

YAGUARA

Nicola Griffith

The 1996 Nebula Award for Best Novel was given to Nicola Griffith's *Slow River*. Griffith was born in Leeds, Yorkshire, England, and has been a laborer, an insurance clerk (for forty-five days), a waitress (forty-five minutes), and a lead singer and songwriter for the women's band Janes Plane. She has also taught self-defense. Her first novel, *Ammonite*, won the Georgia Council for the Arts Individual Artist's Award, the James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award, and the Lambda Literary Award. To quote from Griffith's entry in the *St. James Guide to Science Fiction Writers*: "Though a relative newcomer, Griffith's mastery of language is exceptional, her settings imaginative and well-drawn, her characters compelling, and her plots fast and finely tuned. Griffith is swiftly earning her place among the

vanguard of SF literature." She has also won the National Network of Women Writers Award in England and an artist's project grant from the Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs. She is the coeditor, with Stephen Pagel, of the *Bending the Landscape* series. Her latest novel, *The Blue Place* (due from Avon in July 1998) is a noir thriller.

Rather than publish an excerpt from Nicola Griffith's *Slow River*, I have chosen to include her 1995 Nebula Award finalist, the disquieting and evocative novella "Yaguara." About this story, the author writes:

"Ellen Datlow was soliciting stories for an anthology of erotic horror. I came up with 'Yaguara.' It was inevitable, really...

"First of all, I was determined that I would not write one of those fuck and die stories so beloved by the writers of bad horror films. You know the ones—where the teenagers are humping in the car/bed/classroom when the Serial Killer gets them. Moral: Sex will kill you, especially if you're female. You're only allowed a boyfriend after you've dispatched the Monster (and even then it must be True Love, implying eventual marriage, or you'll end up starring in the next film about Bad Girls Get Theirs. If you're the kind of girl who would rather have a girlfriend, then you're dead meat even before the opening credits).

"Second, much of my work is about the interaction of people and their places. People, fictional and not, are largely the products of their particular time and culture. So what I tend to do is pluck an unfortunate character from her familiar surrounds, drop her somewhere strange—to herself, and sometimes to the reader—and watch with interest while she struggles to deal with an alien milieu. The type and degree of alienness—time, space, culture—don't matter as long as the details are made utterly real to the character and, through her, the reader. We should know how the ground feels underfoot; the level of ambient noise; the taste of the wind on the back of the tongue.

"Third, I had just read: an article in Science News about how little epigraphers really know about Mayan glyphs; Carl Sagan's *Broca's Brain*, on the evolution of the mammalian brain; and a book by some fool of a zoologist who went to Belize to study jaguars but ended up killing five of the six animals under observation.

"Fourth, there's a long tradition in lesbian erotica (particularly that written for straight audiences) that the characters and/or settings are hot, steamy, exotic, sultry, privileged, lush, languorous, etc., etc., etc.

"The jungle, I thought, is hot, steamy, exotic, sultry, lush, languorous, and so on. It is also a frighteningly alien place for most of us, full of snakes and spiders and strange diseases. There are no phones or fax machines, no doctors, no brightly lit bars, just this vast, moist, breathing thing stretching for miles. No one, no matter how tightly armored, can venture into the jungle and return unchanged."

Jane Holford valued her privacy. That is why she became a photographer: people would look at her pictures and not at her. As an adolescent she had watched a film critic on television. The gaze of the camera is not like grammar, he had said. After a while there is no difference between subject and object. He pointed at a still of Marilyn Monroe, dead for years. We ate her alive. Jane had decided then and there that she would be neither subject nor object but invulnerable observer. She would keep herself armored, inviolate, safe.

And so Jane did not travel directly from England to Belize. She packed her cameras and flew to the Yucatan, and from there took a boat to Ambergris Cay. She would acclimatize to the heat slowly, and in private.

On Ambergris, Katherine—ex-governors niece for whom Jane had once done the favor of losing a roll of incriminating film—was drunk by ten o'clock in the morning and forgot, most of the time, that she had a guest, and the house servants probably could not have cared less. But Jane still maintained a perfect control. Even when the sun was licking at her shoulders and the Caribbean wove about her its scents of wide open space and hot driftwood, she did not throw back her head and laugh; she did not take off her sandals and squeeze the seaweed between her toes. When a beautiful woman in the market smiled at her, she did not smile back, did not allow herself to blush, to feel the heat building in her belly.

Alone in her room, it was another matter.

After three weeks she no longer felt vulnerable: she could walk outside in the sun without fainting; she knew how much water she needed to drink every day to remain hydrated; and her skin was dark enough to protect her from sunburn. Armor in place, she left for the Maya Mountains in the far south and west of Belize. Dr. Cleis Fernandez and the ruins of Kuchil Balum were waiting.

“Why do you want to take pictures of me?” the epigrapher had asked when Jane had phoned the University of New Mexico a month earlier, at the beginning of March.

“Because I’m putting together a book on women at the top of their professions.” *Because you made it, against the odds. Because you haven’t let them consume you, yet,* “You’re—”

“Get someone else.” And the phone had gone dead in Jane’s hand.

Jane redialed. “Dr. Fernandez, it’s Jane Holford again—”

“Holford? Wait a minute. Holford who did that series last year on the Lascaux paintings? The ones in *Life*?”

“Yes.” “And I might excerpt a similar photo-essay from the book in one of the glossies—”

“I’m not interested in that.” Her voice was hot and rough, like black glass. “But I do have one condition.”

“Go on.”

“I want you to photograph the glyphs at Kuchil Balum.”

“Tell me about them.”

“It’s classified as a minor ceremonial site in Belize but it’s anything but minor. As for the rest... well, you’ll come or you won’t.”

“I’ll call you back.”

