Butterfly Man

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Extract

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Madero, Colombian Amazon

On the slopes of the sierra, the stretch of primeval forest lay quiet under the rain and stifling heat. Then, in a silent convulsion, the hummocked green canopy of treetops buckled, rippled and leapt into the air in a confusion of flying branches, earth and rocks. The sound of a massive, booming explosion followed. The wave of sound rattled the tin shanties of the mine workers, rumbled over the sweltering town of Madero, and rolled away down the black Madero River until it faded back into the great deadening silence of the jungle.

The dust cloud subsided to reveal a ravaged hillside of mud, rocks, broken trunks and stumps of trees. Huge yellow bulldozers crawled in, clearing off the topsoil to reveal the emerald-bearing seams for the picks and shovels of the mining gangs.

At the foot of the hills, in the muddy run-off from the mines, Tenoch, the old, one-eyed *guacero*, sighed in exhaustion and went back to work. He and his fellow *guaceros* – freelance emerald hunters – scrabbled in the mine waste for the scraps of

emerald that slipped through the processing above. There were hundreds of these men digging and panning the glutinous mixture for a shard of emerald. Barefooted, they tramped the morass of mud and broken pegmatite rock, their gaze glued to the ground for that elusive flash of green.

The lure of emeralds could consume a man. It was almost as if the stones had some mysterious power. Simple beryl crystals coloured by traces of vanadium or chromium, they had fascinated Egyptian pharaohs and Mogul emperors. Sacred to indigenous American peoples like the Inca, the lustrous green gems had driven Spanish conquistadors mad with greed. They had long been associated with ill fortune, but still men lusted after emeralds. The best stones, carat for carat, were worth more than diamonds.

Tenoch himself had not come to make his fortune. He was searching for one stone only. But he had been searching for many years. And he had to eat. That day the slope seemed muddier than ever. The black slurry running off from the mines was mixed with shards of rock and cloying clay washed down by the morning's torrential rains from the deforested hillsides. Apart from some tiny, almost worthless chips, Tenoch had not found a stone for almost a week. He was hungry.

There had been a time when he was the most skilled of all the *guaceros*. He could tread the slopes upright, criss-crossing them swiftly, his one eye sharp as a hawk's two. Now he would take hours to cover his area, bent double, peering at the ground.

And yet, more and more often, he missed the stones that others would find. He sighed again and shook his head. He often felt far from his homeland on the distant shores of the Yucatán. Soon he would have to return to his people – the Maya. He would have to abandon his quest. He was getting too old.

Tenoch paused to remove his grimy felt hat for a moment and wipe the sweat from his face. Then he stopped breathing. He tried to stay calm, failed, and pretended to cough to cover his excitement. In the manner of a true, professional *guacero*, he replaced his hat, pulled it low over his forehead, and betrayed no sign of seeing anything. His heart pounding out of control, he carefully, slowly, angled his way across the slope towards the clump of mud where he had absolutely, definitely, possibly, glimpsed a sparkle of green. He couldn't be sure, though. Another *guacero* had just passed it and the green had disappeared. But perhaps he had just covered it up. No, there it was – clear as day. How could the other man have missed it? Tenoch ambled over as slowly as he dared.

It was always a balancing act when you saw a stone. Move too slowly and someone else might pick up the prize before you claimed it. Move too eagerly and you could trigger a stampede – and in a wrestling match, a stronger, younger man would emerge with the find. But this was huge, Tenoch could see that now. It was enormous. A dull green curved shape – perhaps a whole crystal that had somehow been missed by the miners! It was winking at him, calling him. It looked even big enough

to perhaps contain a stone the size he sought, a stone that could fulfil his destiny and that of his people. With alarm, Tenoch saw two *guaceros* converging on it. They were moving methodically across the slope, treading the mud, eyes glued to the ground. One or other of them would see it for sure.

In a panic, Tenoch lost control. He could not hold back. He took a deep breath, gathered up his strength for the struggle he knew would ensue and leapt towards the small patch of green. He landed in mud two feet deep, and felt the cold hardness of the gem in his hands. He clutched it to his body, curled himself into a protective ball and rolled away from grasping hands. Thankfully, none came. Tenoch sat up, covered in mud, crying with joy and excitement. Around him he heard laughter. There was a ring of *guaceros* encircling him and they were all laughing – at him. But why?

In his hands he held an emerald crystal the size of a quetzal's egg. It was huge. He could feel it hard and smooth as glass. He wiped the mud gently from it. Yes, he saw the green appear. And it seemed of a remarkably clear, transparent quality. A hideous doubt crossed Tenoch's mind. He wiped his find again and drew his hand away sharply. Blood was welling up from his fingertips. The *guaceros* around him hooted with laughter.

