

July 22, 2008, 06:38 (UTC -5)

Thor Sanders' hut

36 kilometers to the north of Puerto Maldonado, Madre de Dios region, Peru

Thor Sanders felt they would sail. The old Norwegian could console himself as much as necessary; he allegedly descended at such an early hour to the rickety shoddy pier a couple of meters from his hut just to get some water, but actually, he knew, that today in the morning he should see *them*.

Thor was afraid. The man was paralyzed by the reverent fear and his hands and back were covered with bubbles the size of ant eggs (and the same eerie white) from one brief thought about what would soon pass by him down the stream of the Stones River, Rio de las Piedras, or as the locals call it — Tacuatimanu. How many of them will be brought down by the river today? Two? Four? What if more? The Norwegian shuddered. Sometimes it happens. In 2005, if the memory did not cheat him. He managed to count seven dead then.

However, Thor Sanders would give a lot so that he had a chance to stay at home, to lie on his unpretentious lounge in the bedroom on the second floor of this small house, muffling in his favorite light blanket, woven from llama's wool (it was Indian's present from Ollantaytambo), cutting himself from the rest of the world: from Rio de las Piedras, from painful memories, that neglected the distance and time (forty years... damned forty years!), which separated him from no longer native Norway, and, of course, from the raft, which was about to emerge from the fog. At the same time, Thor could not miss that. The dark side of his consciousness, which destroyed all his life and the one he could subdue only after isolating himself in the most inaccessible jungles of South America, in fact, desired a show. Not so much happens in this wilderness (to be frank, nothing happens at all... for years) to ignore such an event. Those people are already dead, he cannot help them; they will pass by the hut and by the beach, which pushes away thickets from the water on the other side of the river, no matter whether Thor will stand on the berth or not. So, what the hell's the difference? But the scene will give the food for the brain (even if hideous), eject from the head other bitterer memories, and won't let it go crazy amidst endless evenings during the rainy season. Furthermore, there was something else. Thor Sanders was not a fool (his father often said that, bludgeoning Thor's legs and back with the mop because of some petty misdemeanor, and often without it). The Norwegian realized no matter who was preparing the raft to descend, he had wasted a lot of effort. It is necessary to chop trees, trim and tie the logs together, and place the "passengers". This is the whole ritual - tedious and arduous, – and therefore no one will resort to it without a good reason. The dead are descended with a specific purpose. They are flaunting. The dead certify a stern warning: DO NOT APPROACH, NOBODY'S GLAD TO SEE YOU HERE, NO ONE CALLS YOU HERE. And therefore, one must look at them. To look and show that you understand the message.

Thor entered the pier, which protruded into the river just for a few steps. Boards creaked plaintively, making the elderly Norwegian cringe disagreeably. Sanders took a deep breath and turned around. The motionless fog covered the Stones River and mangrove overgrowth that crept into the water. Over the milky mist, it was impossible to see the beach on the other side of the river (sometimes Thor swam across the river and took sunbathes there, but not for very long - far as his delicate Norwegian skin could withstand – since only there were no mosquitos). Jungles around the hut were deathly quiet as if they suspected something was about to happen. So quiet that Thor even heard the ringing in his ears. "The blood pressure has risen again," Thor was thinking, listening to the monotonous almost unbearable buzzing in the ears. "I'm getting old." He looked askance at the

empty bucket and thought that he should take some water (or at least pretend that he was doing that) but could not force himself to bend.

In the mist in the middle of the river, the bird flew silently as the ghost.

The man was expectantly (and at the same time with the torment) keeping a weather eye on the bend of the Rio de las Piedras.

Five minutes passed; then five and ten again, but Thor was still standing with his bucket in his right hand and stared northwest. Nothing changed. It seemed that thickets were flooded not with the mist, but with the glue. Has he been mistaken this time? But the silence... Such silence comes rarely, once in a dozen months, each time when the dead descend from the north.

Another five minutes — and still quiet...

Tore Sanders wasn't the one who believed in ghosts, spirits of the dead, prophetic dreams, and other occult and mystical nonsense. He did a lot of evil things in his life, and if he had believed in hell, he would have already committed suicide or at least repented. The Norwegian knew that the dead would pass by today, but not because they had suddenly appeared to him or a mysterious voice had whispered about them in a dream. Since yesterday the silence set in the jungle: cicadas died away, birds subsided, disappeared subtle (although usually always present) rustling of rats and monkeys that beat their way through the branches. Giant river otters, which have arranged a nest under the snatchy slope upstream, did not creep out of their shelter. The jungles hushed, and this meant only one thing: somewhere above the Rio de las Piedras, maybe a mile or two from the Thor's hut someone was cutting down the young Chupa-Chupa trees, making a raft out of them. The Norwegian has never tried to find out who was (Daddy had been right: he was not a fool), but he realized that those creatures were close. Tacuatimanu is too winding; to make the raft reach the place where the river flows into the Rio Madre de Dios, and then drift to the pier in Puerto Maldonado, it should be hauled down on the water lower, not in the depths of the forests. The depressing premonition did not let the old man sleep overnight, though this premonition was a consequence of observations but not the voice of intuition, which was coming from the inside. Thor was sure: they would come.

And the dead appeared...

Thor divined the approaching of the raft since the fog started to move. At first, it seemed like a glimmer in his eyes, but later on a bend of the river (above the water's surface) the first vivid balls moved on. Soon after, the flat outline, which was slowly sailing downstream, emerged over them.

The raft.

It was approaching.

