3.

The Hungry Corpse

The next time the Colonel and I crossed paths was to be the spring of 1965, when I arrived on the curious island of New Caledonia. I had barely stepped onto the tarmac at Nouméa airport when I heard him arguing with someone close by. I knew it was him, for a man's style of argumentation is as unique as his fingerprint, and I recognised the Colonel's clipped, unbending tones instantly.

He had hardly changed since our months together in the Karoo. Or so I thought: physically, his bearing was as upright as ever, his small moustache still as neat, his short sparse hair the same shade of grey. Even from a distance I could see the crisp crease in his khaki trousers. Up close, however, I sensed that something was off. The conspiratorial glimmer in his eye shone less brightly, and, as I would soon discover, he had picked up the habit of sighing inscrutably to himself. Perhaps it is merely what happens to all of us with time.

I made my way towards him and said hello. The Colonel, as pleasantly surprised as I by this chance encounter, instantly forgot whatever disagreement he had just been thrashing out and breezily dismissed the relieved young man with whom he had been arguing. "Good Lord," he cried, thrusting out his hand. "Don't tell me you're stuck here too? What the devil brings you here?" I considered dodging the Colonel's question, but landed on telling him the truth. It seemed like the easiest thing to do. I was here, I explained, on a search and rescue mission. A young English anthropologist, Tuckwell, had gone missing in the remote and mountainous north of the island. In a land where cannibalism is still a living memory among the natives, this was quite a serious matter, and it was decided

that a search party was in order. The French, who administer the island, had been quite happy to go and find him themselves, but, as my contact in Brisbane made clear, London would be much happier with one of their own in the mix too. So it was that I found myself agreeing to once again postpone my already long-postponed journey back home. It would only take a few days, I was assured.

The Colonel and shared a taxi into town. I had once flown over Nouméa, the island's capital, at the end of war, but I was so whacked with fever that I could hardly say whether the enchanting memory of a little white town amidst a big azure sea was what I actually glimpsed from the plane window or merely what my addled mind conjured up. Flying in once again this morning I realised that the image was indeed true, and not some apparition of my fevered brain. Nouméa had grown over the past twenty years, of course – a little taller, a little bulkier – but still remained an extremely pretty town. From my taxi I observed with pleasure the bright white walls of the houses, the yellow and orange flashes of the hibiscus, and the verdant green of the pines, beyond which the dazzling blue sea sparkled in the sunlight; indeed, the saturation of the colours made it seem like another world after the dusty monotony of the Australian bush.

Driving through the city, the stubborn mentality of *La France d'Outre-Mer* made itself known as implacably as in any other French possession. It was present in the stone and brick and reinforced concrete of Nouméa's buildings; in the little French cars and motor scooters that flitted through the sunny streets; in the self-consciously European cathedral of St Joseph, so out of place in its tropical setting as to be unsightly. One sees it in the French paintings hanging in the homes of the wealthy, tastes it in the French cheeses on their tables and in the French wines in their cellars. Never have the French made such a conscious effort to be French.

We soon arrived at the hotel I had been booked into. "Say, old boy," said the Colonel, who had listened to my itinerary with envious interest, "is there room for one more on your expedition? I still have my uses, you know."

I smiled and told him to join me at the Commission at three that afternoon, and we would see what we

could do.

* * *

A flat-topped gendarme eyed the pair of us curiously as we entered the Commission a few hours later. We were directed, with surprising efficiency, to the office of Nicolas Lagarde, the official who would be leading the search party. Lagarde had a long face and a long nose, and sharp, critical grey eyes. His light brown hair was neatly parted and greying at the temples. Instantly I noticed the lack of any tan on his skin. That was quite an achievement in the Tropic of Capricorn, and left me concerned for his ability to lead us through the northern mountains.

Lagarde looked up from his desk momentarily and frowned at our arrival. "There are two of you," he said in French, arranging papers into files.

"Yes," I replied, aware that my French was long since passed its best. "This here is my friend, Colonel–"

"I did not ask for two of you," interrupted Lagarde. "Come to think of it, I did not ask for one of you." He eyed the door through which we had just entered, and I briefly wondered whether he was going to ask us to leave there and then. Had such a thought crossed his mind, however, he must have dismissed it, for he let out a small, weary sigh and told us to sit. He asked his assistant, Jacques Courteau, to join us in his office, as the fellow would also be accompanying us on the search. Courteau bounded in almost instantly and shook our hands eagerly. He was young, perhaps no more than twenty-five years old, with reddish-brown hair and a broad, pleasant face.

