El Yunque

“Warning – Do Not Enter”

PROLOGUE

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upon. The waves of light from the algae looked like movies of Kirlian photography, as blue-green undulating flames.

That’s how we knew that we were being followed. We only realized this when we mistakenly traveled in a circle, doubling back on our own trail. The sound of the coquis had been deafening. I became worried when the tree frogs went silent suddenly.

The hike through El Yunque over the Laquillo Mountains was projected for two weeks and this was only our second full day. We still had at least another five miles journey through the wild and increasingly frightening jungle to get to the public area of the park, and hopefully safety and medical attention for Marcel since seeing the footprints. Strange experiences had happened to us before in the jungle; but now there was something different – we were being followed!

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José and Marcel joined me, Luis, on another adventure through the jungle. We had camped in the jungle before, but never for this long, and this deep to the heart of the primeval Puerto Rican rainforest, camping in the restricted areas. El Yunque originally was named by the native Caribbean Taino Indians as Yuké, a sacred place.

Locally the name is commonly known as The Anvil on account of a mountain top looking like an anvil. The history was that the Spanish colonizers adapted the Tainos’ word for the jungle, a place for spirit communication, Yuké, to El Yunque, to satisfy their Spanish tongue.

The three of us met in college. We were all majoring in the biological sciences. That was nearly five years ago. We graduated from the University of Puerto Rico with degrees in botany and genetics, Marcel got a teaching degree in general sciences, with a minor in zoology. I was the plant guy.

José was now working at San Juan City Hospital’s La Familia Laboratory doing genetic studies. The lab was working to identify certain genetic anomalies investigating intuition and clairvoyance. Some individuals with native Tainos’ genes showed a propensity for these abilities manifested as clairvoyance, as is claimed for the Gypsies. These studies are funded in part though the University of Puerto Rico which maintained
the La Familia Laboratory facilities at the hospital; but, it was the military where the money actually flowed from.

The people that had Taino blood had higher rates of precognition and psychic ability. This showed up as a particular peptide-configuration in the T217 range in the Human Genome. Apparently, the military had employed these gifted people in secret, silent warfare. Military exercises were done in remote viewing and in direct psychic interference against enemies foreign and domestic.

These experiments started during WWII when the Nazis began to employ the occult for military advantage. The Tainos had higher innate abilities in the paranormal range of traits identified, José said. Marcel was skeptical. We were all interested, curiosity being an attribute of intelligence. Anything in the spiritual realm was difficult to prove, making for endless discussion and heated words.

Marcel was on school vacation. Since I did seasonal work at a number of farms, and helped out at a local tropical plant nursery, I could take time off when wanted. I am under-employed. It is Puerto Rico. The three of us were lucky to have jobs at all.

El Yunque offered a rich biodiversity and was home to the endangered green parrot, and many unnamed epiphytic bromeliads and orchids. Over fifty native orchids had been named, coming from the jungle. These orchids were often named for beautiful women, or vainly by the botanist discovering them.

El Yunque is famous for its rich botanical diversity and infamous for the many rumors about what is going on in its jungle. There were stories of unexplained disappearances and deaths of people entering the off limits section of the jungle. The fact is that over half of the jungle is off limits. A military base is located in the middle of the jungle, in the off limits area. The Luquillo Army Base was an X-file. Everyone living on the island had heard the stories of the men-in-black patrolling the jungle and of disappearances and deaths but these stories were considered urban myths.

The botany is a rich diversity of plants species that make this place a world treasure. There are over twenty species of trees unique to the jungle. It was named the Luquillo Experimental Forest by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Program on Man and the Biosphere in October 1976, as a world
biosphere reserve. Little more than a decade later the Biodiversity Treaty was ratified by most United Nations’ member states.

However, the United States never signed the Treaty. During the Summit that had been held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Dr. Coleman, a forestry natural resources expert from Bangor, Maine drew maps outlining what with the 1,200-page report recommended and the Treaty required. That quashed the Treaty’s ratification by the United States. The Treaty called for vast amounts of world resources and land to be protected from human habitation or use – totally off limits – Mother Gaia needed to be protected.