Thor Sanders stepped forward, standing on the edge of the pier, risking falling if he leaned his torso forward, and watched with his eyes wide open. He had ants in his pants, and his breathing accelerated. The raft was slowly looming; it was fresh as always (logs have not swelled from the water yet and some of them were even dry). Suddenly the Norwegian noticed another silhouette, which was rising on the bend of the river.

"Wow, so two today ... twin brothers," thought Thor. Actually, he wasn't very surprised about that (it happened sometimes); he just simply stated that this time there will be more corpses. More than four.

The first raft contained three. Despite the thick fog, Thor Sanders discerned that all the dead were the Machiguenga. One of the dead was crucified like a star — his legs and hands were nailed to the corners of the square raft. The head of this poor guy was separated from the body and attached to the belly through the throat with a thick stick. The mutilated head was black from the

dried blood. Other two bodies were lying on each side of the crucified Machiguenga. Their clothes were torn and daubed with dirt and blood; each deceased had no left hand.

Right in front of the Norwegian's house, the Tacuatimanu River zigzagged: coming from the northwest, it bent to the south at first, and a bit further down the river turned to the west. For a few seconds, Thor thought that muddy water was carrying the raft straight to the berth. He stopped breathing, feeling the drops of cold sweat pierce out of his skin. Tied with rope logs were slowly but unavoidably advancing on Sanders but once he was going to make a step back (to jump to the shore and then to scamper away in panic), the wave stopped the raft and carried it back into the middle of the river.

Thor breathed out.

For a second the raft was moving slower as it immersed deeper in the water. The dead were scattered carelessly on it. A spasm of pain contorted the bodies that had intertwined with each other and resembled the tangle of thick clumsy snakes. A shapeless pile of human flesh, from which here and there a leg, an arm or someone's nape stuck out, was floating downstream. Staring at this show, Thor started counting.

"One, two, three, four, five..." The raft was moving so the Norwegian got confused. "Damn it! One, two, three... five... seven..." he paused, devouring the dead with his eyes. "Eight? How many of them are there? Seven? Eight?" The bodies were maimed; the bloody smudges exuded on the ordinary clothes like waves on the snakeskin. The heads of the victims were brutally mutilated. As Thor Sanders was able to distinguish, the unknown torturers had cut off the ears, lips, and noses of the poor victims and gouged out their eyes. Instead of eyeballs, smooth and black river stones were shining in empty holes. No doubt, the most terrifying thing was the inserted stones. The Norwegian thought that he should have felt compassion for the poor, but for some reason, he hated and feared them. Black stones instead of eyes had turned the brutally tortured victims into bloodthirsty demons — humanoid monsters from another world, which did not deserve sympathy.

Most of the dead, as on the first raft, were bronze-skinned black-haired Machiguenga. And only when the raft passed the berth, Thor noticed a pale face, pressed to the raft surface with someone's bulging calf. Also, without a nose, ears, and eyes.

So, at least one of them was white.

Thor has not yet managed to overcome the first shock (ten... at least ten were hauled down this year!) when a second one clutched the throat. The third raft was approaching from the northwest.

Mangled with wrinkles Thor's face turned white and the empty bucket fell out from his hands. Loudly bumping the surface of the berth, the bucket lingered on the outermost board, swung, as if thinking about falling down or not, and then flopped into the water. Thor stepped back and for the first time in the morning, he thought that it would have been better not to go out today. It would have been better to lie, even without sleep, staring at the ceiling and nervously twirling his feet, than to descend to the water and see this infernal parade.

Only two bodies were on the third raft. They were sitting cross-legged facing each other. Both were white-skinned.

"Alive?" — the Norwegian's heart missed a beat. If only they were alive.

Like previous corpses, these two looked almost the same: lips, noses, ears, and even eyelids were removed from their faces. Instead of eyes — polished stones. He could also distinguish strange slits on the biceps that have already begun to fester. One of the bodies seemed to belong to a woman. Sanders was not sure for all 100%, since both corpses had short haircuts, and their faces were so mutilated that it was almost impossible to determine the gender, but on the shirt of the

deceased — exactly on the chest — purple-black oval stains emerged. Only the woman with amputated breasts could look accordingly.

The first two rafts had dispersed the fog a little bit, so when the third one came alongside the berth, surprisingly Thor could discern the man and woman with clarity. And he suddenly realized why they were sitting. The man's head was thrown back. The neck was snicked and wide open, reminding a second mouth, which was smiling defiantly, and out of the rupture in the neck, the end of the acute piece of wood sticking out. ("Like a pencil out of the pencil case," thought Thor and winced at once, "Damn it! What am I thinking about?!"). The man and woman were pulled smartly on wooden stakes, clamped between the logs. In such a position, they were sent off on a small voyage to Puerto Maldonado.

The last raft silently disappeared by the bend of the river.

"And this is the six-time over the last ten years..." Thor stated indifferently, as the astronomer, who sees off the comet, which has already been investigated.