Lagarde explained the situation to us, somewhat unwillingly. Tuckwell set off from the town of Koumac on Saturday 3rd April and was expected back a week later, on the 10th or 11th. He had chosen, foolishly, to venture into the mountains alone, without even a guide. Clearly something had gone awry, for it was now Thursday 22nd and there was still no sign of him. A flight had therefore been chartered to take us to the northern half of the island tomorrow morning. The expedition was to consist of Lagarde, Courteau and myself, plus an Australian, Lawson, who spoke the local pidgin tolerably well and, more

importantly, owed Lagarde a favour. We would pick up a local guide once we had flown north. Yes, there was room for my Colonel friend, but Lagarde really did not understand why the Commission needed more uninvited people slowing down his search. Nevertheless, the second Englishman can come if he was indeed as experienced as I insisted.

I thanked Lagarde for his cooperation and bade him *au revoir*. Once back outside, the Colonel sped off to a prior engagement, promising to meet us at the aerodrome tomorrow morning. Courteau, clearly excited by the voyage ahead of us, volunteered to guide me through the streets of Nouméa as I picked up supplies for the coming days. Apart from my khakis, a pair of indestructible leather boots and my trusted Colt Python, I always prefer to pick up supplies as close to the start of an expedition as possible, as it is invariably much easier than lugging around items bought beforehand. I was glad I accepted his offer, for Courteau proved very useful showing me the shortcuts to the technicolour markets and impressively stocked stores dotted around the town, all the while chatting with boyish eagerness. His great-grandfather, he told me with pride, was one of the many Communards shipped out to New Caledonia in the seventies. Having duly given Paris its twice-centennial uprising, these young men proved more than willing to settle down to their new life in the Coral Sea, eventually giving rise to many of the white inhabitants one sees on the island today. Courteau was perhaps the only Frenchman I met on my trip who was not trying to fool himself about which hemisphere he lived in, and he seemed freer and happier for it. He enjoyed his life on New Caledonia and felt no sense of betrayal in saying so: he loved the warmth; the flora and fauna, much of it unique to this island; and he delighted in the curious, macabre mythology of the native Kanak people.

At the end of a profitable afternoon I retired to my hotel with quiet confidence. I had bought some tins of sardines, beans, peas and bully-beef; some coffee and a small bag of sugar; biscuits; a coil of pork sausages; a bag of potatoes, and a bottle of cognac in case the nights were cold in the mountains. As well as the usual assortment of camp crockery – tin mugs, frying pan, cutlery, tin opener, water

bottle and suchlike – I purchased two hurricane lamps a length of manilla rope. I stocked up on quinine, paludrine and peroxide of hydrogen, together with the standard first aid equipment, figuring that Tuckwell might be a bit worse for wear after almost two weeks alone in the jungle. I looked at my purchases, now neatly packed, and thought to myself: "we shall find this fellow in a day or two." I even worried whether I had bought too much. It was only later that I understood just how misplaced that confidence was. The expedition, unbeknownst to me then, stretched before us like a howling chasm, ready to swallow us whole.

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I arrived at the aerodrome the following morning to find Lagarde, Courteau and the Colonel waiting for me. A few minutes later Derek Lawson appeared, his hair still wet from his morning wash, and our party was complete. Lawson was of medium height and build, with a rugged, weather-beaten face and sandy hair that looked as if it had rarely been near a comb. A geologist by trade, he had washed up on New Caledonia in the years following the war and quickly found work in the nickel industry, he told me. I took an immediate likeness to him: he had that easy-going, down-to-earth Antipodean nature coupled with what I suspected was a real intelligence and fortitude.

The short flight brought us to the little town of Koumac, on the northwest coast. The French had tried to stamp their identity here too, of course, but the sun-baked soil surrounding the Koumac river had proved less malleable than the soft sands of Nouméa. The scenery was too sharp, the vegetation too ragged. Not even a homesick Frenchman could convince himself that this was the Provence. Nevertheless, it was a clear, energising day, and I felt yesterday's optimism rekindle within me as we stepped off the Dornier and onto the dusty landing strip. The sky was a hard, metallic blue, and the heat of the sun met us with a strength that was almost physical, like a slap on the back. The glittering waters of the Coral Sea were just a few minutes' walk away to the west, its rocky coast fringed by the island's distinctive pencil-like pines. To the east, New

Caledonia's central spine of mountains could be seen heaving skywards, its jagged tops snagging passing clouds. It was there that I found my gaze lingering. Somewhere among those ridges and valleys was our man Tuckwell. For the first time I wondered if my optimism had been premature. New Caledonia had looked manageably small on the map spread out in my hotel room, but out here it began to take on larger proportions. I imagined it would seem bigger still once we found ourselves amongst its forgotten gullies and lonely peaks.

We made our way to the government outpost in Koumac. The quiet, melancholy official there was the last known person to speak with Tuckwell, and the man who had raised the alarm once the anthropologist had failed to rematerialise out of the rainforest. It was here that we also picked up our local guide, a short but well-built man known to everyone as Samson. He said very little, but I felt heartened at the sight of his strong, sturdy legs, which told of a lifetime up and down the island's mountains. We all agreed to set out at once.

