

Excerpt Two from Chapter 10

The sun continued to rise slowly and although Kevin had originally planned to set out to El Pilar himself, actually being alone in the jungle now proved somewhat unnerving to him. It was almost as if an eerie quite had settled on the jungle about him. At first, he worried a little the jaguar might still be hungry and would come after him. Then he recalled what he had read at the zoo about their nocturnal and solitary nature. With the sun up the big cat would be long gone, he reassured himself. At the very least, even if it lingered nearby, the magnificent creature was certainly more wary of him than he of it. The thought that he wasn't very far from the cliff of El Pilar, barely far enough off in the distance for him to no longer see it through the forest cover, kept the image of the jaguar in his mind.

Trying not to let his own thoughts spook him, he paced back and forth around the stela. All he had to do was stay put until help arrived and they could mark its position. As best as he could reckon, he and Julie had walked within a few hundred feet of it the other day and not noticed it at all. The survey line had also gone right past this place, but spread out as it was it wasn't surprising the moss covered stela had simply blended right into the forest such that none of them had seen it. If he hadn't literally stumbled onto it he'd probably never have found it in the first place, and he realized if he left it now they might not find it again. So he sat in the forest waiting for help to arrive.

As the time passed, it felt to him like he must have been waiting there forever, until, seeing something moving far off in the dense undergrowth he breathed a sigh of relief at what he assumed was the approach of Santos and the others. Anticipating his friend's approach he listened for their voices calling to him, but all he heard was the hushed sound of the wind above the tree tops.

Not hearing the expected voices, Kevin strained his eyes to see what was moving. His first thought was it must be some birds, perhaps the same turkeys the jaguar had been stalking. For a moment he could see nothing, but then, in the dim light of the forest floor, he saw a silhouette against the green of the forest undergrowth. Whatever it was, it wasn't a turkey. Slowly the outline of the animal became clearer, its black coat now standing out from its surroundings. When he realized what it was his breath caught in his throat. It was the jaguar.

He tried to stay calm, convincing himself the big cat would smell him and avoid him. He'd broken quite a sweat running away from it the first time. Surely an animal with a sense of smell like the jaguar must be able to detect him. The jaguar showed no sign of doing so however. Slowly, carefully it crept towards him, close enough so that if he tried to run it could easily catch him. His heart was pounding in his chest, but all he could do was sit there with his back to the stela, trying to stay as

motionless as possible, hoping the others would finally arrive and the noise of their large group would scare the jaguar off.

Steadily the jaguar moved towards him. One hundred feet, eighty feet, closer, ever closer, until it couldn't have been more than twenty feet from him. As close as the one he almost hit on the road the morning they set out from Caracol. Suddenly something occurred to him. It was an idea so preposterous he immediately dismissed it. Yet as he watched the big cat staring at him, and he sat there staring back at it, he realized maybe it wasn't so preposterous. He was certain the beast in front of him now was the same cat which had run out into the road the morning they left Caracol. In fact, it was the same cat they had seen at the Belize Zoo.

How could that possibly be, he thought to himself. He was pretty sure the distance from Caracol to here or the zoo would be more than the normal range of a cat like this. How could it have possibly followed them here? And why? He told himself he must be mistaken but the more he stared at the big cat, and the more it sat there staring back at him, the more sure he became. It was the same animal.

Then the big cat lurched its head sideways and pricked up its ears. Kevin didn't hear anything other than the beating of his heart. The cat turned its head back towards Kevin and shot forward. Kevin was certain he was about to meet his end, but the big cat ran round the other side of the stela from where he sat and off into the woods. A moment later Kevin heard the sound of voices. The cat, with its much more sensitive hearing, must have heard them before he did and was scared off by them. He breathed a sigh of relief.