

Though Simon was obviously still alive, he lay still and let the fire ants consume him. Harry and Samantha had spent hours looking for their fellow castaway, but none of the grisly images their overstressed imaginations had conjured could equal this horror. Simon was lying completely naked on his back, one obviously broken leg curled underneath him. The only sign of his clothing was a red polo shirt, now shredded, hanging from a bush several feet away.

Simon's mouth was open and his jaw moved reflexively, as if he were trying to swallow. His wide open eyes stared sightlessly into the palm trees above him. His left hand was plunged into the moist earth next to his scabbed and reddened torso.

And then there were the fire ants. They were feasting on his ripped and broken leg, his scratched stomach and chest, and the numerous gashes and wicked looking bites on both sides of his neck. From a distance of ten feet, Harry could actually see little

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bits of flesh in the manacles of the ants departing for their nest.

Coming upon this scene had been a paralyzing shock. They might have stood like statues watching the ants tear Simon apart until nightfall if not for a sudden banshee like bird call. It was some kind of tropical bird none of them had seen or heard before but which seemed to dwell on this small island.

Startled into action, Harry and Samantha rushed forward. "Simon!" She called desperately. Her brother reacted to neither her voice nor her sudden appearance above him. She made to grab his arm and lift him up. Then his condition registered on her. "If we yank him up we could mess up his leg more!"

Harry had been about to mention this so he nodded. "We need to stabilize the leg. See if you can ... um ... wake him up." He began searching for sticks long and thick enough to serve as splints.

Samantha was kneeling beside Simon, calling to him and snapping fingers in front of his eyes. There was no reaction. His pupils were huge and fixed and might as well have been painted on for as much as they seemed to be registering her movements. Shaking him did nothing but attract the attention of several fire ants which bit her. She crushed them angrily and began slapping the rest of them off her brother. There were hundreds of them, and now they were getting on her and biting her hands and arms.

Samantha shrank back, cursing and crying out in pain as more of them bit her. It wasn't until she was out of range of reinforcements that she was able to get all of them off of her. "Jesus Christ," she muttered to Harry, who had returned with two

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approximately equal sized splints. "What can we do about the damned ants, they're vicious!"

Harry pondered that, staring at his best friend turned ant buffet. "All I can think of is securing his leg and dragging him to the beach. We haven't encountered them down there yet and we can wash them off of him."

Samantha agreed and they set about doing it. They straightened Simon's leg and splinted it with the sticks and their shoelaces. Although the sound of the shattered bones grinding together as they straightened the leg made Harry want to scream, Simon did not react at all. His eyes were still open but he seemed to be in a deep coma.

When they were ready to move Simon, Harry circled the scene looking for the rest of his clothes and his other possessions. Spying something black and furry that looked like the sweat pants his friend had been wearing, Harry leaned forward and reached into a thick tangle of vines and bushes so he could pull it out.

Something furry and alive seized his hand. Before he could react, two razor sharp needles were sinking into his flesh. Harry screamed and yanked his hand back with all his might. The fangs ripped down excruciatingly and finally pulled out before his hand was free of the undergrowth.

Moaning and stumbling backwards, Harry's feet hit a rock. Before he knew it he was tipping backwards and landing hard on the moist but rocky and vine covered earth.

Something black darted from the undergrowth and landed on his leg. Harry screamed again, incoherent pleas for help intermixed with cries of pain. But the black thing, the approximate size of

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a large cat, leaped to Harry's stomach and then upper chest. There was a quick impression of glittering blue eyes and long silver fangs before it ducked its misshapen head and twin prongs of pain exploded in the left side of his neck.

Harry's hands shot up reflexively but he could not dislodge the thing. His fingers encountered six rippling but thickly furred legs which seemed to end in sponges rather than toes or claws. Its back felt like a tiny camel ... if a camel had three squishy humps.

Then Samantha was above him, swinging a thick branch. There was an ear piercing scream, a moment of increased pain that exploded to hellish agony, and then the creature squatting on and biting him was gone.

Samantha watched it land six feet away, flip up on its legs with frightening speed, and widen its blue eyes at her. It was nothing she had ever seen before. A furry humpy mass with six legs and no tail. No visible mouth, only a silver fang jutting from each side of its lumpy skull.

As she eyed it, her club ready, Harry got shakily to his feet. Samantha backed up a step. "Grab my waist band if you have to, but for heaven's sake don't fall down again!"

Harry mumbled something in a disoriented voice and stayed with her as they slowly backed away from the creature and towards Simon.