The clear day promised trouble-free conditions for the first leg of the journey, and the light breeze from the sea took the edge off the heat. Roads have not penetrated far into the island's northern interior, and so we decided to strike out on foot rather than attempt to commandeer a car. It proved to be a wise decision, for after less than an hour's walking the ground became too bumpy for even the most dependable off-road vehicle. Behind us we could still clearly see the sea, glittering and winking at us. Before us stretched a blood-red dirt footpath, little more than a goat track. It headed in the right direction – that is, uphill – and so we decided to follow it, presuming that Tuckwell would have done the same.

The western half of New Caledonia is rather dry and sparse, the Pacific rains having mostly been swallowed up by the mountains that run down the length of the island. People say it is reminiscent of the veldt, but I found it a harsher, more alien climate than that. Stunted trees, twisted and shrivelled, scraped a living in the nickel-choked soils; the entire landscape was a deep rusty red, with the exception of a few delicate yellow and white flowers which poked their heads out of the ragged grasses. The six of us

marched through this landscape saying little, Lagarde and Samson in the front, Lawson and Courteau behind, and the Colonel and I in the middle. The sea breeze had petered out, leaving us exposed to the relentless heat of the sun.

Soon the blood-red dirt track dried up and we were forced to continue our route through ever-wilder undergrowth and scree. As we climbed higher the landscape began to change: these slopes evidently received more rain than the scrubby foothills, and the vegetation was growing ever more luxuriant. Palms and ferns began to dot the landscape. We even saw a few of New Caledonia's famous tree ferns, their curious feather duster crowns poking out above the increasingly dense thickets through which we found ourselves trudging. We saw frangipanis, striking purple Bougainvilleas and the peculiar Amborella, with its shy little clusters of miniscule white flowers. I heard the distant roar of a waterfall from far off in the hills and cliffs. I had hoped to see a kagu, the island's unique flightless bird, but any that might have been in the vicinity easily evaded my untrained eyes.

Tramping through the undergrowth I settled reluctantly into the monotony of discomforts the tropical hiker must put up with: the constant sweat, the clinging khaki, the eyes tired from squinting against the fierce white sun. Nothing makes me doubt the redoubtable mind of Captain Cook more than to study his nomenclature. His decision to name this sticky, spiky, sun-drenched tropical island New Caledonia surely ranks alongside his coinage of New South Wales as one of the more mystifying acts of that great man's life. Such are the rambling thoughts of the expeditioner as he slogs along, too tired to strike up any meaningful conversation with his equally tired companions.

By the evening we had walked and climbed eighteen miles, and there was a loose, elastic weariness in my limbs. I freely admit I was relieved when Samson suggested we set up camp for the night. Dusk was fast approaching, and already a nocturnal darkness was creeping out of the forest towards us. We had our camp in order just in time. Lawson and I cooked that night. None of us had our hiking legs yet and it was a welcome relief to simply sit, eat and do no more than watch the flickering flames and listen to the symphony of the tropical night for a time. I looked

up at the bright stars and wondered if Tuckwell was looking up at them too.

* * *

We spotted our first Kanak village on the second day of our expedition. It was little more than a collection of huts nestled together in a forest clearing. Lagarde attempted to make conversation with them in French, but they seemed unable, or perhaps unwilling, to do so. Lawson then addressed them in Bislama, the English-French pidgin of the island. Like all bastard tongues, Bislama has a clumsy, childish quality when written down, but when spoken has a clarity and directness no standardised language could ever achieve. I had never heard it spoken before, but the outline of the conversion was easy enough to follow. Importantly for our party, when Lawson asked if a white man had gone this way in the past few weeks he was met with vigorous nodding.

After a few more rounds of questioning Lawson thanked the villagers and turned back to us. He ran a hand through his hair. "Well, it certainly seems that Tuckwell came this way," he reported. "And that he continued eastwards, roughly in the direction of Mont Panié."

"Where did he hope to end up?" asked the Colonel.

"Well, that's the thing," came the Australian's reply. Was that a slight pause, a certain hesitation in his delivery? "They said he was looking for the mask of the *hanggri dedman*."

Only the Colonel seemed oblivious to the slight chill that touched the group. "The what? Who on earth is that?"

Lawson glanced at Samson, whose stocky frame, I was shocked to notice, had frozen with fear. "It's not a person," replied Lawson. "At least, not anymore."

"Excuse me?" snapped Lagarde, frowning.

"The *hanggri dedman*," repeated Lawson. "It's a superstition around these parts. Something to scare children, you know. I suppose you would translate that as *le cadavre affamé*." The effect of those words seemed to unsettle Lagarde and Courteau. Lawson turned to me and the Colonel. "I guess we'd call it the Hungry Corpse."

It was such an odd and unexpected combination of words that I did not know how to respond, although I did notice how the jungle suddenly seemed a little darker, a little danker. I hunched my shoulders against an involuntary shiver. Lawson did not smile as he continued: "If I understand correctly, it's a sort of a ghoul or phantom. An evil spirit, if you like." No, I thought, I did not like. "One of the most feared spirits among these people, they told me." Lawson made a face like he had just tasted something bitter. "They say it likes to stalk among the living and exact punishment or revenge."