She had checked. Kuchil Balum was in the Maya Mountains, first excavated two years before. Nothing there that could not be found in dozens of other, more accessible ruins in Belize or Guatemala. And yet... Apparently Fernandez had been applying for grants all over the place, for money and time to go study these ruins and their glyphs. She had been turned down. Jane read and reread Fernandez’s articles in the journals, and *The Long Count*, her single book. The passion and dedication, the need to know, came across loud and clear. Why was Kuchil Balum so important?

She called back four days after their original conversation. “I’ll do it.”

“You will?” Fernandez sounded challenging. “The jungle isn’t a good place just before the rainy season.”

“I understand that. Now, my schedule—”

“I’m going there next week and won’t be coming out again until the rainy season, May or June. Take it or leave it.”

The road was a track torn through the tropical forest by logging skidders, deteriorating to dust and potholes and broken bridges. Leaves brushed the Jeep on both sides and smeared the dusty paintwork with sap, leaving Jane with the feeling that the greenery was closing in behind her and she would be encysted in the forest forever.

Not long after noon, she stopped to drink water from her canteen and eat a banana. It was hot; mosquitoes and bottle flies whined about her head. Wind, sly as a great cat's breath, stole from banak to ironwood to Santa Maria pine, stirring hot perfumes and the iridescent wings of a blue morpho butterfly. When she turned the key in the ignition, the Jeep's engine roared too loudly, and it seemed to Jane that when she moved, the breath of the forest followed.

Over an hour later, the jungle ahead of her thinned abruptly, melting from dense emerald to sunlit mint. The breeze stiffened and expelled her into a green-sided bowl floored with dirt-brown: a clearing. Adobe huts roofed with thatch stood in an irregular west-east line; a macaw hung in a cage outside the nearest. Chickens scratched in the dirt and a pig rooted in the undergrowth at the edge of the clearing. She turned off the engine and found herself staring into the solemn eyes of a group of thin-armed children.

Stranger, those unblinking camera eyes said, you cannot hide.

One child wiped his nose with the back of his hand, another tilted her head at Jane like a bird. Then at some unseen signal they ran back toward the forest and melted into the trees.

Jane climbed down from the Jeep and began to lift an aluminum case from the back.

“Don't do that.”

She whirled, found herself facing a lean woman wearing shorts and boots and vest, muscles showing long and tight over knobby bones; neck tendons flat and hard; face planed by heat and hard work; hair in rough curls as black as volcanic rock.

“I’m Cleis Fernandez.” When they shook hands, Cleis’s long fingers reached past Jane’s wrist. “It would be best to leave your things in the Jeep. It’s another half mile or so to our shack. We can drive if we go very, very slowly.”

Our shack. She had prepared for everything but sharing a room. Jane climbed numbly back into the Jeep.

Jane knew she drove well: poised, unhurried, competent. She glanced in the side mirror, caught the flash of brown eyes studying her in turn, and deliberately looked away. She was the observer, not the observed.

“This is it.” It was a square building of breeze block and corrugated aluminum. They climbed down. “It was built by the logging company. Never got used—they went bust. It’s more comfortable inside than it looks.”

A wooden step led into a single room, low and dark, about eighteen feet square, with plasterboard walls and a dirt floor. There were wooden-framed bunks, each with a blue blanket.

Two bunks. No room into which she could retreat and close the door.

“There’s a toilet over here,” Cleis pointed, “though I, we, have to fill the cistern from a bucket. The well’s in the village; Ixbalum lets me, us, use that at least. The stove uses propane.” She lit a match, turned a knob, demonstrated. “I cleared some of the shelf space for your things.”

Jane looked at the clothes already on the shelf. New. Aggressively good quality. She had seen clothes like that before, when she shared a room at Cambridge with a scholarship girl.

The windows were holes cut in the wall and screened, the door a flimsy affair. Jane looked for a lock.

“No one will steal anything. Ixbalum won’t even let anyone near this place.” Jane nodded, wondering who Ixbalum was. “We’ve got three Coleman lamps...”

Jane closed her eyes. Sharing. The hut smelled of heat and mildew and sweat, and faintly of gas and matches, but behind that lay the must of forest animals and the heavy green scent of ceaseless growth. She felt trapped.

“... last as long as possible, because I hate the drive to Benque Viejo for more supplies, though if you’re willing, we can take turns on that chore. Jane?”

She opened her eyes, smiled her warm, practiced smile. “Thank you for going to so much trouble.” *How am I going to survive this?*

The well was at the western edge of the village. Jane wound up the bucket. “Where is everyone?”

“Tending their milpas. Or hunting. Some are hiding in their houses. The children are running wild, or maybe watching us right now.”

Jane could see only trees, and the inevitable chickens.

The bucket creaked to the lip of the well. Jane concentrated on pouring from the wooden bucket into the galvanized steel pail. She was fascinated by the cool clear flow, the fact that water could stay cold in one-hundred-degree heat. She dipped her hand in it.

Someone behind her spoke in a throaty Mayan dialect. Jane turned, saw a short, muscular woman with squat powerful limbs and a large jaw.

“Jane, this is Ixbalum.”

“What did she say?”

“That rivers are for playing with, well water for drinking.”

Ixbalum lifted Jane’s left arm, laid it next to her own, pointed to the mahogany brown then the honey, dropped the arm, lifted Cleis’s arm, compared the mahogany to teak, spoke for a while, then padded away into the trees.

Jane realized she was wiping her hands on her shorts, stopped. “What did she say?”

“She said you’re not made for the mountains.”

It was just over a mile from the village to the ruins. The trail was a twisty tunnel through the green. Sweat ran down the underside of Jane’s arm, and she felt as though she were breathing sap. Ahead of her, Cleis’s shorts whif-whiffed as she walked. Their boots were silent on the thick leaf mold. Insects hummed and whined. Jane slapped at something that landed on her neck.

“Got to be careful of the insects,” Cleis said over her shoulder without slowing down. “Especially mosquitoes. They carry botfly eggs and things out of your worst nightmares.” Cleis had no idea about her nightmares, Jane thought.