El Yunque was one of these places to be protected from human use. Irrespective of US ratification of the Treaty, the jungle became uninhabited. Beside the hidden military base, the Arecibo Observatory, and El Yunque National Forest. Eco-tours of the jungle are offered limited to certain areas, and during specified times.

The one thing that the local people had to say about this United Nations’ designation and Treaty was that now the jungle was no longer a Puerto Rican treasure. After this, the jungle became managed and controlled by the UN, US military and through NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in furtherance of the United Nations’ goals. There was something nasty going on in the jungle hidden by design. How could we have known what they were doing?

As with so many things Puerto Rican, there was loss of local control to the US and the UN. We could not vote in American elections, but were under United States’ control. Federal laws and regulation made Puerto Rico a modern serfdom with a New World Order twist. From our perspective Obama was not our president; but a dictator – we celebrated his election all the same because this is where the money flowed from, and we are a celebrating people. Any local control was only for show. Certainly local mayors did have a say in budgetary matters, or where favors went; but, ultimately they were being told what to say and do.

The “Golden Orange” statue in Las Marias is a perfect example of wasted resources. There are scores of unfinished housing development tracks all over the island crumbling and empty and abandoned houses due to massive foreclosure activity and bankruptcy. But we have an interpretive bronze orange taking the place of where a farmer used to sell his crop. So much for progress.
The political infrastructure benefited the few, and most of Puerto Rico lived seriously below the poverty line. One study said our unemployment rate was as high as 45%. Tropical fruits and some vegetables were locally grown on the island, but most of our food and consumer goods came from away. The three of us were really lucky to have jobs at all, and we knew it. We were all top of our graduating class and received honors. These were some of the things that held our friendship together. Our burning desire to know, to explore, and that we thought out-of-the-box.

We found few others to share our passion for science and knowledge. The three of us made it a point to meet at least once a month for supper to talk, to share our latest books that provoked thought or boiled our blood. José would usually have an interesting tidbit about his work that should not be discussed, but this was just amongst friends.

There was a family with a genetic trait for wolfism; they were so hairy that they looked like apes. The trait had gone back for generations.

Then there were families that had offspring with extra fingers and toes, and webbed digits too, that were genetically followed. Polydactylism is a trait that some said represented alien genes, when spacemen mated with humans. It is rarely seen in Puerto Ricans. The English have higher incidents of this trait. We enjoyed speculating on this and about the Nephilium.

The one trait that we wanted to know more about was paranormal ability. That was where José had the least amount of information. He did know that it had been localized to those families that formerly lived in, and surrounding El Yunque; the indigenous Taino blood. No one lived in the jungle now, not since the United Nations’ designation and military takeover. The jungle was essentially off limits.

The jungle became a fearful place to some. After all the people were relocated from the interior of the jungle, a lot of the perimeter of El Yunque was depopulated through sheer economics, a subtle form of red-lining. The saying about the jungle was, “If you are going to the jungle, than be sure to say goodbye.”

The public area of the jungle has pathways over designated trails with magnificent views and vistas. There were palms, breadfruit, bamboo, and tree ferns with feathery fronds up to six feet long, philodendron and monstera vines of many kinds climbing up and hanging down, and copious flowers growing on the rocks, in the crotches of trees and
on the ground. Along the trails salmon and pink-flowering impatiens grew covering the jungle floor. Rare white-flowered ones were a delight to find in small colonies, in a sea of salmon and pink.

We had never sought a permit to camp in the jungle. It was easy enough to get in from the deserted sections of the periphery, avoiding the roads to the telescope installation and the military base. There were signs everywhere at the boundary of El Yunque – STAY OUT. Most of the jungle was off limits, with provisions for fines and jail time if found trespassing.