Eleven years ago, in the winter of 1997, Sanders got scared when he saw a raft with dead people for the first time, and... he made a mistake. The Norwegian moved to Peru forty years ago, leaving his homeland for the reasons he had been trying to forget already for forty years. At that time the Republic of Peru was a free country. Nearly the freest in the world. You could live forty, fifty, sixty years after all — the whole life there, and not a single person would ask you for your passport during all this time. Certainly, if you live a normal life. Thor settled in a small town called Trujillo in the north of the country, hoping to start all over again, but he failed to live humanely. Due to different reasons: his appearance (young Peruvian girls literally threw themselves at the blue-eyed blond), hot temper, friendly relationships with whiskey, and so on. After living five years in Trujillo young Sanders got into a mess again and it forced him to take a decision: to take his passport and return to Norway, where life imprisonment was waiting for Thor's ass, or to escape even further. Thus, he had found himself in Puerto Maldonado and later — in the Amazon jungle, where he lingered for thirty-four years without quitting the place. Sometimes Thor laughs at himself: he has always been running away in order not to vegetate in prison until the end of his life but instead has driven himself into the wilderness, which is a hundred times worse than solitary confinement. If he was in Norway now, he could even watch TV... So, in the winter of 1997, the consciences began to stir inside the Norwegian with great zeal. After seeing corpses, he swam in pursuit, drove the raft to the berth, made sure that none of them were alive, and only after that he towed the raft full of bodies to Puerto Maldonado *alone*. At the time, even in such a country like Peru, it was impossible to live without a passport. For a week and a half, Thor was kept in prison where he had a few agonizing but pointless interrogations, after which he began to think that the murder would be hanged on him, and then... they simply released him. He had no passport, no visa, and no residence permit; however, he was allowed to leave. Opening a prison cell, the senior officer pleadingly looked at Norwegian and said, "Don't meddle. Let it be as it already is." For a long time, Sanders could not realize what was going on, until in 1998 he encountered a new raft and slowly began to understand. Sometimes corpses descend from the forest, they are buried, and... the story ends. Certainly, tales remain, they are passed from mouth to mouth, and sometimes they even slip out of the country, but without stamps and signatures of witnesses these stories — are just simple myths. Since 1998 Thor tried not to react to dead people (of course, without taking into account the animal fear). He won't change anything until it is safe for him...

The Old Norwegian stood there, peering into the fog with longing in his heart (what if there will be a *fourth?*..), then turned around and, overcoming aching pain in joints, hobbled to his house. In the evening he got drunk to unconsciousness.

After three weeks, while shopping at the market in Puerto Maldonado, Thor encounters the old issue of *El Comercio* newspaper that clarifies his thoughts about the mysterious raft and its cargo, which has drifted past his pier one terrible foggy morning.

# Daily Mail

THURSDAY, JULY 24, 2008

[www.dailymail.uk](http://www.dailymail.uk)

50p

## BREAKING NEWS!

### THIRTEEN MUTILATED BODIES

MEMBERS OF SIR PAUL HOLBROOK'S EXPEDITION FOUND **DEAD** IN PERU

*Judith Toynbee*

Yesterday at noon, the Ambassador of the Republic of Peru in London Jose Luis Bisket confirmed the information that the crew of British naturalist Sir Paul Holbrook, the connection with which snapped on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, was found in Puerto Maldonado. All members including Sir Paul Holbrook and the Australian biologist Katherine Mooney are dead. Thirteen bodies were detected, and most of them had been terribly mutilated. All the bodies were discovered on the raft, which was carried to the wharf in Puerto Maldonado by the stream, on July 22 around 9:30 local time.

Severe injuries that, according to preliminary information, were inflicted on researchers while they were still alive astounded not only the UK but also the whole civilized world. The assailants had cut off Sir Paul's penis, eyelids, ears, nose, lips, and nipples on his breasts, gouged out the eyes, and tore out his nails. In addition, they had knocked out all his teeth and inserted pieces of transparent quartz instead of them. Katherine Mooney's face had been distorted in the same way; moreover, her breasts had been cut off. Both scientists had been pulled on wooden stakes.

Other bodies belong to Indians from the local tribe Machiguenga, who worked as carriers during passing through the jungle; they had been also mutilated. Their limbs were missing too.

In the evening the unknown called the *Daily Mail* editorial office and informed them that it was not the first expedition to the upper part of Río de las Piedras, which had ended tragically. Previously, the unknown adventurers had set off to the jungle, hunting for Inca ruins and gold, so their deaths passed unnoticed. This time Sir Holbrook's name attracted public attention to the case. According to anonymous sources, over the last decade in Puerto Maldonado rafts full of bodies were noticed at least four times. Currently, this information is verified.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown expressed condolences to the families of scientists and promised that he would make every effort to find those who had committed the murder and bring them to justice. At the same time, Brown harshly criticized Peru, directly accusing the government of inaction. "The fact that they [Holbrook's expedition] had some problems was noticed one and a half months ago. And what Peruvians have been doing all this time? Nothing! The rescuers had not even lifted their finger to determine the location of Sir Paul and his people. Even now, after detecting the bodies, local authorities took no action to seize criminals while the trail is still hot," stated the Prime Minister.

However, there is another position. A high-ranking official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Kingdom, who requested to remain anonymous, in a conversation with a *Daily Mail* journalist claimed that British attacks on Peru are intended to hide their weakness. “Sir Paul stepped into the most inaccessible forests on the planet. Hidden under an impenetrable shade of the rainforest, he had been hundreds of miles away from the nearest settlement. We can indefinitely accuse Peruvians, but the point is that we’re not gods. We often forget that even the most modern technologies have their specific limitations. It’s not enough to send a helicopter to save people. First of all, you have to find them, and this requires six, eight, or, probably, a dozen rotary-wing machines. Where can you get them? There is none of them in Puerto Maldonado. But even if they had one, Sir Paul went too far. Helicopters have a certain range of actions. They have to refuel in Puerto Maldonado then fly to the possible location of the expedition, circle there and go back instantly otherwise there is a possibility of falling into the jungle due to lack of fuel. You have to understand, there are some places on our planet such as Everest, the South Pole or Madre de Dios that in case of going there, you should not wait for a rescue helicopter... Even if we had had the whole Her Majesty's Naval Service close to Lima, it is unlikely that we could have done anything,” said the official.