They walked on in silence. The heat pushed its strong fingers under Jane’s skin, slicked muscle and bone until she felt slippery inside, like a well-oiled machine. The jungle eased down her throat, sighed in her ears, whispered *You could let go here, and no one would know.*

Jane realized she was stroking her belly, walking with a loose open-hip sway. *Armored, inviolate, safe...* She jerked her hand away from her stomach and laid it on the hard black case hanging down by her hip. She was the only one with a camera here. She was in control.

Cleis stopped abruptly, turned. “We’re almost there. You have

to remember that this is classified as a minor site, not to be confused with the great centers like Tikal.” Cleis’s hands moved as she talked, emphasizing phrases with precise gestures like movements distilled from tai chi or wing chun. “There’s only one pyramid, and that hasn’t been fully excavated. Nothing has. It may not look like much but Kuchil Balum is more important than anyone knows.” Her hands stopped, fell back to her sides. “I just wanted you to know that.”

They climbed the last few yards up a steep rise and looked down at Kuchil Balum.

Grassy hummocks and walls choked with vines lay scattered around an area the size of a small urban park, perhaps two acres, level, but slightly sunken. It reminded Jane of the huge ruined amphitheaters of Greece, only here it was wood, not stone, that formed the sides of the bowl, great vertigo-producing trunks that spun themselves up and up to bridge earth and heaven.

Over the faint susurrus of leaves a hundred feet from the ground, Jane thought she heard something else, something that she felt as a faint vibration under her feet. “What’s that noise?”

Cleis smiled. “We’ll save that for last.”

Jane clambered over a pile of tumbled stone and to the top of a small mound. It was not hard to envisage this place as it had once been: people coming and going, sun flashing on jade and gold, children playing with a ball. Why had they left?

The northwestern corner of the site was hemmed in by gray rock. In front of that lay a whole complex of ruins. Something just inside the trees caught her attention, something golden that slunk from light to shadow, lifting heavy paws, turning its massive head from side to side. Slowly, heart hammering under her ribs, Jane lifted her camera.

“What is it?”

The golden animal was gone. Perhaps she had imagined it. Jane lowered her camera. “Nothing.”

“Over here is the mat house.” They walked back down the slope to a small green mound with one side exposed: a few gray stones, beautifully fitted, a doorway and lintel. “I’m particularly interested in the glyphs on the western wall.” They squeezed through. Inside it was dim and smelled of animal fur and musk, like a woman’s hair after the rain. Cleis ran her hand along the wall. “This section here is vital.” She tapped a relief carving, a seated jaguar-headed figure. “The throne indicates temporal power, but other indicators point to the human figure being female. That’s very unusual.” She looked at Jane. “About as usual as a Latina professor in your Anglo world.”

Jane said nothing, refusing to be baited. Cleis smiled slightly, then continued. “Over here,” she traced her way across the name glyphs and dates, “another jaguar-human, but this time not in the regalia of the royal house. See the scythe? A peasant. I’ve seen jaguars as thrones, jaguars as symbols of shamanic and from there royal power, but this is the first time I’ve seen jaguars as ordinary citizens, or vice versa. I don’t know what it means.” Frustration deepened the grooves on either side of her mouth for a moment, then she shook her head. “It’s dark in here. I hope photographing them won’t be a problem.”

“No.” Jane touched the glyphs lightly with her fingertips.

The strange, bulbous carvings were everywhere she and Cleis went. Cleis’s hands were never still as she pointed out the date glyphs and name glyphs, explained the long count and the calendar round. She saved the northwest corner for last.

They climbed up the remains of four huge terraced steps and then through all that remained of what had once been a corridor. The vibration became a thrumming hiss. “See these hinges here? This corridor was once gated on both ends. Very unusual.”

They stepped out into sunlight. Cold spray brushed Jane's cheek. "A waterfall..."

But Cleis did not give Jane long to admire the fall, or the pool bobbing with lilies. "This way." They went down steps cut into the stone, underground for five yards, then up again into what had once been a vast courtyard.

Cleis pointed to the wall that ran across the courtyard in six separate sections. It was covered in glyphs. "This is the heart of Kuchil Balum. This is why I'm here."

Jane posed Cleis at the well, at the ruins, outside the shack, trying to catch the intensity that seemed to burn at the woman's center. They stopped when the light faded.

At dusk the air tasted like hot metal. Jane sat on the step outside their shack and sipped at a battered tin cup: rum, lime juice, and well water. Night light, Cleis called it. From inside, the galvanized pail clanked as the epigrapher flushed the toilet. Jane heard the laughter of children float up from the village.

"Not one child in that village has ever seen the inside of a school." Cleis filled her cup, sat next to Jane. "If only Ixbalum were willing to talk, the lack of education could be invaluable to me..."

Jane was glad to keep the conversation impersonal. "In what way?"

"Virtually all the schooling in Belize is done by missionaries: Catholics, Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists, the Assembly of God—you name it, they're here." She sipped meditatively. "There are probably three million people around today who still speak various Mayan tongues, hut none of them can read these glyphs. The rituals that gave meaning to all these things were destroyed and discredited by the missionaries."

“But not here?”

“Not here. They probably still tell each other bedtime stories about Queen Jaguar Claw and how she ruled over Mommy and Daddy’s great-great-great-to-the-nth-degree grandparents, and how she gave their children jade beads for... I don’t know... maize productivity or something. But they won’t talk to me. Ixbalum won’t let them.”

“I wonder what Ixbalum’s afraid of.”

Cleis was quiet for a long time. Plum-purple shadows gathered under her cheekbones and in the hollows of her neck. “That I’ll make them famous.”

Jane nodded slowly in the gathering dark. They had evaded notice for a long time. “How was Kuchil Balum discovered?”