"And how do they go about that?" I enquired.

Again that face. "The word the villagers used was *fidim*. Feeding. By feeding on the living, apparently. Hence the Hungry Corpse."

Courteau attempted a hearty laugh of derision. "You're trying to scare us with cannibal stories? Come on, the missionaries stamped that out fifty years ago."

Lawson shook his head slowly. He seemed confused by what he had heard from the villagers. "No, not quite." He appealed to Samson, who had remained silent this entire time. "You must have heard of this spirit before, yes? How would you say it works?"

Samson cleared his throat. He looked nervous, as if he were about to talk to an audience not of five men but five hundred. "Not cannibal," he finally said in a husky voice. "But the *hanggri dedman* a very bad spirit. Kill you by magic. Throws a rock at your head, or a spear through the air. Even use your muskets," he added, nodding to the pistol in Lagarde's holster. "But no one ever sees it do it. Very bad spirit. *Nakaemas*."

Lawson shrugged helplessly. "Well, that's the story. My guess is that they blame any unexpected or unexplained deaths on the Hungry Corpse. The chief was telling me just now about a man from the village who was found, completely alone, with a stone hatchet in the back of his skull. There were no other footprints in the dirt around him. It was undoubtedly the work of one this spirit, he said."

Lagarde shook his head as if snapping out of a daze. "Wait a minute. You said something about a mask. What mask? How does that fit into this?"

"Further up this mountain, apparently, there's a village with a ceremonial mask depicting this thing," answered Lawson. "For rituals, dances, invocations, that sort of thing. Tuckwell was an anthropologist, correct? I'll bet my shirt that's what he was after. There can't be many masks like that left in New Caledonia today. It would make a fine addition to any museum collection."

"Not just for dances," interjected Samson, despite himself. "The mask *is* the *hanggri dedman*. It is inside. Makes the mask very dangerous."

"Stop a bit, Samson," I said. "You're telling us that the mask actually contains this spirit? How do you mean? Through some sort of possession?" Samson would say no more, however. He simply stared at the ground, shaking his head side to side softly and sadly.

"By Jove, what ridiculous stories you people come up with!" chortled the Colonel, mopping his brow. I observed that no one else joined him in his laughter.

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After a small, unsatisfying lunch we continued eastwards, away from the village. We had to leave Samson behind: he had refused flat-out to continue with us, even when Lagarde all but screamed in his face for him to follow orders. The hungry corpse was a very bad spirit, he repeated, and any mask channelling that spirit was bad news; he would not take one step further in its direction.

Samson's departure left us in a sour mood. Lagarde was fuming – infuriated, I suspect, as much by the simplicity with which Samson had defied him as the superstitious reason he gave for leaving us. We trudged on through the dense jungle, largely in silence. I decided not to tell Courteau about the fat leech dangling from his calf.

There was a primeval quality to the jungle by this point, a feeling that we humans did not belong here out of sheer anachronism. You could sense something prehistoric in the hum and buzz of the insects; in the heavy, thick air; in the verdant vigour of the vegetation. The curious needle-like outlines of the ubiquitous pines and the jagged, un-dulled blades of the mountain ridges added to the ancientness of the scene. Had a pterodactyl swooped

out of those tree tops I would not have been in the least surprised. Even the stars, when they came out that evening, burnt with a brightness of a younger, more vigorous age. I was exhausted that night after another hard day's climb, and yet I was unable to fall asleep straight away. Again I heard those words: "the Hungry Corpse." Again I heard Samson's frightened voice: "Very bad spirit. No one ever sees it."

The next day we awoke at five to find that the clouds had descended during the night. The tumbling fog only added to the Jurassic atmosphere of this place. I dressed, thankful for having packed my thick socks and stockings. It took us longer than usual to pack up that morning; for one reason or another all of us had slept badly.

As we climbed that morning the landscape took on a curious wan appearance. Pines appeared to grow stunted and sickly. The undergrowth seemed to wither away, and our boots quickly became weighed down with claggy grey mud. The morning's fog eventually cleared somewhat, but a ghoulish mist still slithered among the trunks and exposed roots of the forest. After about two hour's strenuous walking the pointed roof of a Kanak hut emerged from the preternatural gloom. It appeared abandoned; Lawson and I explored its interior, but found nothing beyond a few large bats roosting in the thatch. Neither Lagarde nor Courteau seemed interested in it, and I suspected that they had seen many before. The Colonel merely sat and stared at it, a strange grey tinge to his face.