The official El Yunque literature had a notice that one could apply for a permit to go into the nonpublic areas, the protected areas of the jungle, with an application fee required. Camping, if allowed, was in specifically designated campsites in the public access areas.

The first time we had talked about camping in the jungle a few years ago, José pulled an application for a permit off the Internet. There were questions about the affiliation of the applicant(s) to a university or governmental unit, the purpose of the request, and many provisions about collecting specimens that were rigid, and rights had to be waived when signing the application. There was no camping allowed without just cause, an act of Congress practically. Applications had to be submitted months in advance of a proposed visit. We opted to enter the jungle on our own, as amateurs, and camp out wherever we wanted to; to hell with the rules.

The first time we went in together was during semester break of our junior year. Some of our classmates were going to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida to hoop it up drinking and carousing. Others were gathering at local beaches. There were a lot of social events going on over winter break.

We wanted to get in touch with nature, to feel our native roots. We Puerto Ricans are a mix of Spaniards, Africans and native Taíno blood. The Caribbean had influence on our heritage too, adding to our complexion and native beauty. We are a proud and newly formed race, a product of the times. There was no question I was the darkest skinned of all three. It was a running joke that I had more native blood and should be really psychic with a strong voodoo heritage. It was a blessing to have such good friends value me.
For months, when meeting for dinner on our night out, all the details for the adventure were discussed and coordinated. We would meet Saturday morning in San Juan and take my car. My Subaru was rusting, dented and older, and would be the least likely noticed when left in the outer parking lot of the abandoned motor lodge located near the jungle boarder. It worked before when we had gone on weekend adventures in the jungle. No one bothered our car when parked there.

There were remnants of a few residences and farms from before displacement along the jungle boundary. They were abandoned when the jobs and cash left the area, after United Nations’ designation and covert military takeover of the jungle.

We would enter through an abandoned farm along a main road we found on a former trip. This spot would allow us to pierce the boundary of the jungle by a few hundred feet, to the back of this formerly cultivated slope. The area was becoming overgrown, and the farm buildings and chicken coops were rotting away. The main house was disintegrating stucco. Strangling vines were engulfing the remains.

High leather boots were a must and a few changes of sox. We only took along one change of clothes as there were plenty of streams and pools in the jungle to wash along the way. We didn’t need any soap and would use the abundant guava leaves that were found in the jungle. The leaves would froth up when in water and acted like soap. Knowing plants and what was good to eat was vital. Although we took along some freeze dried foods, it had to be stretched for the full two weeks, in case we found little to eat.

Hammocks are a must. Anyone foolish enough to sleep on the jungle floor would soon be sorry, or dead. There are poisonous ants, centipedes and a host of other scavengers devouring anything in their paths. The higher off the ground, the safer we would be. A flash light, matches in a waterproof tin, a compass, rope and climbing picks were the minimum. I would take a copy of Jacobson’s Rainforest Botany, so there was no second guessing specific species that were poisonous.
All of our electronics would be staying behind—we wanted to get away, not listen to the radio or talk on the phone. Who knew when we would be able to do this again? Marcel was getting married in the fall; and, José was working all the time and getting more serious with Carmen. She was so beautiful he had to begin to commit or another man would draw her away. We could see this happening. So, he would quickly drift away too, and it would be me alone to face the jungle. After my breakup with Sofia as a freshman at university, I lost interest in dating and dedicated myself to plants. Hopefully this would change, but for now the jungle was my only lover.

The last night out before our trip we met at the Oceana Motel and Restaurant on McLeary Street in San Juan, that is close to José’s condo, and dined on the rooftop for a private time together. The main dining room on the first floor of the Oceana was designed as a grotto and garden; intimate, but not private. It contained a small wading pool and waterfall, and about ten glass-topped rod iron tables and chairs. Tropical potted plants were located along the walls and in every nook and cranny, and surrounded the pool and waterfall areas.