“Three years ago a logger was tracking a jaguar. Came across some funny-looking stones. He didn’t think much of them at the time. Apparently he never did find the jaguar, but on the way back, he was bitten by a fer-de-lance. By the time his friends got him to the clinic at Benque Viejo, he was bleeding from the eyes and babbling about a city of stone. He died a few hours later. But one of the nurses remembered what he’d said and told her friend. The friend knew someone who worked for the State Archaeology Department. They sent someone down, some idiot who took a cursory look, labeled it ‘Minor Ceremonial Center,’ and forgot about it. It was listed, of course, but these sites turn up all the time. Still, I was curious, I’m always curious, so when one of my grad students told me he was planning to spend the summer at Caracol, I asked him to check out this place. He brought back a Polaroid of those jaguar figures I showed you this afternoon. And I knew someone had made a big mistake.”

Jane was still thinking about the logger. “It was lucky, for the villagers I mean, that the logging operation went bust when it did, just a mile from the site.”

“Luck? I’m not sure I believe in luck.” Cleis’s long hands hung loosely between her knees. “Look into Ixbalum’s face and tell me you still believe it was just bad luck that the skidders kept breaking down, that the bridges collapsed, that every worker who didn’t get bitten by a fer-de-lance ran off in ones and twos babbling about the jungle cat that was out to get them.”

Jane remembered driving along the logging track, her feeling that the jungle was breathing on the back of her neck, stalking her like a big cat.

Jane listened to the steady, still-awake breathing of Cleis in the other bunk. She could see the next few weeks unrolling before her like sticky flypaper, the jungle whispering to her *Let go, let go, there’s no one here to care*, but if she let go now, if she let her armor slip just once, the damage would be permanent: she would have been seen, known. Cleis was always there.

Jane turned on her side, careful not to make any noise or disturb the sheet that was pulled up to her shoulders. She thought about Cleis’s toffee-colored eyes, the way they watched her all the time. What did they see?

At mid-afternoon the sun was still strong and heat wrapped around Jane like a thick tongue. A hundred yards away, the waterfall roared, tossing spray into the already humid air. The light was perfect: green-gold and viscous as honey, seeping into every crevice and old chisel cut, easing out details ordinarily invisible. With luck, she would be able to photograph this whole section while the light lasted. She set up her specially adapted tripod and tilted the camera up to the next section of curtain wall. More jaguars, more pictures of the plant that Cleis did not recognize.

“I just don’t know what it is,” Cleis had said the night before, and pulled out four Polaroids she had taken days earlier. “And it’s

depicted exactly the same in each glyph, always bent with these six fronds outward to show the spiderweb veins. That's significant. It suggests ritual function. And it's always in conjunction with these glyphs here." She tilted the pictures toward the feeble light of the Coleman lamp streaming through their doorway, so that Jane could see.

"Jaguars and women?"

"Jaguars, yes, but they're not portrayed symbolically. It's almost as if they're... pets or something." She sighed and rubbed her eyes. "And these women are all young. You can tell by their clothes." Jane took Cleis's word for it. "If I didn't know better, I'd say these glyphs represented some kind of purdah, spent behind the curtain walls. Though what that has to do with the jaguars I don't know. It's so frustrating! If only these people would talk to me!"

Jane looked at the photos again, tapped two glyphs of women covered in what looked like blood. "What does this mean? Some kind of execution?"

"No. Look at them carefully. Both are wounds to the left shoulder, on the muscle: ritual again."

"Scarification?"

"I don't know what the hell it is. I feel as though I should understand, but it's just out of my reach."

Jane touched the limestone carvings, weathered now, and tried to imagine the glyphs fresh and new. The carver had squatted out here in the ninety-degree heat with only soft bronze tools and pieces of dirty string to make sure everything was straight. A labor of months. Years. It was terrible to think that all that effort—the sweat and bruised palms, the pads of fingers callused and permanently white with limestone dust—now meant nothing because no one knew what these enigmatic, bulbous figures represented.

The camera whirred, clicked, whirred again. Jane, stiff after squatting so long, stood and stretched. Froze. Behind her, arms folded, face dappled with tree shadow, stood Ixbalum.

They looked at each other. Jane could not speak Mopan Maya. She lifted a hand in greeting. Ixbalum stared back impassively. Jane cleared her throat. It sounded impossibly loud. She wondered how long Ixbalum had been watching her. “I have to take these pictures,” she said, pointing at her camera. “The light won’t last forever.”

Ixbalum did not move.

She cleared her throat again. She hesitated, then wiped the sweat from her face and doggedly tilted the camera to a different angle. She had a job to do.

Ixbalum’s gaze settled on the back of her neck, as hot as the sun. She bent to the viewfinder, focused carefully on a jaguar figure. *All that work...*

She straightened abruptly, turned to Ixbalum.

“Tell me what it means,” she said, pointing at the glyphs. “They’re your people, Ixbalum. Don’t you want the world to hear what they had to say?”

Ixbalum might as well have been carved from the same stone as the glyphs, but the breeze in the trees stirred and the leaf shadow on the Mayan woman’s face shifted. Her eyes were yellow, like hammered gold.

Jane stepped back, bumped into her tripod, had to turn quickly to catch it. When she turned back, Ixbalum was gone.

Later, when the sun was slipping behind the trees and the light was more green than gold, when Jane was treading carefully along the trail, camera slung over one shoulder, tripod on the other, she felt that same heat on the back of her neck, as though she was

being watched. She stopped, turned slowly. Nothing.

Ten yards farther down, she felt it again. This time she put down her camera, dropped her tripod into her other hand to hold it like a club, and turned.

Six feet away, inside her own footprint, was a jaguar track so fresh that a piece of dirt tottering on the edge of the heel depression fell inward as she watched.

“Jaguar? You’re sure?” Cleis sat cross-legged on her bunk, surrounded by notes.

“It looked like cat to me.” Jane leaned her tripod in the corner, began to sort automatically through her film stock. “And the print must have been four or five inches across.”

“Ocelot, margay?”

“I didn’t think they got that big.”

“You heard nothing?”

“Not a thing.” Fear made her sound angry. If she had not remembered so clearly touching the spoor with her fingertip, then retrieving her camera, taking a picture, she might be tempted to assume she had imagined the incident. But it was real. A jaguar, a predator, had been a few feet behind her and she had not known it.