We remind, that Sir Paul Holbrook set off into the Madre de Dios jungle in southeastern Peru six months ago, searching for the red-bearded Titi – rare and still not officially opened representative of primates, which...

## The Guardian

Tuesday 29.07.08

Published in London and Manchester

£1.20

### WHO ARE THEY?

FOUR OUT OF THIRTEEN DETECTED BODIES ARE NOT THE MEMBERS OF  
HOLBROOK’S EXPEDITION

*Hadley Freeman,  
exclusively for “The Guardian”*

Fresh details of Holbrook’s crew’s resonant ‘returning’ are driving the investigators to a standstill. Another discovery has added a mystery to this tangled story.

Yesterday it was reported that at least four out of thirteen bodies that in the morning on July 22, 2008, were carried to the wharf in Puerto Maldonado by the stream are not the members of Holbrook’s expedition. The attaché of the British Embassy in Lima Clifford Stratton has announced this at a press conference. Among unknowns are two whites, one representative of the Negroid race, and one Asian (probably Chinese). It is known that at the moment of departure from Puerto Maldonado, there were only two whites in Holbrook’s crew: the Australian entomologist Catherine Mooney and Sir Paul himself (whose bodies are currently in the city morgue and will be dispatched to their families in two weeks). The rest of the members were representatives of local Machiguenga tribes (their exact number is still unknown, and it is already clear that some of them remain in the jungle up to this time).

Quite by chance the same day, one of the unknowns was identified. It was the Italian traveler Luca Molinari, who disappeared without a trace in the summer of 2002 in the jungle of Acre state on the far west of Brazil, nearly five hundred miles away from the last defined location of the Holbrook's crew. Signor Molinari did not have any academic degree and he was rather an adventurer, who was prowling along the Rio Purus River searching the Incas' legendary lost city Paytiti (it is sometimes identified with El Dorado). Judging by the condition of the dead, Molinari was in good health for five years after everyone had stopped looking for him.

The names of the other two strangers are still defining.

Another interesting detail. Among the documents that were found on the raft with the dead (mostly maps, descriptions of several new species, and also Holbrook's and Moony's international passports) there was also discovered a driving license in the name of Gunnar Iwers. We have managed to contact and talk with the owner of the document. Gunnar Iwers is an unknown Swedish artist. He is 67 and he has been living in Amsterdam for the last three years. Gunnar was impressed to hear that his driving license was carried from the jungle together with the corpse of Sir Paul (oh yes, he had heard about the expedition). According to his words, he has never been to Madre de Dios or Puerto Maldonado, but he lost his license in 2003 during his trip to Peru (he has visited only the Nazca Lines and Machu Picchu). The old Swede has no idea how his driver's license got on Sir Paul's raft or to the people, who made it.

Cliff Stratton is sure that in the next few days, considerable changes will be noticed in the investigation of Sir Paul Holbrooke's tragic death. Investigators have already sent pictures of three unidentified bodies to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the appropriate countries; they are cooperating closely with Interpol and trying to get in touch with those who in 2002 followed Luca Molinari.

## USA TODAY

FRIDAY, MAY 8, 2009

\$1.00

### HOLBROOK'S DEATH: NEW MYSTERIES

"THE BRITON DID NOT VISIT THOSE PLACES THE GPS SIGNALS INDICATED," SAYS  
AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGIST

*Richard Hammet*

The latest discoveries caused a new wave of debates about the death of one of the most famous zoologists of our time Sir Paul Holbrook, who was brutally tortured in Peru in July 2008.

We remind that at the beginning of last week, experts determined the name of one more victim out of four unknown corpses that were not members of the British naturalist's expedition, but whose bodies were found together with participants of the campaign. DNA analysis confirmed that the only Afro-American among killed was the US citizen James Devar from Arkansas (he was 39 at the moment of death). Mr. Devar, the mining engineer, disappeared without a trace on October 23, 1998, on his way back home from work. Representatives of the united Peruvian-British investigation team currently have no version to explain how James Devar had got into the Madre de Dios jungle and what he had been doing there for ten years.

A 34-year-old ornithologist Fred Yardley, a Ph.D. student from Yale University, joined the investigation on his initiative. At the moment Fred is in Madre de Dios, where he went a month ago to find the material which is indispensable to complete his dissertation. Fred is observing the birds at the scientific station *Progreso*, which is located 180 km away from Puerto Maldonado on one of the tributaries of the Rio de las Piedras. In the jungle, near the *Progreso* station, there is a soil runway, whereby small planes can land, delivering supplies and scientists to the station. Having analyzed the GPS data, Yardley fueled the small plane *Cessna 172R* at his own expense, paid a pilot, and went north, surveying all points where Holbrook's group was. "The idea came when I was studying GPS data that recorded the way of the expedition," says Fred Yardley. "Pay attention that the last few days Holbrooke was moving very quickly, sometimes passing 15 kilometers per day. And it is in the jungle! The research expedition never moves as fast. Observations, records of results, etc. always take some time. It seemed that Sir Paul was in a hurry, or he was trying to flee from something. But what's the point to run deep into the rainforest away from civilization?"

Fred has seen the remnants of fires in open spaces, but he only checked the utmost western point of the route. After the expedition had turned to the northeast, (according to satellite) traces disappeared.