A spiral rod iron staircase in the back of the room had vines going up the rails and ascended to a balcony overlooking the pool, waterfall and grotto dining room. The motel had an amazing eclectic collection of art and sculptures, mostly by the local talent. But our perch on the rooftop was secluded and a perfect place to plan our getaway without interruption or eavesdropping. We had maps, lists of supplies that we needed and I brought my plant book. Marcel ordered a few bottles of good red wine to go with our supper.

Nearly everything was ready. Saturday was just two days away. We would meet first thing in the morning to get an early start. It would be midmorning before we finally stepped foot in the jungle for our adventure to begin. We prepared for every eventuality, except for an encounter with the legendary Chupacabra. We did not believe in the stories of the reptile-like blood-sucking cryptid—there was no such thing. It is just another urban legend. There was no need of any weapons, there was little to fear in the jungle. I carried a jackknife that was necessary for harvesting plants for food and for botanizing.

Our time together on Oceana’s rooftop that looked out at the glowing city was becoming a memory. José and I had to work on Friday. This would be our last day of
labor before this jungle adventure. The final plans were made. We were ecologically minded and would only leave footprints behind. Granted, I planned on taking a few specimens of the local flora, but would be careful not to disturb the plant communities in any measurable way, even though it was against the law to disturb the plants.

By the time we got to the reception desk on the main floor to pay our bill, the dining room was practically empty. There was an American couple dangling their feet in the pool, and a guy drinking. At twenty dollars each, there was plenty left over for a generous tip. José lived up McLeary Street and walked home. Marcel was less than ten minutes away.

I had the long trip back through the mountains to the eastern side of the island and Las Marias. It was an adventure going over the mountains with the many twists and turns of the narrow roadway through the area. Finally, just after midnight Mr. Sandman caught up with me.

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Friday disappeared in a bustle at the tropical plant nursery. A greenhouse of plants needed repotting besides the regular watering and greenhouse cleaning to get done. The day could not go fast enough. The jungle was calling my name. An eerie feeling crept into my unconscious, creating a pricking sensation in my thoughts during the day, increasing as the evening came along. It was apparently due to the excitement of getting away.

When I got back home, I completed packing. Everything taken was essential, with the weight of the pack being most important. The lighter it was, the easier the hike would be. My one blanket was of a light synthetic material and the hammock was nylon. Freeze dried food weighed practically nothing. My clothes were few. The pack would not be heavy.

My stomach was fluttering by bedtime. The last thought before sleep was of the chance of getting arrested in the jungle for trespassing. It hardly ever happened. What was there to worry about? Life was good. Still a weird feeling persisted. My sleep was interrupted by colorful visions of the jungle. It was a watercolor vision of Marcel
running through the verdure and blue-green palms. This dreamy vision was of an overcast sky of lucid red. I woke up worried. Deep sleep did not return. Four AM came precipitously.

This would be my last hot shower for awhile, and brewed coffee. After eating a hearty breakfast of eggs and ham, it was time to go. Everything was ready; and, I put my pack in the car. The drive up and down the mountains from Las Marias to José’s in San Juan was over two hours away, on the other side of the island.

These twisting and narrow roads on this side of the island are dangerous and even more so during daylight hours. At least when it is dark the headlights of oncoming traffic can be more easily seen from a distance away. During the day, a car can turn a sharp corner and surprise an oncoming vehicle. There were a number of deaths from cars going off the side of these steep mountain sides.

During this camping trip there were a number of plants that I was hoping to see. Orchids are always a delight to find blooming; and bromeliads with yellow, orange, red and pink inflorescences are startling to see growing on the side of the palms and trees. Colorful begonias of many species decorated El Yunque with interesting leaves and lustrous polka-dot flowers. It would be fantastic to find the red-trunk palm growing in the wild which is unique to Puerto Rico. I couldn’t wait to get in the tropical rainforest and see the plants growing in their natural habitat.

Daydreaming during the ride to San Juan made the trek seem quick. It was 6:30 by the time I got to José’s. The morning traffic was starting. Within minutes José and Marcel were in my car with their packs and ready to go. For months we had planned this getaway. Now we were finally on our way.