Cleis set aside her notes, rubbed her eyes. “The lights terrible in here.” Jane remembered the hot gold of Ixbalum’s eyes and shivered. Cleis studied her. “Did you know that *jaguar* comes from a South American word, *yaguara*, that means ‘wild beast that kills its prey in one bound’? They have very short, powerful limbs and the strength of their jaws is incredible. Pound for pound, they have the most efficient bite of any land-based predator. When I was in the Xingu basin two or three years ago, I saw a tapir that had been killed by a jaguar: the back of its skull was sheared clean off.”

All Jane could think of was Ixbalum's short, squat legs, the muscles along her jaw.

"As far as I know, there has only ever been one reported case of a jaguar attacking people, and that was thirty years ago in Guatemala." Cleis, Jane realized, knew she was scared, and was giving her information to deal with because it would help. She was being humored. "Apparently, four men were killed at a convent."

Despite herself, Jane was intrigued. "A convent?"

Cleis grinned. "They probably did something very unchristian to one of the novices and the other nuns banded together and hacked the men to death with machetes, scythes, garden shears. No local doctor is going to argue cause of death with the good sisters, especially when the church probably controls the medical supplies and the hospital." She glanced at her notes, then back to Jane. "Anyway, my point is that jaguars simply don't attack people. Why should they? There's too much to eat around here as it is. Maybe it was following you because you smelled interesting. Maybe it was an adolescent practicing."

Maybe it was trying to intimidate me. But that was ridiculous.

The humidity was thick enough to stand on and the sky low and gray. Cleis threw her knapsack onto the Jeep and climbed behind the wheel. "I'll stay overnight in Benque Viejo," she said. "I've a few things to do."

Jane glanced at the sky. "Think it'll rain?"

Cleis shook her head. "It can't. I can't afford it to."

Jane's clothes were already stuck to her. "Don't forget the beer."

"I won't."

Later, alone on the trail to Kuchil Balum, Jane felt as though

she were walking through another world: there was no breeze, and every sound, every smell, was singular and intense.

The air under the trees grew hotter and more damp.

Jane stumbled over a hidden tree limb. She fell to one knee, her nose seven inches from a log over which Azteca ants marched in an endless, silent line. And it was as if she had been looking at the world through a camera and had only just found the right focus. Everywhere she looked life leapt out at her: huge black carpenter bees buzzing around red melastoma flowers the size of roses; a leaf-frog, gaudy and red-eyed, peering from the depths of a sapodilla; the flicker of a gecko's tail. And there were millipedes and rove beetles, silverfish and wood lice, and spiders spinning their silent webs to catch them. The air was luxuriant with rot, like the breath of a carnivore.

She stood up feeling hot and hunted and hemmed in. A snake slithered in the undergrowth. Her heart began to thump like a kettledrum. She licked salt from her lips, wondered how many different eyes were watching her from behind tree trunks or under leaves. A twig snapped under a heavy paw. Something big was coming toward her... *Yaguara, a South American word meaning "predator that kills its prey in one bound."* She ran.

Night seeped through the trees like tea and gathered under her bunk. She sat on the rough blanket fully clothed, facing the door. A shelf bracket pressed into her shoulder blade but she stayed where she was. The jungle was full of eyes.

She dozed and dreamed she was walking to the ruins in thin moonlight. Sliding earth and metal sounds came from the direction of the purdah house. Cleis was digging feverishly, lips skinned back with effort, teeth glinting like old bone. "It's here somewhere," she was muttering to herself, "I just have to keep digging." Jane wanted her to stop, just for a moment, but she could not seem to get close

enough to touch Cleis. She would walk toward her and stretch out her hand only to find that she had gone the wrong way and Cleis was behind her. Then suddenly Cleis was laughing. “Yes!” she shouted, and threw away the shovel, and she was digging with her hands, throwing the dirt back between her legs like a cat. “I’ve found it!” She looked up at Jane, and her eyes were golden, and suddenly the dirt was piling up around Jane, burying her, and she could not breathe—

Jane surged off the bunk, swallowing, and staggered outside. The night was silent: the four in the morning lull before dawn.

The Jeep bumped into the clearing a little after midday. Jane ran to greet Cleis.

“Well, hello to you, too,” Cleis said. “What have I done to deserve this honor?”

Jane stopped abruptly. “Did you bring the beer?”

Cleis nodded. “Though I would have driven faster if I’d known you were so desperate. Give me a hand unloading this stuff.”

They lugged the new gas bottles inside. Cleis pulled the cardboard off a six-pack and submerged the bottles in the galvanized pail. “Should cool off quickly.” She trundled an empty gas bottle out of the way for Jane. “You get some good pictures yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Any rain?”

“No.”

They unloaded foodstuff for a while in silence. “According to Radio Belize, the rains will be late this year.”

“That’s good.”

“I see you’ve lost none of your talent for conversation.” Cleis sighed. “Sorry. That was uncalled for. It’s just that I’ve got things on my mind and I wanted...” She shook her head. “Doesn’t matter.”

Jane watched Cleis slide the orange tubing into place on the gas bottle, turn the knob on the stove, listen for the hiss. She looked different. Something had happened in Benque Viejo.

Cleis opened a beer. “Let’s go up to the site. It’s cool by the water.”

They took the pail and an extra six-pack up the trail and sat on the grassy bank together. Cleis threw stones, opened her second beer, sucked half down without pausing. They listened to the waterfall.

Cleis popped open her third bottle, seemed to come back from wherever she had been. “So, how was your night alone in the jungle?”

Jane wondered if Cleis knew she had been terrified. “I was... Well, I felt skittish, had bad dreams.”

Cleis nodded. The sun glinted on tiny beads of sweat on her upper lip. “It was like that for me the time I spent four months in the Xingu basin in Brazil. Years ago. Strange place, the jungle. Feels alive sometimes, and then other times... you wonder what the hell you were worried about.”