Fred Yardley comments, "Usually they stopped on glades. It is safer, fewer mosquitoes, and normally there is a stream in such places. Flying at a low altitude, I noticed ashes remained after the fire. Personally, I'm sure that this is Briton's traces. According to satellite, on June 7, 2008, Holbrook made a sharp turn and just after this his traces simply disappear. I covered the whole route from the turn till the final point, and I didn't see anything that could detect human presence. GPS locators might have been there, but Holbrook himself — definitely no. I claim that after the 7<sup>th</sup> of June, the expedition wasn't in those places, which the GPS showed."

Trying to get alternative comments, we appealed to the head of the united investigation group Robin Levine, 48 years old. Levine responded rather sharply, "Nonsense! As far as I know, to hold in the air *Cessna* has to move at the speed of at least 160 km/h. How is it possible to look for something in the rainforest by flying over it on a plane? Yardley didn't see anything because he simply couldn't. It's the same thing as looking for a needle in a haystack, skirring around it on the sports car."

Robin Levine refused to comment on the remarks that Yardley had noticed remnants of campfires.

Neither the British nor the Peruvians have organized search teams, which should follow the deadly expedition route. There are no volunteers.

[...]

## XXXVIII

July 31, 2012, 2:53 (UTC -5)

Madre de Dios

The darkness was thick and humid. Permeated by the blackness, the thickets were densified by the flood of darkness but still did not die away even for a moment. The branch crackled somewhere; something like a carpet of rotten fallen leaves rustled elsewhere; the rodent made his last squeak in the talons of a nighthawk. From time to time the silence was broken by sharp sounds: the scrunch of a tree under the weight of a predator or the desperate but short wail of a dying tapir or spider monkey. Closer... Farther... Sometimes overhead. The murk was flattening reality,



dissolving the dimension. Only the sounds of the night, although eerie, brought back the feeling of space. The coppices did not keep silent. They were breathing with timorous faint sobs like a helpless woman pent in the dark room with a maniac.

Levko took some time to realize that he was already awake and lying with his eyes open. The guy idly blinked once or twice and made sure there was no big difference. All the same darkness. Then he pondered. Commonly he sleeps well. He wakes up on rare occasions merely because of the annoying appeal of the bladder or biting itch in numb limbs. But he did not want to go to the toilet at that moment; he could hardly feel the leaden heft of stagnant blood in his feet or hands. Something different had awakened him. But what? Levko lent an ear...

The night jungle is not a highly comfortable place even for people with steel nerves. Anything could be inspired by the snort, rustle, and scratching flying from everywhere. In a minute a boy started falling asleep again, having not revealed anything tricky.

As Levko immersed himself into the transition state, where the borders between the dream and reality are blurred, he suddenly saw Gunnar Ivers' studio. Lots of dusty reams of mainly talentless paintings, rags smeared with paint, rotten easels. The moment when the old painter had shown him the map with a route to Paititi revived his consciousness. The guy remembered himself to have hardly kept from laughing at first, but afterward, he took the paper. Then he fell on questioning Gunnar about Peru, ruins, and the Stronghold, but in a current dream (or half-conscious delirium) Levko is pushing the sheet back, thereby fencing himself off Paititi, Incas' mysteries, and a trip to Madre-de-Dios.

And then the veil of clouds thinned over the jungle and cracked stilly in a few places outright. Through the spaces with blurred edges, the moonlight was gushing on the earth. Fracturing upon the brunches, barging into the thorns, it was flowing down like the lianas, filling the glade, where the boys and their female friend have set up the camp. Levko was surprised to realize that his eyes were still open. Now through his half-open eyes, he could distinguish the dense wall of thickets that surrounded their camp. For a few seconds, two images imposed one over another: the boy was glancing at the jungles silvered by the moon through Gunner's studio in Stockholm. Out of the ominous wall shrouded with black fog, branches were sticking out, like the gnarled paws of a woodland werewolf. They were impaling Gunner straight to the bones, getting into his chest and belly. The old man was trying to say something else, but Leo could not hear him anymore. Seconds later the Swede withered and faded away. The art studio vanished after him.

Suddenly something moved in the bottom of the thickets. The hazy silhouette detached from the impenetrable wall of trees straightened up and started moving. Levko's imagination portrayed a monster with a mouth full of fangs and pieces of flesh hanging down its face. The boy could hardly keep himself from crying out, because at first, the figure was taking its way straight on him. Luckily, the jelly viscosity that fetters us during sleep didn't let him open his mouth, and in a second Levko comprehended that while the light is dopey the eyesight was simply unable to distinguish the details. Suddenly, the next moment the phantom turned left having approached the piled-up equipment and backpacks.

"Is it a dream?"

Levko caught his breath and grasped tightly the lining of his sleeping bag. The heart was thumping frequently like a watch mechanism. The black figure was moving around making no sound, flowing in the air, slumping into the shadow, and sometimes showing itself up more legibly. When the apparition stole up closer to him, the boy recognized a person in it. It was a short man with a square torso and short hands. Or it was something very similar to a man.

"Am I sleeping or that's my reality? Damn it! Am I sleeping?"

Levko was hardly 3 meters apart from the pile of equipment. The silhouette bent down, then squatted and gingerly, trying not to rustle, commenced rummaging in the backpacks. Lying sideways quite near the rucksacks, the fellow saw someone or something having just come out of the jungles and rummaging in their stuff.

“That’s not real. It can’t be real. It’s only a dream.”

The quiet romping lasted five minutes. What is he looking for? Who is he? For a moment Levko thought about screaming again, but he was afraid to move and thus disclosed himself. He feared to ascertain that a mysterious guest was not a phantom.