After another hour or so we came across a track which we hoped would lead us to the village Tuckwell had himself presumably been searching for. A stubborn drizzle had been slowly been soaking us through, heightening the physical discomforts of the trek. "By God, what a miserable place," groaned the Colonel. "It's like November on the moors." I could not help agreeing. Our expedition was by no means the toughest I had ever embarked upon, but it seemed to sap us all of our strength with unnatural voracity. Samson had left. Courteau and Lagarde exchanged quiet, terse snippets to one another in French but otherwise said little. The Colonel seemed to soak up the gloom like a sponge. As for myself, I felt the unmistakable signs of fever

stirring in my blood, and found myself stumbling repeatedly on the rocky track, much to my annoyance. I was reminded of E. A. Anderson's description of his ill-fated expedition into the Qorqinish Mountains: 'even though we were constantly climbing higher, I had the unsettling feeling that each step took us lower, deeper into the bowels of some infernal pit.' Only Lawson, I noticed, seemed unharmed by our surroundings, trudging ahead at the front of the group with heartening steadfastness.

Our hunch about the track had been correct, for we soon saw signs of village life ahead of us. A pile of stacked logs stood by the side of the path. From somewhere nearby came the sound of a hatchet striking wood. Even now I half expected to see Tuckwell stroll out of the mist towards us, hand outstretched, apologising for all the bother. The other half of me, however, seemed to know better.

The village was a grim place. Despite our altitude, the air had a dank quality to it, like a cellar, and was thick with flies. Everywhere hung that greasy, grey fog. A struggling fire hissed and popped in the centre of the village, its acrid smoke adding to the uncomfortable atmosphere. The sun, clearly as unimpressed with the vista as I, had already made its excuses and slipped away early, leaving a premature darkness to take its place. As we reached the centre of the village I spied two mangy dogs laying listlessly on the damp earth, whereupon one of them stood on its hind legs and revealed itself to be a small boy. His fellow villagers looked at us from their huts with silent, sullen stares; were they merely ill, I wondered, or was there something else in their eyes? Even the Colonel was perturbed. "I don't like this, old boy," I heard him mutter. I was unsure whether he had said it to me or to himself.

Lagarde, seeing no one trying to engage with our party, called out: "*qui est le chef ici*?" When no one replied, he snapped a look at Lawson, like a schoolmaster waiting for an answer.

Lawson cleared his throat. "*Hu jif blong yu?*" he asked, though it still seemed no one was listening. The thud from the rain on the foliage was steady. "*Hedjif? Bos blong vilej?*" A small, withered man emerged from the gloom of one of the huts and approached Lawson. He wore his filthy rags with the pride of a man who had never

anything better.

He said, in a high, hoarse voice: "*Mi jif.*" I am the chief.

So it was that Lawson and the shrunken chief launched into the familiar round of questions and answers. Had they seen a white man here? Yes, very recently. What did he look like? Tall, pale, light hair, glasses. Where did he go from here? At this point, however, the interrogation deviated from its usual course. For instead of pointing us further east, the chief said nothing. He stood up straight, defiantly, looking Lawson straight in the eyes. "*Em ded. Mifala i bin kilim em.*" The words "*ded*" and "*kilim*" made me groan inwardly. I knew what they must mean. The chief continued, with growing intensity: "*Em wantem dolifes, nevamaen mifala i bin won em. Taswe mifala i bin mas kilim em. Nakaemas.*" A number of his villagers were now creeping out of their huts towards us.

Lagarde, who had been impatiently trying to listen, cut in: "What's he saying? What's going on?" Lawson shushed him, and an unmistakable spark of animosity flew between the two of them. Courteau and I glanced uneasily at each other. I was suddenly reminded of how young Courteau looked.

Once the chief had finished, Lawson turned to Lagarde and sighed. "Tuckwell's dead. They killed him over a week ago."

Lagarde turned white with fury upon hearing the news and I thought for an awful moment he would shoot the chief there on the spot. Instead, through a clenched jaw he managed to ask: "Why?"

Lawson ran a hand through his hair, uncertain how to proceed. "It's those superstitions again," he eventually replied, addressing the whole group. "The mask. It seems Tuckwell had wanted to see the mask, like we suspected, but the village refused. Said it was much too dangerous for an uninitiated man like him to touch it. Tuckwell insisted, however, and it seems things got heated. Tuckwell told them that he was not only going to touch it, but take it back with him. At this point, I–" he broke off, his mind clearly playing the scene for him in his head. "Well, it was one chap against fifty. He stood no chance. Bloody fool."

We stood in silence at this point, the seconds refusing to pass. Our search and rescue had been an unqualified failure, and always would have been: Tuckwell was already dead the moment I set foot in Nouméa. Eventually Lagarde cleared his throat. He had swallowed his initial rage and once again assumed his official persona; but somehow it did not quite seem to fit, as if he himself were wearing a mask. "Courteau, arrest this Kanak for the murder of the Englishman," he ordered in clipped tones, glaring at the chief. "You two," he continued, pointing at me and the Colonel, "come with me. We are going to destroy that mask and this ridiculous belief. Lawson: tell these savages that we are armed, that we have the full support of the French government behind us, and that we will subdue with force any attempt to stop us."