Jane started on the second six-pack about mid-afternoon. Despite the weight of the heat, she felt lighter than she had done in a long time.

“How come your first name’s Cleis?” she asked. She was sitting next to Cleis who was sprawled out on the turf, hair almost touching Jane’s thigh. Jane wondered idly what that hair would feel like wrapped around her fingers.

“My mother was fond of poetry. Read lots of the classics in

Colombia, when she was young. Don't look so surprised."

"I'm not surprised."

Cleis did not seem to hear her. "She may have ended up in poverty in East L.A., and I might have had to do everything on scholarship, be twice as good as the Anglos to get what I wanted, but we have a history, a past. The U.S. isn't the only place where people know things."

"Cleis was Sappho's daughter." *Now why did I say that?*

"I know."

A kingfisher flashed blue and green and black across the pool. "Get kingfishers in England," Jane said.

"I know that, too." Cleis climbed to her feet. "Time for a swim." She pulled off her shirt, unzipped her shorts. "Aren't you coming in?"

Fear squeezed Jane's throat. "I'm not sure it's wise to swim after so much to drink."

"Three beers? Besides, look at this place!"

The pool was green and quiet. Damselflies hummed over the surface at the edge away from the fall where water cabbage floated, leaves like huge furry clams. Along the northern bank heliconias with leaves as big as canoe paddles made a dense wall between the forest and water on one side. No one would see.

Jane shook her head. "No. I can't swim."

"Well, you could just paddle a bit." Cleis's body gleamed like polished hardwood. "The floor slopes gently. No danger of falling into a pit. And I'm here."

I know. "I'd rather not."

"The waters cool."

Jane was aware of sweat running over her stomach, trickling

down the small of her back, itching behind her knees. Swimming would be lovely. She almost moved. Almost stood up and took off her shirt, but years of habit and training brought her up short just as effectively as a chain around her neck. “No.” It came out flat and hard.

Cleis’s eyes narrowed. “What is it? You don’t think a bare-assed Latina is good enough to swim with?”

“It’s not that.”

Cleis stood with her hands on her hips. “What then?”

Jane drained the bottle of its last, warm mouthful. *Armored, inviolate, safe.* “You wouldn’t understand.” Immediately, she knew she had said the wrong thing.

“So. Now I’m stupid as well as inferior. What is your problem, Lady Jane? You drive in here, cool as cut glass, and act like you’re queen of the fucking world. You smile at me so politely and ask me questions for your damn article. You take my picture, you listen to me rambling on, but you give me nothing. Not one thing. Why? Because deep down you think you’re better than me. Better than everyone.”

“No. That’s not it. It’s just that...”

Cleis lifted her eyebrows, waiting, and Jane realized that she was being goaded. For once, she allowed it.

“Why is everyone so eager to show everything to everyone all the time? Everywhere you look there are people being stared at: television, film, video, magazines, newspapers. Close-ups taken from a mile away, such huge scale that pores look like craters. You can’t hide anything. Everyone looking, being looked at. Gossip columnists. Stalkers. Tell-all biographies. Desperate actors having their faces sculpted to look like last week’s star. It never stops.” She was panting.

“What exactly are you afraid of?”

Jane blinked. “What do you mean, what am I afraid of? These people are being eaten alive! Everything they do or say is consumed by a greedy public. A woman’s child is mown down on the street and the cameras are there: tracking her tears, recording the snot on her chin, following the way she shifts from foot to foot because she needs the bathroom. Sometimes they follow her *into* the bathroom. Once you start giving them something, once they see the hairline crack in your armor, they’re there, driving in, wedging you open, spilling your guts.”

“I still don’t understand why it bothers you so much.” Jane stared at her. “Look, suppose they wired up your bathroom and made a tape of you taking a dump, complete with groanings and strainings, so what? So fucking what. It’s something every person on this earth does. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But it’s private! It’s my life...”

“You don’t have a life. You’re so afraid someone will take it away you haven’t allowed yourself one.”

“No! That’s not—”

“Then why are you so scared?”

Cleis gestured at her own nakedness, at Jane in her hot, itchy clothes, the cool lake, the empty jungle. All of a sudden, horrifyingly, Jane did not know why. She was twenty-nine years old and had spent her whole life hiding behind a mask and she did not know why. She had denied herself so much: never had a lover, never been naked in public, never been drunk or screamed out loud with pleasure except in the privacy of her own apartments. She had never had a friend, never had a real argument, never wept over a dead pet.

She looked blindly out over the water. Normal people swam naked and did not care. She was not normal. She did not know what she was, or who. She wanted to lay her head down on the turf and cry: grieve for all those lost years. But even now the habit of

privacy was too strong.

“It’s never too late to change,” Cleis said. And she waded out into the pool and dived underwater.

Jane watched the ripples. She knew she could not swim naked in that pool. Not today. But she could, at least, get drunk.

The sun was sinking when she woke. She sat up, and her head thumped. There were mosquito bites on her legs and one already swelling on her left breast. She looked around. Cleis’s clothes were gone.

She knelt down and splashed her face with water, trying to think. Beer bottles clinked. She gathered them up, then felt foolish and put them down; counted them. Twelve. And Cleis had had three, four at most. She swayed and realized that she was still drunk. But she never got drunk.

“Cleis!” She climbed carefully up the western slope to the purdah house. “Cleis!” She listened, walked south toward the glyph-covered walls, stopped. She heard something, a vague scrabbling coming from the tumbled remains of a masonry wall.

Cleis was half lying, half sitting against a stack of newly fallen stone. Her left arm hung useless and bloody. She was swearing, very quietly, and trying to push herself upright.

“Cleis?”

Cleis smiled lopsidedly. “Fucking thing.” She sounded cheerful. Shock, Jane decided.

Jane peered at her eyes. They were glassy. “Do you hurt anywhere except your shoulder?”

“Shoulder?” Cleis looked at it. “Oh.”