Marcel talked about how Carmen was upset about his going; and, he had to promise her that after they were married he would not go away for more than a few days at a time and infrequently. We knew this meant he would never go camping with us again. We would make this our greatest adventure ever. We were electrified for El Yunque.

It was about an hours drive on Highway #3 east from San Juan to Palmer and south on 191 for another half-hour’s drive to the jungle periphery. There was a large sign along the road that stated the entrance of El Yunque, United States National Forest, and
United Nations Biosphere Reserve ahead; day passes were available. A few miles before the official entrance into the rainforest we parked the car in the abandoned motor lodge parking lot. It was used by the locals as a place to repair cars and for long term storage. We hid the car in the backmost part of the lot. We donned our packs and found the overgrown entrance to the abandoned farm a short distance from here.

Finally, we left the civilized world behind. We walked past the crumbling buildings and through the remnant of a citrus grove, mostly dead or dying, and a few larger colonies of overgrown banana clumps. We picked and relished the few sparse oranges. They were sweet. The clumps of ripening bananas were high up in the fleshy trees and too much work to get. At the back line of the property was a rusting and broken down fence. We crossed over. The forest canopy closed in overhead.

The great colonies of bamboo at the beginning of the jungle were impenetrable and had to be walked around. Lizards scurried back into the thicket of canes as we came upon them. A light rain fell on us, and within minutes filtered sunlight pierced the rich verdure and we dried quickly. We could expect to be rained upon throughout our trek. It felt good to be in the jungle amongst good friends. We were three boys playing hooky from everyday life.

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This was heaven. Bromeliads of many descriptions hung from the trees. There was a white terrestrial orchid in bloom where we were, and yellow and orange heliconias poked above large lush green leaves. We decided to stop along a brook to relax and talk about our trip ahead. Our plan was to enjoy our hike without aim. The deal was to find a good site for camping before night each day. There needed to be enough trees of a size to hold up hammocks in the same spot so that we could be close together. We followed along the edge of a brook.

Ahead, the brook flowed into a larger stream with a waterfall at the base of the mountain. This was a good place to stay for the night. There were plenty of palm trees along the stream for our hammocks and to host our packs up and out of the way of
scavengers. The stream pool under the fall could contain a delicious supper. Marcel brought some fishing line and hooks. After just a few minutes the campsite was set up.

Marcel turned over rocks looking for bait for his hook. A huge poisonous centipede nearly a foot long scurried from under one of the first rocks he turned over. That was a good reminder to be careful. There were not many poisonous creatures; but, one bite from that centipede could mean death. It would take too long to reach a hospital for treatment from a bite.

He found a worm and got it on his hook. Throwing the baited hook as far as it would go, it landed on the water surface only to be taken right away. With a jerk he set the hook and had a fight pulling the fish in. The fish was well over five pounds, we ate heartily and talked of our lives and what we hoped for during our delectable dinner. With Marcel marrying and José becoming more serious with Carmen, my loneliness barked at me. After this trip, there needed to be some changes in my life.

At daylight we would begin again. When darkness enveloped us we shut down for the night. In our hammocks we were rocked to sleep with the sounds of the waterfall as background music provoking interesting dreams. Intermittently during the night there was a screeching sound from far off. It was Marcel that spoke first. “What in the heck is that?” No one could say, but finally we settled for it being an owl—a screech owl.

When the first glimmers of light cut through the verdure; and, the jungle colors could be made out, we got up, had dried fruit for breakfast, and packed up. Today we would scale the mountain whence the waterfall flowed. It was a rocky incline toward a summit we could not see. Another light rain fell, and a mist wafted under the palms and tree ferns making visibility poor, but we climbed on with the summit our aim.