'Ha, ha, ha! The Mayan is a millionaire – in glassware!'

'A glass eye sees glass better!'

'Enjoy your fortune, old man. Just don't drop it – it may break!'

Smooth as glass ... and just as sharp. Tenoch looked at the green shard in his hand and saw the mark of the beer manufacturer. It was the oldest trick in the emerald hunter's book and he had fallen for it. Around him the *guaceros* were crying with laughter, beating their thighs with their hats, taunting him. Overcome with exhaustion and despair, he collapsed forward into the mire.

Tenoch lay face down in the mud and for a while he did not care whether he lived or died. He had been searching for so long. He believed now that he would never find what he sought. He had failed.

Then he felt a strong hand seize him and pull him from the sucking mud. He was turned over onto his back and found himself looking up into a black form, a silhouette against the blazing sun. Shading his eye, Tenoch moved his head until he could make out the face of his rescuer, a rainforest Indian.

'I am Neman,' the man said, in Spanish. He was tall for an Indian, with a pale complexion. His chest and shoulders were broad and powerfully muscled. His left side was deeply scarred. 'I am of the Jemberí. How are you called?'

'I am Tenoch, of the Maya.'

Neman picked Tenoch up and wiped the mud from his face with a hand rough as sandpaper. Then he handed Tenoch a gourd of the thick, fiery *kicha* – the glutinous, saliva-preserved maize alcohol of the Jemberí. He watched Tenoch drink, took a long draught himself, then said, 'We must talk. The Jemberí need your help.'

PART I

THE GREEN EYE

I am a true man from a land of palm trees,
And before I die, I want to set down this song
of my soul.

My song is of a shining green
And a burning scarlet.

From *Versos Sencillos* by the
revolutionary poet José Martí
Words used in the Cuban song 'Guantanamera'

Xcalan Island, Mexico

It is a commonly quoted idea that the wingbeat of an insect in China can cause a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico. This does not mean storm warnings should sound in Tampa every time a moth is sighted flitting round a light in Shanghai. Such minuscule turbulence can take centuries to ripple out across space and time before it has that quaintly destined effect that mathematicians call 'Chaos', most of us, 'Fate'.

That jungle encounter between Neman and Tenoch, for instance, was the product of a mingling of tribal destinies set in train almost five hundred years before. And the meeting itself had repercussions, rippling out along the strange fractal pathways of Chaos. Some three months later, two thousand miles north of Madero, these ripples reached Burr Whitman, bodysurfing towards a beach in Yucatán.

Burr's breaker bent with a smooth face, then rose and plunged in a perfect tumbling arc, shooting him onto the sand in a roar of speed and bubbles. He

stood up before the next wave broke, and let the blazing sun dry him as he walked naked back up the high dunes. He had been at Xcalan for many weeks, and his body was a deep golden brown, barring the jagged white streaks of a dozen different scars.

The climb was long and the sand was hot. At each step Burr made sure he dug his feet into the cooler sand below the surface. Close to the top of the slope he caught an astringent scent like witch hazel. He looked for the *Heliconius erato* he knew must be nearby and saw the red-and-blue longwing butterfly in its slow, looping flight. The male would have deposited the smell on a female during mating – to discourage subsequent suitors.

In the estuary to his right, now hundreds of feet below, he could see the fins of the bull sharks coming up the river again in numbers. The crocodiles watched lazily from the bank, still sapping heat from the sun. At dusk the crocs would slip into the muddy current and, where the fresh water met the salt, they would defend their territory against the sharks in snapping whirls of foaming water and blood.

As he climbed the dune, Burr tried to ignore the boat outside the reef. With deliberate calm he walked slowly into the forest where it rose in a green mat to the crest of the sand hills. The shade was a cool relief from the sun. Burr's old friend Pachal lay there, watching the boat through binoculars.

'It's them,' Pachal said.

Burr lay down beside the Mayan, the mixture of

sand and leaf litter warm on his stomach. Pachal handed him the binoculars and he brought the visitors into focus, their dark suits absurd on that sweltering day. They were still too far away for him to make out their features clearly.

An imperceptible swell slid towards the beach on the still rising tide, pushing the visitors' ski boat closer to the reef. The boat was a beast, built for shark hunting and fast work inshore. Its engines were massive and its pointed hull was tall and tough enough to launch straight out through a high sea, or power straight in over breaking surf, right up onto the beach. But here at Xcalan it could find no way through to the beach, which was protected by the seemingly unbroken reef half a mile out.