Levko still has not opened his eyes completely. He just didn’t want to. The more he tried, the more realistic the situation seemed. And it scared the hell out of him. It was easier to convince the consciousness that it was not a reality but a dream than to raise an alarm and face eye-to-eye with the unknown creature, which stiffened near the rucksacks. The human brain is a great master of ignoring everything it doesn’t want to contest with.

Closing his eyes, the boy burrowed into his sleeping bag. In a minute he was dead to the world, having fallen asleep.

... Alarmed by the rustling, the silhouette froze. He turned his head. Then he looked at the sleeping bag. In the dense murk, the face was hard to distinguish. It is impossible even to discern whether it exists or not. Having waited for some time the newcomer got on his feet and went back to the forest. Unhurriedly he vanished in the place, whence he came.

## XXXIX

July 31, 2012, 07:32 (UTC -5)

Madre de Dios

Levko has overslept. The clank of spoons and sizzle of raw firewood under the cattle woke him up. Having crept out of the sleeping bag, the boy did not recall his nightmare instantly. Only after he looked at the pile of equipment, he called the dream to his mind. Having examined the rucksacks, half-folded tents, and sleeping bags, he went to brush his teeth.

But after returning, the boy finally dared to ask, “Haven’t you noticed anything weird last night?”

“What do you mean?” Satomi lifted her eyes.

“It seems like someone has been in the camp.”

“Are you serious right now?” asked Ian.

Semen stopped lacing up his sneaker and froze, hearkening to the words of the Ukrainian.

“Who knows, it could have been a dream,” Levko mumbled inaudibly.

“I woke up to piss at half past three in the morning,” Semen straightened.

“It must have been you,” Levko smiled sourly. He could hardly keep himself from asking whether Semen approached the backpacks and rummaged inside, but the tongue refused to obey him. Sometimes it is easier, although - wrong.

“Have you got scared of it?”

“I hardly kept myself from staining trousers with something brown.” Nobody laughed at the joke, probably because of the manner of its expression.

Satomi was pouring the hot water into cups. Levko walked about the camp without pondering his actions, until he found himself standing at the same place the silhouette from his dream had approached. The boy squatted down and silently noted that his rucksack was lying at the top.

Levko glanced at his companions. Nobody drew attention to him. He opened the backpack and examined it inside. Extra pair of shoes, tied-up socks, clean t-shirts, a pair of shorts, underwear, phone charger, Wilbur Smith's adventurous novel "Shout at the devil", toiletries (in a separate section), navigator, bear deterrent, a hatchet. A little bit of a mess, but it is typical for guys. "For normal guys," Levko thought, "not for the ones like Ian or Graham".

The main thing is that everything is in its place.

Levko was going to put the backpack aside, but stopped, having remembered something. There was a pocket for papers at the back of the knapsack, where he kept his passports (Ukrainian and international), auxiliary money reserve, Visa debit card of Nordea bank, and also various documents required for a trip (Internet printouts, maps, hostel reservation in Cusco). Levko unzipped the bag and put his hand inside the section for papers. He sorted the papers without peering at the contents. It seemed to be okay, though...

Wait!

There was a lack of something.

The boy pulled out the T-shirts, the book, and the underwear to see the pocket better. Passports, printouts, writing out with the address and telephone of the Ukrainian Embassy — everything was there, except... the glacial boulder slid down the esophagus and sank into the stomach... there was no typical lustrous album sheet, an extremely important piece of paper, that gave birth to this adventure.

There was no map inside.

"Jesus fucking Christ! Gunnar's map disappeared!"

The absence of the sheet did not worry him too much (the map was not that accurate, thus unimportant), but the realization of the fact that somebody has come out of the jungles at night, was rummaging in their backpacks and stole the drawing, which served them as a map to Paititi.

Damn it! It cannot be! People do not inhabit such backwoods.

"Perhaps, I've given that map to someone like Semen and I simply don't remember this?"

But Semen had its copy made in Swede, so he had no sense of taking Levko's original. However, the Ukrainian had to ask.

"Semen, didn't you..." his friends lifted their heads and the Ukrainian stammered. Something was prompting him not to say about the disappearance of the map, especially about the way it disappeared until he figures everything out. Levko immediately converted the question.

"Do you have a copy of the map, don't you?"

"What map?" the Russian asked obscurely.

Levko strained. It was not a cartographic expedition so that is impossible to get confused about one simple map.

"The one Gunnar had drawn. I guess, I gave it to you in Puerto Maldonado after we had agreed about the boat with Atauchi."

Semen hesitated and Levko was not the only one who noticed it. An awkward silence lasted for a few seconds.

"Well..." Semen muttered.

"Is it all right?" Leo fixed his eyes upon his buddy's face.

The Russian pursed his lips up and blurt, "No."

"What does it mean?" and immediately thought, "What if the copy has also been stolen?"

Levko could have lost one map, but if both of them have vanished...

"It means that I have some problems with my map."

"What kind of problems, buddy?"

"I don't have it anymore."

“Semen, I remember you had it...”

“Leo, I’ve wiped my butt with it.”

Satomi giggled. Ian’s and Graham’s faces lit up in smiles. Levko still had a serious-minded mien without understanding whether Semen was making fun of him or speaking quite seriously. Clearing his throat in a businesslike manner, the boy said slowly, “I understand, it may sound absolutely strange, but, Semen, dude, could you please explain to me, why the hell have you wiped your damn ass with a copy of Gunnar Ivers’ map?”

Leaning back, Ian Fidler burst out laughing.