“Yes. Do you hurt anywhere else? Did you fall, bang your head?” Cleis’s left arm was broken by the looks of it, and the

gashes on her shoulder would need stitches. There was no sign of a head injury, but you could not be too careful.

“... fucking thing knocked the wall down on purpose. Kill that fucking thing...”

It was getting dark. She needed to get Cleis to a safe place. First she needed to make a sling.

She touched the buttons of her shirt, hesitated. *Does it matter?* Oh, yes, it still mattered. But there was no real choice. She shivered, despite the heat, then wrenched it off, trying not to imagine a grainy telephoto image of her breasts appearing on newsstands around the country. She draped the shirt around Cleis's neck, tied the sleeves together. “Help me, damn it.” But Cleis was lost in a world of shock and pain. Jane thrust the arm into the support.

Later, Jane never really knew how she managed to get them both back down the trail safely. She womanhandled Cleis out of the rubble and laid her on the smooth grass. Cleis was too heavy to carry far, Jane could not drag her by the arms... She took off her belt, slid the leather tongue under the small of Cleis's back, under and around Cleis's belt, then threaded it through the buckle. Tugged. It should hold.

The forest was hot and close. The light was going rapidly. Jane plodded along, dragging Cleis behind her like a sled.

Two-thirds of the way down the trail, Ixbalum was there, standing in the leaf shadow, eyes invisible. *Eyes. Cameras. Don't think about it.* “Help me.” She did not know if Ixbalum understood or, if she did, whether she cared. “Please.”

Ixbalum turned and said something over her shoulder. Two men with the same sloping foreheads and close-set eyes of figures depicted in thousand-year-old glyphs stepped from behind her.

“Be careful,” Jane said, half to Ixbalum, half to the men. “Her

arm's broken.”

Ixbalum gestured for Jane to move aside. Jane stayed where she was. If she could just keep hold of the belt that connected her to Cleis she would not feel naked. “She might have hurt her head, too.” The men stepped around her. One gently pried the belt from Jane’s hand.

“It was a jaguar,” Cleis suddenly said, very clearly.

“What—” But they were picking Cleis up and Jane had to scramble to follow them down the trail.

The tallow candle flickered and sent shadows dancing over Cleis’s sleeping face. On her chair by the bed, Jane huddled deeper into the coarse cotton wrap that Ixbalum had held out to her without comment, and tried to stay awake. She felt feverish with too much sun and alcohol and fatigue, and she wondered when Ixbalum would be back.

Cleis opened her eyes. “This isn’t our shack.”

“You’re in Ixbalum’s house. How do you feel?”

“I don’t know yet. Confused. What happened?”

“A wall fell on you. About eight hours ago. Don’t move your arm. It’s splinted.”

“Broken?” Jane nodded. Cleis closed her eyes. Opened them. “Help me sit up.” She hissed with pain when Jane lifted her. “Feel like I’ve been run over by a truck.” She wrinkled her nose. “What’s that terrible smell?”

“Some salve or other Ixbalum put on your shoulder. You have some bad cuts.”

“On my left shoulder?” She seemed tense. Jane nodded. That answer did not seem to please her. “Anything else?”

“Just bruises.”

“Where?”

“Legs, mainly.”

“No... blood?”

“Except from your arm, no.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Tears ran, sudden and silent, down Cleis’s cheeks. Jane looked around; there was nothing in Ixbalum’s hut that might do as a tissue.

“You’re all right.” Jane realized she had never had to reassure anyone before; there had always been someone else, someone closer to do the comforting. “Really. No head injury. And your arm should be fine in a few—”

“I’m pregnant.”

Jane did not have the faintest idea how to respond.

“I found out for certain in Benque Viejo. Just over three months gone.” Jane got up, dipped her a bowl of water from the barrel by the door. “Thank you.” She looked up, met Jane’s eyes. “Aren’t you going to ask me if it’s good news?”

Cleis seemed thin and vulnerable, her eyes big, and Jane wished she knew how to comfort her. “Is it?”

Cleis nodded. “I’m forty-one. I’ve never loved anyone enough to have a child with them. Last year I realized I probably never would. So I decided to have one on my own. It took me ten months of trying. I thought that wall coming down...” She was crying again. This time Jane wiped away the tears with her hands.

“You’re all right. You’re all right.”

“I’m sorry.” And Jane thought she might be apologizing for more than the tears.

After a while, Cleis looked around at the smooth adobe walls, the herbs hanging from the roof. “Where’s Ixbalum?”

“She went out about two hours ago.” They had not exchanged a single word. Jane had just watched while the Mayan woman washed Cleis’s wounds, slathered them with an already prepared salve, bound them. When Ixbalum had gestured for her to help with the split-branch splints, she had.

“I want to get out of here.”

So did Jane. She never wanted to see Ixbalum, and those golden eyes that had seen her naked, again.

Cleis pushed aside the glass of water and the pills that Jane was holding out. “I don’t want them. Not yet. I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t like it.” She was flushed, sweaty. Jane wondered if she had made a mistake encouraging Cleis to walk back to their shack so soon. At least she was lying down now.

“Take the pills. You have a fever, and your arm must hurt.”

“Of course it hurts. Christ knows what crap she put on it. How do I know my arm’s not rotting off?”

They had already been through this. “I watched her wash it. She seemed to know what she was doing.” She should have come here and got the first-aid kit, proper antiseptics, antibiotic creams, but she had been too drunk, too shaken up from the conversation by the pool. And Ixbalum had been so... competent. She said, again, “I don’t know what the salve was but it was fresh—moist, green-smelling—and the bowl looked clean.”

“But why was it fresh? How did she know I’d need it?” Cleis was getting more and more fretful.

“Just take these pills. Everything will seem better when you’ve had some sleep.”

Cleis plucked for a moment at the blanket. “Oh, give me the goddamn things then.” She swallowed them. “Now will you listen to me?”

Jane sighed. “Go ahead.”