I was shocked. I knew instinctively that this was a bad decision. It could not end well. Courteau reluctantly stepped up to the chief and looked pleadingly at Lawson to explain the situation. Lawson waited a moment, as if deciding something, before wearily informing the chief of his arrest. The man looked so small and frail that I struggled to imagine how he and his villagers could have killed Tuckwell.

The news that we were going to take the mask shocked the village out of its stupor like a canon blast. A few more began approaching us, genuine fear on the faces. Voices began to rise up around us.

"*Savapano?*" someone gasped. "*Nakaemas blong dolifes. Tumas denja! Nakaemas!*"

"They're saying the mask has evil powers," explained Lawson to Lagarde over the growing murmur of moans and complaints; "that it's too dangerous to handle."

"*Mon Dieu*, Lawson, this is the twentieth century!" cried Lagarde. "I do not want to hear another word about curses and magic! Do *you* believe in this rubbish?"

Lawson stood resolute. I admired the man more and more. "It's not what I believe that matters when fifty other people believe the exact opposite," the Australian said. The crowd of villages was indeed growing. I noticed, with dull horror, that they were encircling us. I began to speak to Lagarde. I told him that the best thing to do was to recover Tuckwell's remains and leave this godforsaken

mountain. The cries from the natives were rising in pitch and tempo. Lagarde shot back at me: "Your opinion is irrelevant. I never wanted you or your friend here in the first place." A furious Colonel returned the volley but I did not hear what he said. The moaning crowd was jostling us by now. A villager began tugging at my sleeve. A hand grabbed my arm. Instinctively, I reached for my Colt.

A shot tore through the air. I span around to see Lagarde holding his pistol up to the sky, smoke rising out the barrel. The roar of the gun instantly cowed the villagers. In the silence that followed, Lagarde stepped up to the chief.

"Where is that mask?"

Lawson reluctantly translated. *Berem*, came the answer. "They buried it."

"*What?*"

Lawson spoke again to the chief for a few minutes. He turned back to us, wiping the rain out of his eyes. "He says the mask has the *mana*, the spirit, of the Hungry Corpse trapped within it. Long ago, they used the mask in rituals. Men would wear it and be inhabited by the spirit." A distant rumble of thunder rolled across the blackening horizon. "They would act like men possessed, scaring people and suchlike. This was part of the ritual, you understand. Over time, however, those who wore the mask began to act too aggressively. They would hurt people. It was clear to the chief that the mask and its spirit were becoming too powerful for the village to handle. They call it *nakaemas*: evil magic."

Light was fading fast in the village. Again I had that sense, which I have often noticed close to equator, that the darkness had assumed a physical, liquid form. In Europe, the night descends from the heavens with dusk: in the tropics, it oozes from below and seeps out of the undergrowth. I lit a hurricane lamp and glanced round our group; all of us seemed ill to some degree. Lawson continued doggedly: "Soon after, the chief says, the mask began to act by itself, without the need of a human puppet. Things would vanish. Things would move by themselves." A snort of derision from Lagarde. "Villagers would become inexplicable injured, attacked by an unseen assailant who made no noise and left no footprints. Others grew sick. The land became

infertile."

A shiver of ague ran up my spine. I had to support myself against a tree so as not to appear frightened. "So they buried it?" asked Courteau, his voice barely above a whisper.

Lawson nodded. "The chief here decided that the mask had become too dangerous for the village to keep in its possession. Destroying it, however, would release the hungry corpse it contained and wreak even more havoc. So the village decided to bury it, to trap it underground in the hope that the earth would contain its power."

Another peal of thunder, closer now, drummed against the sky. Still the rain fell. The Colonel lit the other hurricane lamp and held it up. "And where did they bury it?" pressed Lagarde. Neither the chief nor the villagers said anything. Lagarde pointed his pistol at the chief. "I don't think this needs translating," he hissed in French, jabbing the pistol into his taught stomach. "Show me where you buried your mask. I'll shoot you and your whole village if I have." Even Courteau protested against this, but to this day I am not sure whether Lagarde actually heard us or not, so intense was his focus on the chief. The chief, for all his physical frailty, met Lagarde's gaze with a glare of molten hatred. Slowly, steadily, and without blinking, the chief raised his arm and pointed to the far end of the village. A flash of lightning revealed an earthen mound beyond the huts.

Lagarde straightened up and, to my overwhelming relief, holstered his pistol. He once again tried to assume a business-like air, but it seemed to me as if the persona had slipped a little further still. "This mask is a cancer. We are cutting it out. Courteau, fetch the shovels."

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I shall not try to describe the excavation in any detail. In the flickering light of the hurricane lamps and the jarring flashes of lightning the dig site presented a gothic spectacle. Courteau and the Colonel, with Lagarde overseeing, made quick work of the soft ground. Lawson, who had refused to take part, was tasked with guarding the chief and policing the rest of the villagers, who watched in misery

and horror, lowing lamentably like cattle. I had offered to set up camp for the night, suspecting that my juddering fever would render me fairly useless for physical exertion. Every one of us stewed in a vicious mood.