“Well, the toilet paper has completely got wet, and I thought...” Semen was mumbling, “I couldn’t find anything either and... I hesitated to ask about Satomi’s napkins... It would have been better if had torn out pages from your book. Come on, man! I grabbed the first sheet near my hand from the backpack and went into the shrubs. It was a little dark... I’ve noticed that the paper I took only after it was half-used. Just then I turned the sheet over and saw the map.”

Graham, Ian, and Satomi were splitting their sides with laughter. The Czech was laughing until he cried. But Levko had no reason for laughing. It seemed he was about to burst.

“But what?” Semen was going on, “Do you think I had to put it back into the backpack? So, I’ve used it completely on both sides.

“Fuck! Fucking shit!” Levko rashly switched to Russian. “You couldn’t find a better alternative except wiping your butt with our map? What about the leaves, goddamn you, fucking LEAVES!!!! Semen, you’re in the jungles! Should I cut a tree down to wipe your butt?”

“But that was only the copy of your map!” Soima attempted to defend himself. Now it was Levko’s turn to blame himself. “Why do you brawl? You have the original picture,” Semen bent his eyebrows, remarking that Levko’s face had somehow changed. “Or...” Suddenly he realized that the conversation arose with an ulterior motive and started attacking his friend. “Leo, where is the original?” He was absolutely serious.

Levko knew, if he says that his dream isn’t probably just a dream, he will consequently confess that somebody is watching them; moreover, someone is scurrying along the camp at night and that will definitely destroy the team. After the first day in the jungles, they all are on the edge. The boy had a sense that he should lie. Carefully revolving every word in his mind, he said, “I’ve lost it.”

Ten seconds or so they were dumbfounded and kept silent.

“How come?” Satomi dropped a word.

“It just happened.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know...”

“Why haven’t you told us at once?” Graham wondered.

“I thought we have a copy.”

“Was it the only one you had?”

“Yes, the other one is in Stockholm.”

“Wait,” Satomi started, “If I’m not mistaken, we are diving into the most impenetrable jungles on the Earth now searching for ephemeral ruins having no map? So where are we going, guys?”

[...]

Squinting, Levko looked around. They were standing at the very top of the Stronghold. The upper platform was perfectly smooth. Similar to Incas’ agricultural terraces the entire surface was

filled with soil; the grass was growing everywhere. Trees surrounded by bushes jutted out here and there.

The upper terrace had the shape of an elongated rectangle. It had a length of two football fields and its width was about three-fifths of a football field. In the middle of the terrace on its southern part, a stepped pyramid with a dilapidated ceremonial building on top was rising above the surface. Its construction was unlike other Inca pyramids, resembling Mayan temples. Blocks were hewn from a strange stone, which glittered like the metal in the sun. Levko has never seen that before. On each side, two smaller pyramids huddled to the main one and extended their diagonal. Shifted location of the pyramids about the longitudinal axis of the terrace (all three pyramids occupied the southern edge of the terrace — to the left of Levko's position) made the upper level of the Stronghold extremely like an aircraft carrier deck: pyramids replaced the deck superstructures, and the elongated surface of the terrace reminded the runway for aircrafts.

Wooden barracks with tin roofs painted in khaki were instilled around pyramids. In front of them were two awnings that protected tables, folding chairs, boards with schemes, computers, and other digital equipment from the burning sun. Near the awnings towered a mast with radar similar to marine, which was rotating on the top. Right behind the mast, a huge satellite dish was standing. Colorful wires snaked in the grass in between the awnings. The majority was leading to a massive yellow booth (more than three meters long and nearly two meters high) wherein Levko recognized the British diesel generator *JCB* by the typical yellow-black company logo. Further, there were several wooden tables and a huge military tent, which bore a strong resemblance to a gypsy tent. From the other side of the pyramids (on the west end of the terrace) the dark shadows of a helicopter (the same Levko and his friends had seen in the morning) silhouetted against the sky. It was *EC120 Colibri* — a single-engine helicopter, produced by the French company *Eurocopter*, covered with a special paint that does not reflect the sun.

At the farthest western end of the terrace, cylindrical hangars stuck out. Well-trodden trails were stretching between them. What amazed Levko the most was a dozen of shaggy llamas that were peacefully grazing along the platform.

All together — awnings, barracks, metal hangars, satellite dish, and even a helicopter were covered with camouflage nets. The roof of one barrack in the Norwegian style (probably the oldest) was coated with moss.

Whomever these guys were, they cared about camouflaging.

Semen groaned with relief when they put him on the grass. Satomi crouched down next to the Russian and started stroking his head (she was the only one, who had her hands untied, probably because Peruvians did not consider her a threat). They dragged Gram and Levko further and put them on their knees.

Levko attempted to move his jaw. His lips swelled, his eyes filled with tears, but luckily the bone was unbroken and unshifted. Gram glanced at Leo with horror.

“Why are looking at me like that?”

“They've knocked your tooth out.”

Ukrainian grimaced contemptuously. As if it was the biggest problem they had at that moment. Nevertheless, he slid with his tongue along his teeth and ensured that one was missing — front left, right next to the upper incisor. “Wait for a little, they will get you too,” — the fellow thought irritably.

“Amaro! Amaro-o!” one of the guards yelled.

