roots; it was as though the earth trembled momentarily as an aftershock passed thorough its crust. It was Bhenatu. She was to the south, behind the hunting natives. Through the sounds of Bhenatu's screaming came the sound of a man yelling in a terrified voice. The Mugaeru warriors ran towards the commotion, spears raised. The jungle spirit had cursed their hunt.

Mantz saw his chance and began climbing hurriedly out of his tree. As he was about to reach the ground, he caught a glimpse of the white form lashing out at black shapes not far to the south. As more natives approached the form bolted into the safety of the deep jungle.

Mantz hit the ground and began running. He ran and ran and ran until he thought his heart might pound out of his chest. He did not stop until he saw smoke rising to the north about two miles away. He then slowed his pace and checked his shoulder often, seeing no movement behind.

New Athens lay in a small stretch of savanna, a glade between two large arms of jungle that reached down to embrace the small fortress where it sat near the ocean. The way was not too tangled and Mantz was sure to make the mission before nightfall. He climbed a final ridge and saw the little compound with five whitewashed buildings, the chimney of one smoking invitingly. His breathing slowed and he sauntered up to the main gate.

Robert Mantz looked back into the jungle. He now recognized the feeling that had followed him since his trial began. It was fear. He suddenly felt great pity for Bhenatu, pity because of the lust men held for her beauty. Bhenatu lived in fear all her life, but Mantz had to be taught to fear. He also thought of Cimmeri and Humbal, and the Gawani. Another feeling manifested itself now: guilt. He was his own jury. He stopped and closed his eyes, as if to ask forgiveness.