As I was pitching the last tent I heard the dull thud of metal on wood. Courteau and the Colonel had found something. I walked over to investigate; Lawson, I noticed, also advanced towards the dig site. On Lagarde's orders, Courteau slid into the pit to see if he could retrieve the object. Once the mud and slime were cleared away it revealed itself to be a curious crate, something like a child's coffin, roughly hewn out of the island's pinewood. It was bigger than I had expected. Most striking, however, was that the box was bound in rope and a large, rusted chain that must have washed ashore decades ago. It impressed upon me just how keen these villagers were that whatever was inside should not be allowed to escape.

Nevertheless, Courteau, by now slathered head to toe in mud, proceeded to fasten a rope around the coffin. With infinite effort, for the ground around the excavation was by now a quagmire, he and the Colonel hauled it out of its earthen tomb. Against my better judgement I edged closer. If anything looked like it did not need opening, this was it. A growl of thunder, directly above us, seemed to warn us to back off.

Lagarde picked up Courteau's shovel and drove it through the rusted chain, which gave way easily. He then wrenched open the lid. At this the constant moaning and pleas from the villagers suddenly stopped, and a deathly silence fell upon us all. The five of us peered inside. At first I could see very little in the dim glow of the hurricane lamp. Then a whip crack of lightning tore across the sky and illuminated, for a split second, the horrible visage of the Hungry Corpse. Half-way between anger and anguish, it bared its blackened teeth at us in a frozen scream. Its hooked nose pointed down over its mouth. Its dark carved wood glistened like sweat-soaked skin. On its head was a pile of brown, tightly coiled human hair, much like the heads of the villagers around us, and its beard was made of dreadlocked human hair. Its mother-of-pearl eyes, nasty and narrow, seemed to flash and glare at us from under a sharp, severe brow. Even as my vision began to swim from

fever and exhaustion, I felt a dark fascination grip me.

Lagarde, a look of grim triumph on his narrow face, bent down and pulled the mask from its casket. For a moment he held it by its hair, like a savage trophy, before letting it drop back into its coffin with a sneer. It landed with a heavy thump. Still not a word emanated from the cowed villagers. Placing the lid back on the coffin and picking it up, Lagarde made for his tent. "Everyone to their beds," he said. "We'll destroy this mask in the morning."

With nothing left to be said or done, we duly trudged to our respective beds, the sense of hopelessness and helplessness weighing us down far more than our sodden clothes. Had I been in a better condition I would have given Lagarde the boot and taken charge of the situation; in my state, however, it was all I could do to crawl into my tent and pull on a drier set of clothes. I slipped, slowly and uncomfortably, into that fitful rest of the feverish, neither asleep nor awake.

I have tried on numerous occasions since to measure how much time then passed while I was in my tent, but to this day I cannot honestly say whether it was six hours or six minutes. All I know is that, at some point in the inky depths of that night, a second gunshot tore through the air. I was frozen by a white flash of terror that had nothing to do with the noise of the blast, for I had heard far more fierce salvos in my time. Indeed, I have felt fear like it only once before: in the Roaring Forties, when a friend and I were certain we were to drown. For it is the fear of knowing that one is utterly helpless, of being swept along in forces that either cannot or will not listen to one's pleas. Lying in my tent I knew instantly that something had gone deeply wrong, and that whatever it was could not be undone. In my blurred, feverish state it seemed as if the chaos from beyond the stars was folding in on our party that night.

I heard European and native voices and headed outside to discover what had happened. As I staggered out of my tent the Colonel appeared, shining a hurricane lamp in my face. "That wasn't you fooling around with a pistol?" he asked. I shook my head, eyes screwed against the light. What on earth would I be doing messing with a gun in the dark? I replied, unamused. The Colonel sighed. "I thought as much. That only leaves Lagarde. Bring your

torch."

The two of us walked over to Lagarde's tent, where Courteau and Lawson already stood holding back the growing crowd of villagers. From the looks on their faces I think we all knew what had happened. I shone my electric torch over the tent and called out to Lagarde, offering a silent prayer of thanks that it was no longer raining. No response came from within. I approached the tent, noting the clear set of footprints left by Lagarde earlier that night as he went to bed. I called out again, but was answered only by the hiss and scream of the jungle at night. Trying desperately to control my shivering, lest anyone think me afraid, I unzipped Lagarde's tent and shone my torch inside. Even through the mesh of the mosquito net the scene was clear enough. There was Lagarde, his face chalk-white in the torch light, his open eyes as cold as marbles. He had not undressed, and still lay in his soaked khakis. His pistol was in his right hand; the wound was in his temple. He was quite dead. Beside him, I noticed with a start, sat the mask of the Hungry Corpse. It seemed to stare right back at me, a look of concentrated malevolence in its silver-grey eyes.