An ugly dwarf crept out of the farthest tent and hurried to the captives. The shorty was obscenely disgusting: approximately one and a half meters tall, hunchbacked with crooked legs. Levko has never seen such people with inappropriately built bodies. His pants were rolled up

several times and in addition, they could barely fasten at his waist; a hairy belly jutted out from the bottom of the khaki shirt, but his shoulders were small and narrow, so the sleeve covered half of his biceps. But the head impressed the most. Flattened and elongated, from afar it resembled a “beaky” knight’s visor. The forehead, flat nose, and chin were lying on the same sloping line at an angle of 45 ° to the horizontal. Because of that the head seemed flattened and thrown back all the time; his ears protruded on the same level as a sharp ledge of the lower jaw. Except for black bunches above the ears and on the nape, the shorty did not have any hair. The shirt was girded with a wide leather belt, where a holster with an automatic *Sig-Sauer* gun, a long knife, and two fragmentation grenades were attached.

The shorty jumped up to the captives. With the reduction of distance, his other defects became noticeable: crooked fingers, decayed teeth that resembled rotten stumps, and bear-like clubfoot. Even pumped forearms, which demonstrated a considerable physical strength a pygmy had, seemed incongruous and sham on his body. Something violently shifted during his prenatal development; perhaps the Almighty Creator messed up, irrelevantly pasting together chromosomes. The pygmy knew this. A desperate understanding could be read in his flashing eyes, where behind the despotism and furiousness lots of various complexes were hidden.

The dwarf gave an order in Spanish, and one of the Peruvians started rummaging in captives’ backpacks. Then he poked on Semen’s foot and asked something. Another guardian shrugged his shoulders, and jabbered something, probably explaining that it was not their fault. The gnome held his look at Satomi; his eyes were clouded with lust. He licked his lips, demonstratively squeezed his groin, perked up giggling with holey laughter, and pushed Gram’s head down. The American has almost fallen, causing a burst of rude laughter among the rest of the Peruvians.

Having searched the backpacks, the guardian passed four passports to flat-headed.

The shorty was moving all the time: pushing his hands in the pocket, pulling them out, turning his head, digging the earth with his heel, and tossing from side to side. Because of this Levko didn’t notice at once that the dwarf’s lower eyelid was constantly twitching. He seemed to be trying to wink, but the poor guy wasn’t able to succeed in it. “If this type is the chief here,” he thought, “we are screwed...”

Levko was trying hard to comprehend who these people were. A crew of rebels? Unlikely. Why do the rebels need a laboratory with workstations and technicians in sterile lab coats? It is unlikely that ordinary rebels have enough money to keep a helicopter in operation. Maybe drug dealers? What if they plant coca, produce cocaine, and transfer it to Mexico or USA? It is also unlikely...

A second before seeing the gray-headed man, Levko had thought that it would have been better, if these guys had been the rebels. Drug dealers would never let them go alive.

From the far end of the terrace, widely waving his arms, a tall man was heading to the captives. He was not a Peruvian. The white one. Judging by appearance he was not yet old — around fifty, probably fifty-five years, but already gray-haired. The gray hair has completely captured his forelock leaving unspoiled a small (two fingers wide) strip on his nape. He wore shabby blue jeans, cheap sneakers and a t-shirt with George Carlin’s aphorism stylized as graffiti: “The planet is fine, the people are fucked”. He was dressed casually, almost carelessly; Steve Jobs often dressed in the same way. In general, he seemed agreeable, perhaps a bit clumsy and dry, but nice.

He had no weapon. Nevertheless, Levko met the gray-haired with caution, giving no chance to prematurely inflamed hope.

“Why are they standing on their knees?” the man asked, approaching. He has an American accent, calm and relaxed.

The flat-headed dwarf “blinked” and gave a sign. Two Peruvians rushed to the boys, set them on their feet, and then gently placed them on the grass.

“Do you speak English?”

The boys nodded.

“Where have you found them?” the man asked over his shoulder.

One of the guardians answered. The gray-haired discontentedly waved his head. He remained silent for a long time, gazing at the sky above the terrace.

Levko was studying him quietly, gradually realizing that they have nothing to expect for. The eyes of the man demonstrated this. They irreversibly spoiled the impression of a friendly face. Colorless, watery-erie, with insightful numb pupils, which like two anthracite splinters were piercing through the eyeballs.

It seemed an eternity had passed before he started speaking.

“Good morning, ladies...” the man bowed histrionically before Satomi, “...and gentlemen,” the boys were awarded a slight glance. “I’m glad to welcome you in the depths of the citadel, which long time back — so long ago that even most of the modern historians can’t imagine — had been the center of powerful civilization...” he lifted his head, laid his hands behind his back, and dreamingly looked around the terrace. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?” he lowered his colorless eyes. “The sun. Pleasing wind. And mosquitos do not annoy...Great rareness. Right, my friends?” he was looking at the captives but did not expect an answer. He was playing, but not for the public. He was playing for himself, taking pleasure in his gestures and improvised monologue. The gray-haired was one of those vainglorious, although brilliant scoundrels, who knew the value of ostentatious deeds. An eccentric Portuguese football coach Jose Mourinho has suddenly come to Levko’s mind. The same haughty, arrogant, and... charismatic person. They even look alike. “I’m so damn sorry, my friends, for taking your precious time. I feel bad for detaining you and for preventing you from enjoying the beauty of this lovely day in the jungle. I had no intention to distract you from those lovely nonsenses you were involved in the rainforest,” here he squinted at Semen’s leg. “Seriously. But it happened; our paths had crossed, and I asked to bring you here because I want to hear the answer to one... very simple... question...” the last words he uttered as if under a press.

The man looked at his feet, moved his lips, and made a few steps in one direction and back. Having decided that he has sustained an appropriate pause, he bent over Levko (considering him the chief) and, without unlinking his palms, shouted straight in the boy’s face, “WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?!”