Samantha eyed the glittery eyed creature, momentarily fixated on the foamy drool dripping down from the left fang. "What the HELL is that thing?"

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Even as she spoke, Harry stumbled again. He tightened his grip on her waistband in an attempt to not fall flat on his back a second time in two minutes. But all he succeeded in doing was pulling her sweatpants and panties down to her ankles as he fell.

Samantha grabbed wildly for a nearby tree branch, losing her weapon in the process, but it was no use. She landed hard on top of Harry, which at least saved her bare bottom from severe thrashing from the sharp ends of the rocks and sticks littering the earth beneath them.

Samantha was barely aware of Harry's fresh grunt of pain from her landing before the furry nightmare was upon her. A stench worse than her uncle's slaughterhouse greeted her as it leaped nimbly atop her knee and then launched itself to her neck. Twin daggers of agony sank into her throat.

For a second every old vampire movie flashed into her mind, but there was no sucking sound. She didn't know what it felt like to have blood drained from her neck but this didn't seem to be it. Instead, she felt cold all over her body, even the parts still clothed.

"Get off her!" Harry screamed, tugging at the creature.

It complied, whirling about and darting for his neck again. A second later he screamed again.

Samantha rolled off her friend, fingers searching for a weapon. Her left hand found a sharp rock and in a second she was on her knees beside Harry, rock in both hands, and stabbing the creature again and again. Hot blood as thick as syrup geysered every direction. When the creature finally lay still, Samantha

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dislodged its fangs from Harry's neck and tossed the vile thing as far away as she could.

Samantha stood and pulled her clothes back up to her waist. She was coated in purplish blood up past her elbows. It had felt hot and disgustingly sticky at first but now it felt like nothing at all.

Odder still, she could see the wind blowing the leaves and branches around her. She could see her hair being tossed around by the suddenly brisk wind ... and yet ... she couldn't feel the wind. Should feel the wind against her face but didn't. Should feel the furry nightmare's blood on her but ... didn't.

Samantha grabbed her left arm in her right hand. She couldn't feel this connection with either limb. She couldn't feel her shoes around her feet or her tongue in her mouth. It was as if she had been injected with a body sized dose of Novocain.

Which she probably had. That THING must have a numbing poison which spurted from those repulsive fangs. Once it had numbed someone, the much smaller creature could feast at will and leave the rest for the fire ants. Which explained Simon's condition.

Harry's moaning shook her from her reverie. He was sitting up, clutching his chest with one hand and rubbing his eyes with his other. He was moaning "what is wrong with me?" over and over again.

"Come on, Harry. We have to go NOW. We have to get back to the camp and regroup, there might be more of them around here. There surely are."

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Harry jerked his head her direction. His hands dropped lifelessly into his lap. His eyes had the same thousand yard stare that she had seen so shortly ago from Simon.

"I can't see, Sam! I'm blind! That thing didn't touch my eyes but I'm blind! And - and I can't feel anything. I can't even smell anything!"

A thrill of fear shot down her spine. These creatures didn't just numb the sense of touch, they numbed every sense if enough of their venom got into you. Did that mean Simon was still conscious? Still conscious but blind and deaf? Numbed senseless like someone trapped in a sensory deprivation chamber? Completely unaware of anything happening around him, even the fact that he was being consumed one minute bite at a time?

"Holy shit." Samantha breathed. With a renewed sense of urgency, she grabbed Harry and tried to pull him up. "Stand, Harry, we have to get out of here NOW!"

"I'm not standing already?" He asked bewilderedly.

Was that all he could do? Hear? He couldn't see, taste, smell, or touch. He didn't even know if he was lying down or standing up.

Harry's hands and feet jerked in odd directions, wholly uncoordinated. He obviously couldn't tell what position any of his limbs were in, he was moving randomly and reflexively.

He wasn't supporting his weight and she couldn't hold him up any longer. Samantha let go to avoid being pulled down on top of him again. Only the sound of the impact and the snaps of bones in his right hand breaking as he landed on top of it alerted Harry that something was wrong. "Did you fall? Or was that me?"

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"You don't feel your hand? You just broke your hand, Harry!"

"I didn't feel a thing." He giggled hysterically.

Before Samantha could reply she heard a rustling behind her. She spiraled around to find two more black lumpy shapes bounding towards them.

Samantha ran. If and when her mind turned to something beyond her immediate survival, she could rationalize that there was no way she could get Harry out with her in time before the things had bitten her enough times to make her as helpless as he was. That was true, they had been only yards away and were moving fast enough that they would probably catch her anyway. Trying to drag along someone who couldn't keep his feet under him was certain death.