The visitors seemed convinced there was a way through, and they worked the ski boat patiently along the line of white water that marked the reef. They were floating the boat in on the tide, coming dangerously close to the rocks before gunning the engines in reverse to pull the boat away. Then they would idle again, drifting the boat in to check a spot further along the reef. Through the binoculars, Burr could see one of the two men on board leaning over the bow of the boat, searching for a gap in the submerged rocks. He was signalling to a second figure at the wheel, his face hidden under a blue baseball cap.

'I wonder what they're after,' mused Burr.

Pachal looked serious. 'You know. They are after you.'

'They could just be tourists who want to picnic on the beach,' Burr said, doubtfully.

Pachal shook his head. 'No, brother. Isaiah saw these men two days ago. They were trying to drive up from the mainland, but they could not find the path and stopped at the lagoon. Two of them, Isaiah said. Wearing black like these.'

'Why didn't you tell me about them before? When they came first.'

'We did not want to bother you.' Pachal's mouth spread into his broken-toothed grin. 'After all, they could have just been tourists who wanted to picnic on the beach.'

Burr smiled – Xcalan was not a common picnic spot. Lying at the tip of a remote peninsula in the southernmost reaches of Mexico's Yucatán State, it was made even more inaccessible by the river and lagoon. At high tide the brackish water of the lagoon would creep up over the causeway and the peninsula would become an island. But some people made the trip nonetheless. Xcalan was famous for its shark cave, where for some mysterious reason the sharks slept. It was also famous for its dunes, some of the tallest in the world. Hundreds of feet high, the dunes were more like white hills, rising steeply from the beach to meet the rare sand forest – an outlier of the great Petén – growing on their landward slopes. When they were young, Burr and Pachal, lugging their small palm-wood surfboards, whose undersides were coated with slippery beeswax, would climb the hot dunes and toboggan, screaming, down the long, smooth slopes to the sea.

Apart from the Mayan villagers who fished the

lagoon and the estuary, most visitors to Xcalan were on official business: they were scientists, military officers and government agents. The few tourists who did come were either invited by Burr, or were extremely hardy backpackers.

'Oil company?' Burr wondered aloud. Mexico was in the midst of a black gold rush. The multinationals had struck crude all the way down the Yucatán coast. The threat of oil drilling offshore hung over Xcalan like a cloud. And soon the very island itself could be bought from under the local Maya.

'Maybe,' said Pachal, 'but I do not think they would come alone.'

Pachal was right. With Burr as leader, Mayan opposition to exploration – including some intimidating interventions by Pachal and his fellow Mayan warriors – had become highly effective. They had managed to delay the prospective sale of Xcalan. And if the oil prospectors dared to come, they did so en masse with a gang of armed guards.

No, whoever the figures in the boat were, it was likely they wanted to talk to Burr. But he was retired. If the visitors found him, that meant trouble had found him once again. It hurt a surprising amount to see that his past could follow him to this place – his home. Burr remembered that was one of the reasons he had avoided having a home for so long. Home meant a place that caused you pain when it was violated. He sighed. What was that quotation? *No man is an island.* When he was around, it appeared not even an island was an island.

In the dappled light of the tree line on the ridge of the dunes, Burr adjusted the focus on the binoculars and saw that the visitors were nearing the entrance to the channel. In this calm sea, if the man in the prow knew what to look for, he would see the signs of slack water and glimpses of sandy sea bed that gave away the narrow, dog-leg passage. It was almost as though someone had told them where to look. Now was the best time to try the passage, too. The channel was only navigable during the half-hour each side of high tide. Burr was surprised to find that part of him wanted them to succeed, to come through the channel and confront him with whatever upheaval they intended to thrust into his calm existence.

But the boat was coming too close to the submerged rocks now, at the wrong angle. Unless the man at the wheel was an expert, they would touch.

'Shall I go down and show them the channel?' asked Pachal casually.

Burr hesitated. Subconsciously he rubbed at the callus in between his right thumb and forefinger. The skin had been hardened over the years by the recoil of thousands of pistol shots.

'The knot always reaches the comb,' Pachal said quietly. 'We can let them go, but if they want you, brother, they'll be back.'

Just then a slightly larger wave lifted the ski boat and dumped it with some force against the reef. The man in the prow was jarred, sprawling, onto the deck. He clung to the rail as he was swamped by

the wave bursting on the rocks. Burr could see him in the spray, gesticulating angrily back at the cockpit, where the helmsman waved his arms helplessly. The boat pulled back from the reef and the two figures seemed to confer. Then the taller figure turned back to the wheel, the stern dug deep into the swell and the bow pointed skywards as the big motors gunned the boat back towards the open sea.

With an aching mixture of regret and relief, Burr watched as the boat continued out to sea then swung south in a broad arc, on course for the regional capital of Chetumal, down on the border with Belize. Then he stood up, brushed sand from his body and started to walk along the edge of the forest, back towards the house.