The rocks were slippery with moss, algae and their marriage, lichens, and were mist-covered. In spots the larger boulders could not be avoided or gone around. Our climbing hooks were useless in this kind of terrain. Even the gullies between the rocks were slippery, with protruding roots, dropped leaf fronds and algae. Marcel slipped and scraped the inside of his calf and knee. He pulled down his torn jeans to reveal two bruised and scraped areas that drew blood; and, a laceration nearly an inch-and-a-half long that was bleeding steadily. He wiped the area clean of blood along the cut, applying
a topical antibiotic cream from the first aid kit and pulled the skin together using Band-Aids to hold it together.

This was not good. Cuts are more difficult to heal in the jungle because of high humidity and fungus spores in the air. His pants were only torn about an inch. He changed into his other pair that was moderately dry.

We would stop at the next level area, hopefully the summit. We sat for a few minutes to let Marcel rest to let his pain subside. He was not in a lot of pain; but, the cut stung he said. Once he was ready we were off again. It was not long before we reached the summit. The mist had dried off and the views were spectacular. The summit across the valley of the next mountain top was a few miles away.

José noticed something. “Hey look over there.” He pointed to the summit at its northern side. “See that antenna?” At first I didn’t see it, but then it struck me, there was a tall narrow column reaching above the tree line. Then Marcel noticed a trail. He pointed out a trail going north. It appeared to be an overgrown jungle corridor.

Our hammocks were hung with trepidation. It was only the first full day and already Marcel was hurt. We were aware that there was something going on, on the other side of the next mountain, to maintain communication with the outside world. We ate nuts and dried berries again for supper tonight and José found some wild ginger that he peeled for us. It was strongly flavored and we could only eat a little of it.

Before jumping into our hammocks for the night, we talked about the next day. Marcel assured us he was fine. Then by consensus we would follow the jungle corridor to wherever it led going north. Although a sense of dread added to our moods as we would trek along.

We were awoken during the night by that same screeching sound as the night before. This was no owl. The screech was piercing and closer than before. After more than an hour it abruptly stopped. For the remainder of the night, my sleep was troubled. That sound resonated in my mind. It was primordial.

Then the jungle canopy appeared lightened and sunlight danced on errant leaves. The second full day came. There would be no hurrying today. Marcel complained of pain so we decided to relax for a few hours before traveling down the northern jungle
corridor. This was in the direction of El Portal Tropical Rain Forest Center. The antenna was ahead over the next summit’s ridge.

Once again we started the day with nuts and dried berries. Marcel decided to lay back down, José would try his luck fishing in the stream. It was a good time for botanizing and to look for edible plants.

Following the stream a ways, the palms were draped with golden flowered bromeliads decorating an area. Butterflies attended these foot long inflorescences. Smaller pink orchids sparingly hung from the crotches of the trees and a few found housing in larger rock crevices. This was heaven on earth. I collected a few handfuls of black palm berries that were edible. Traveling another few hundred feet, there was a smell of sulfur in the air; acrid and burnt.

That was far enough away from the campsite. On the way back I collected some palm leaf buds to use as a cabbage. We would not starve. A feeling of being watched came upon me; and, I felt hyper alert. It was just a few minutes before I was back at the campsite. José caught a few fish; but, Marcel was still lying in his hammock. When questioned he said he felt feverish. That is not good to hear.

José and I prepared lunch and talked. Before the meal was over, it became early afternoon. We packed it in and followed the northern corridor with Marcel sweating a bit. He kept up for a few hours until he asked to rest. We stopped long enough to have a handful of trail mix that José had packed. Marcel’s eyes were beginning to get fiery. José and I discussed the situation. The jungle map indicated that from where we were the forest center was over six miles away.

If we kept walking we would get there by nightfall. We had to get Marcel to the hospital. There was nothing left to do. Marcel followed behind, as we wanted to set the pace as fast as he could go. We would have to move along to get to the center by dark. Then the inevitable happened. The corridor forked. The best guess was going to the left.