I straightened up and turned to face the group, careful to block the tent entrance from the view of the villagers. I cleared my throat and spoke quietly to the party. "The old boy's dead, I'm afraid."

"You don't think it was one of the natives?" hissed the Colonel.

I shook my head. "The only footprints are Lagarde's, going in to the tent. There are no others within a few feet of the tent, and there's no way anyone could walk through this mud without leaving prints."

"What do we do?" asked a wide-eyed Courteau.

I marshalled my bedraggled thoughts. "Lawson: tell the villagers that Lagarde accidentally fired his pistol while cleaning it; he's fine but wounded, so no one is to go near his tent. Colonel and Courteau: get some rest, and be ready to pack up at first light. We're getting off this mountain." Instructions given, I entered Lagarde's tent. I wrested the pistol from his tightening hand and closed those glassy eyes, which at least took some of the rawness from the scene. I was conscious the whole time of the Hungry Corpse eyeing me from the corner.

* * *

The plan to hush up Lagarde's death was, of course, a complete failure, and by dawn the whole village seemed to know every detail of the sorry event. For the natives this was absolutely the work of the Hungry Corpse. How else could one explain the lack of footprints around the tent? "But, *jif*," I asked the terrified chief, "Lagarde died of a gunshot wound. Does a hungry corpse know how to use a gun?" Somehow it did not seem to fit.

The chief was adamant, however. "Yes, it is very clever," translated an exhausted, red-eyed Lawson. "It sees you using your guns and it learns."

We commandeered some of the villagers to carry Lagarde's body back down to Koumac with us, but even with their help it was still a hellish journey. The fog never once lifted until we were clean off the mountain, and Lagarde's body served as a constant reminder of the utter failure of our expedition. We had not even been able to find Tuckwell's remains before heading back. Yet again life chose to remind me how of just how capricious it can be; how the brief flash of our existence can so quickly and unexpectedly be snuffed out; and how close by the eternal somnolence is for all of us.

We had at first been unsure what to do about the mask. We had, after all, only dug it up on Lagarde's orders, and I knew without asking that none of us had agreed with the command. Courteau seemed especially spooked by its appearance, and I wondered if the gaping visage of the Hungry Corpse had visited him in his sleep also. Seeing that no one else wanted it, let alone had a plan for it, and reminding myself that it was still a striking example of native artwork, I volunteered to take it back to England with me. The relief among the group at my offer, and especially in Courteau, was palpable. It was agreed. We unceremoniously wrapped the mask in burlap and hauled it back down the mountain with us.

I thought the return to civilisation would be a relief from the prehistoric gloom of the mountains, but even the gay spectacle of Nouméa failed to lift the group's spirits. If anything the colour and motion of the town, which had so recently delighted my senses, now grated my raw nerves:

the colours were too bright, the chatter too light. The laughter in the markets sounded to my ears like mockery; the carefree conversations on the sunny streets now seemed somehow careless. Even as my fever subsided it felt as if the cold mountain fog were still clinging to me.

My final few days in Nouméa were uneventful. I washed and shaved, wrote my contribution to Courteau's report and made my own report to my contact in Brisbane. The Colonel had finally secured a flight to Goa, the very thing he had been arguing about when I first touched down on New Caledonia less than two weeks ago, and left with haste. I arranged to leave soon after. On the morning of my departure I handed in my report to Courteau and bade a fond farewell to Lawson before taking a taxi back to the airport. I was finally heading home. The relief in my heart buoyed the exhaustion in my bones.

* * *

Several weeks passed before the Hungry Corpse arrived at White Gate. I went to uncrate it with trepidation. It had been almost a month since I last saw it, not counting its many appearances in my dreams. Prising open the lid, for a moment I thought I could smell the dank air of that mountaintop; see the mist swirling around my ankles; I even thought I could hear Lagarde's pistol firing in the distance. Had it been a mistake to bring this totem back with me?

What a difference a change of scenery makes! It was a wonderful May morning, fresh and bright. The peonies were just beginning to flower. A blackbird hopped across the lawn. There is undoubtedly something fortifying about the English air. The close, heavy atmosphere of the tropics never leaves you alone: it presses in on you, clings to your clothing as you try to pass, making your thoughts and actions sluggish. Back in England, however, there is an open, elastic quality to the air. One's head suddenly feels clear and free to think. I am to this day convinced that if our party had discovered the mask in Shropshire or Somerset we would never have allowed ourselves to become so swept up in the fear and superstition that surrounds it.

As I peered into the crate those ghosts of New Caledonia vanished in an instant. The Hungry Corpse was a striking mask with a ghoulish name. That was all. I could see that so clearly now. With the spring sunlight pouring through the windows of my study it no longer even looked unpleasant. If anything, its new setting made it look crude and impotent. I felt as if I had finally exorcised the mask. I lifted it out of its crate, looked it dead in those cloudy, mother-of-pearl eyes, and laughed in its face.