As she ran a thought flashed through her mind. We slept here last night. After the crash yesterday we slept on the beach just 100 yards from this spot. These creatures were that close to us.

The treeline was in sight and she could hear the waves breaking on the beach ahead of her when Harry started screaming behind her. Shrill, incoherent, pitiful screams. They had reached him and must have stopped to bite him a couple more times. Samantha found the energy to run even faster.

But she had forgotten that she could no longer feel her limbs or anything else. Her feet got tangled with each other and before she knew it she was face first in the sand twenty yards from their camp. The sand had already been red hot when they crossed it to enter the woods and look for food this morning. The sun was just setting so the sand had to be hot enough to fry her flesh.

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But for all she could feel, she might as well be snuggling up to a room temperature pillow. Even if she hadn't heard rustling behind her, however, she still would have quickly gotten up because not feeling her skin burning would not change the reality of it. Intact skin would come in handy once the poison wore off and she could feel again.

If it wore off.

But it had to, didn't it? Any poison that didn't kill you would wear off. Didn't it?

Samantha was running again. She didn't even hesitate at their camp but continued on into the surf. When the water was up to her knees she dived head first into the water and swam as fast as she could. Her immediate goal was to reach the plane wreckage. One wing was still jutting above the ocean surface and she could cling to it and watch what happened on the beach. If these buggers could swim and started coming after her she would continue out into the ocean until she drowned. A death she could feel was infinitely preferable to one she could not.

She was about 20 feet from the exposed wingtip when an angry buzzing began behind her. Samantha didn't waste her breath or energy twisting around to look beachward. As long as she didn't hear splashing sounds they could make whatever else kind of noise they wished.

She couldn't feel the water on her skin but she could now smell the unmistakable acrid stink of oil. The plane's remaining fuel must be leaking into the ocean.

"We got what we paid for." Simon had said last night on the beach as sat around their fire. "We could only afford the rattiest

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plane they had and that's what they gave us. Worthless piece of shit." He had said, glaring at the exposed wingtip that Samantha had now reached and was clinging to.

She turned finally to look at the beach only 24 hours ago had seemed so desirable as the three of them swam from the wreckage.

Now the beach was filled with the creatures, over a hundred of them. They stood in a line, just beyond the high water mark on the sand. All of them were staring at her with silver teeth glittering in the fading sunlight and blue eyes fixated on her. Their toeless feet pawed the sand restlessly, making them seem like thoroughbreds lined up and anxious for the starting gun.

"The Filipino government is hiding something on that forbidden island," Simon had said defiantly not two days ago. "I'm going to get some pictures of what it is. Maybe there's a Pulitzer Prize in it!" He had said the last with his usual boyish grin that she had so loved. The grin that always made her willing to follow him into hell and back.

Samantha stared at the line of hellish demons staring back at her and realized Simon's camera was still aboard the plane. It was in his very expensive steel exterior padded camera case. If she remembered correctly, this case was watertight.

Excellent. She could get his picture of what the Filipino government was hiding on this forbidden island. That was the least she could do before she died out here. After emptying the roll she'd replace the camera in the watertight case and swim it out as far away from the island as she could before she drowned.

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It wasn't a good plan, it certainly wasn't as happy plan, but it was all she had at this point. She thought of Simon laying there motionless and soundless as fire ants ripped him to shreds one microbite at a time. No doubt these monsters were planning to come by later for a snack of their own.

To hell with that. Samantha would rather die almost any other way than being completely unaware of it as it happened.

Resolved, Samantha released the wing tip and slide beneath the waves. She found the door they had opened after the cabin filled with water. It was still open and she found Simon's camera case on the first try. It was still under his seat.

Samantha wondered if the pilot was still strapped in his seat and figured he probably was. A piece of the front propeller had broken on impact and sliced through the windshield and into the pilot's head.

They had thought they were the lucky ones to avoid that fate but now it looked like he had gotten off easy.

Samantha broke the surface with a loud splash. She grabbed the wingtip again with one hand and began rolling the combination lock tumblers on the case with the other.

When it was open she discovered with delight that the case was indeed waterproof.

Samantha loaded a roll of high speed film to account for the dimming light and started shooting, a grim smile on her face.

The creatures were still in their line, staring balefully at her.

"Smile, you bastards." She said with fierce glee as she continued to take their pictures.

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Samantha had been an Olympic level long distance swimmer in her youth. She could push this case ahead of her for a long time before she drowned.

The End