The trail seemed clear for another quarter mile, and then it turned to wild jungle with no clear path. Still we moved ahead pretending to see a pathway that did not exist. Finally, it was clear we were no longer on a trail. We were lost. The only thing to do was go on. We attempted to relocate the corridor. Marcel was beginning to look pale. In
the area where he had been cut, his jeans were wet surrounding the wound. We had nothing to give him. He had to keep going.

It seemed a hundred years by the time we came back to the corridor again, and it was starting to get dark. Before long it would be night and we were not going to spend another night in the jungle the way Marcel was feeling. As darkness gathered in, the Cocque sang loudly from the trees and algae bloom glowed. Ahead there was something glowing in a pattern.

A number of footsteps could be seen in outline form, as a bioluminescent signature of the algae on the jungle floor. These weird glowing algae are only found in Puerto Rico, and covered the forest floor in season. They activated strongly when walked upon. The waves of light from the algae looked like movies of Kirlian photography, as blue-green undulating flames.

That’s how we knew that we were being following. We only realized this when we mistakenly traveled in a circle having taken that wrong path, doubling back on our own trail. The sound of the coquis had been deafening. I became worried when the tree frogs went silent all of a sudden.

The hike through El Yunque over the Laquillo Mountains was for two weeks and this was only our second full day. We still had at least another five miles journey through the wild and increasingly frightening jungle to get to the public area of the park, and hopefully safety and medical attention for Marcel since seeing the footprints. Strange experiences had happened before in the jungle; but now there was something different – we were being followed!

A screech rang out in the jungle. In a flash we saw a human sized reptile-like figure running upright passing us. We heard Marcel yell. When we looked behind, the shadowy figure had blades running up its back. It had accosted Marcel, slashing at him. There was a strong burning sulfuric smell that wafted past us. Marcel and the creature were gone. Marcel had been dragged into the darkening jungle undergrowth. He yelled only that once, and stopped.

Within seconds we were surrounded by a small brigade of army soldiers dressed in black with their rifles raised on us. Without thought our arms and hands were raised in
submission. “What are you doing here?” I answered that we were hiking in the jungle and camping out, and that Marcel was missing.

The leader said that we were under arrest and that they would look for our companion after they got us to a safe location. We were scared to death. How could this be happening? After walking for a half mile we were at a small fenced-in army outpost. They brought us into the cinderblock building within the secured area and sat us at a table. One of the men radioed headquarters. “We have two of the intruders. One is missing,” he said. They took our statements and personal information. We were left with two soldiers guarding us.

About an hour later they returned with Marcel on a stretcher, with gapping bloody gashes all over his body, dead. The reptile creature has slashed him up unmercifully. I almost puked. José was stricken, and turned completely ashen.

The army sargent told us how this was going to unfold. José was beginning to lose his mind. The leader told us to shut up and listen, because our actions would determine what would happen to us next.

The official story would be that we got lost in the jungle and Marcel got separated from us and fell into a ravine. He sustained severe injuries and died. The army would contact his family. His body would not be released. We would be arrested and be put in jail for a week so that we could pull ourselves together. Our families would be informed but would not be able to see or contact us until we were released. We were also informed that for our own safety that we had better keep to the official story, or otherwise we would be re-arrested for any reason.

As was explained to us, there were reasons that would not be revealed to us, that the jungle was off limits. Marcel was killed because his wound caused him to get killed. This was an experimental army base and things were going on that the public was not aware of and would not be told. The jungle was off limits. Our violation of the “no trespassing” warnings caused Marcel’s death. They told us we were to blame.

The following morning we were taken to the army base and locked up in the brig. We were not treated unkindly, but the army was clear. It was our fault that Marcel died and that any discussion about what we may have seen or thought we saw in the jungle about this incident was fantasy. Marcel “fell into a ravine and died of his wounds.” It
would be up to us if our lives could return to normal or we too would have a difficult future, or no future at all. The threat was clear.

That was over a month ago. José returned to his life a different man. He was sullen and stopped communicating with me. I returned to my plants and kept busy. I would never return to the jungle again.