“I was looking at the glyph wall, wondering what was under all those vines, thinking maybe I should start clearing them away the next day, when it suddenly struck me how, I don’t know, how orderly the vines seemed. So I squatted down and had a closer look: they were growing from the dirt an even eight inches apart. They’d been cultivated. To hide the glyphs. I stood up, thinking maybe I’d tug on them a bit, see how—”

“No wonder the wall came down!” Jane’s voice was loud with relief, and it was then that she realized how scared she was.

“But I didn’t actually pull on them. I was just thinking about it.”

“You’d been drinking. We both had. All that beer...” *Go to sleep*, she was thinking. *I don’t want to hear this.*

“I didn’t touch that damn wall. The jaguar did it.”

Jane closed her eyes. Those dreams of danger and golden eyes.

“Did my face look like that when you were telling me about the jaguar that followed you home from the ruins?” Cleis reached out, grasped Jane’s wrist. Her hands felt thinner, dry. “Listen to me, Jane. Just listen. Don’t think, not yet. A jaguar knocked down that wall, wounding my shoulder, my left shoulder, like those young women in the glyphs. Ixbalum knew we were coming, and that I was hurt. She had to know, there’s no other explanation for the salve and her appearance on the trail. How much do you bet that some of those herbs hanging upside down from her roof are the

same as the plants pictured on the glyph wall?”

No, Jane thought, and felt the same fear as that day when she had turned around and seen a jaguar print crumbling inside her own tracks. “You’re feverish,” she said firmly. “Maybe there was a jaguar, yes. Maybe the ruins have become the stamping grounds of some solitary cat. But that doesn’t alter the fact that you need to get to sleep. Now. You need to get some rest and get well.”

Cleis was pale now, her lids drooping. “You believe me, I know you do. Because you’re scared. I’m scared.” Her chin was sinking onto her chest now, eyes barely open. “Ritual wounding... How did she know?” Her eyes closed. “Fucking thing. You’ll see...”

Jane sat where she was for more than half an hour, watching Cleis sleep, telling herself that Cleis was wrong.

Jane half woke in the middle of the night. Her muscles were relaxed, soft; she felt content. Across the room moonlight showed a tangle of blankets pushed back from an empty bed. There was some reason why she should be disturbed by that, but she was already falling back to sleep.

The next time she woke moonlight and shadow patterns had moved farther along the wall, and Cleis’s bed was no longer empty. She crept out of bed, padded over to the other bunk. She must have dreamed that Cleis was gone, earlier. Cleis was sleeping soundly, naked as usual. Jane checked to make sure no blood was seeping through the bandages, then simply watched her for a while.

Cleis woke late the next morning. Jane brought her water and fruit, checked her fever. “Not as bad as yesterday, but still too high for you to be out of bed.”

Cleis twisted restlessly under her blanket. “You should be out

working. Just because I have to spend the damn day in bed wasting precious time doesn't mean the rains are going to come later than planned."

"Your colors better," Jane said.

"Well, I hurt. My legs, my shoulders... strange places. All my tendons feel pulled."

"You'd better take some painkillers."

"I don't want any more drugs." She touched her stomach. "Anyway, they give me strange dreams. I feel exhausted from running around the jungle in my dreams." She looked up at Jane crossly. "*Now* what's the matter? I'm fine. I'll take the damn pills. Go do some work."

Work, at least, would mean she would not have to think.

"And before you go, hand me those notes. I can be of *some* use." Jane picked up the nearest camera case, opened the door. "And Jane, I think I was a bit delirious last night. Said some wild things. Just forget it, OK?"

Jane nodded mutely.

Cleis's fever lasted three days. She was up and about before then. "Don't tell me I should rest. I'm fine. Never better. I don't need two good arms to study the glyphs. And the rains won't wait."

The first couple of days at the site, Jane kept a surreptitious eye on Cleis, but gave up when Cleis caught her at it and glared. They worked in silence, Jane moving crabwise with camera and tripod along walls, changing filters, checking light levels; Cleis making notes, taking measurements, staring blankly at the trees and muttering to herself.

On the fourth day, Jane got back to the shack to find Cleis

sitting on the bed with her notes, and the remains of the splint piled in a heap on the table. “I took it off,” Cleis said. “My arm feels fine. It was probably just a sprain.”

There was nothing Jane could say. She cleared away the mess.

Something had changed since Cleis’s accident: children now ran past their shack, playing games, and more than once Jane had seen villagers walking through the trees to their milpas, mattocks on their shoulders. They had greeted her with a smile and a wave.

Sometimes, too, she would look up from her camera to see Cleis and Ixbalum together, out of earshot, talking. Jane wondered why Ixbalum was now willing to speak to Cleis; wondered what she was saying, what craziness she was spilling into Cleis’s eager ears. But she did not ask. Instead, she tried to push Cleis from her mind by working from first light until last. At night she would lie down, exhausted, and fall into a troubled sleep. Her dreams were vivid and fractured. More than once she woke to find Cleis gone from her bed. *Where do you go? Jane wanted to ask, and how?* But she never did. She imagined Cleis and Ixbalum gliding through the jungle, looking into the dark with their golden eyes...

One night her dreams were jumbled images: time running backward while she watched the ruins re-form into a city; vast storms overhead; Cleis talking to her earnestly, explaining. “Ixbalum doesn’t care what I know anymore. It doesn’t matter what the children tell me. I’m hers now.” Jane woke drenched in sweat. She looked over at Cleis’s bed: she was sleeping like a baby.

Am I going mad?

She needed to get away. She got out of bed, pulled on her clothes.

She waited until just after dawn to wake Cleis. “The photography is ahead of schedule, and we need supplies. I’m driving to Benque Viejo. I’ll be gone two or three days.”

Jane had expected to reach Benque Viejo, walk through its streets, loud with traffic and thick with the stink of leaded gasoline, and come slowly out of her nightmare. All the time she was pulling Belize dollars from her wallet for bottled gas and beer and canned food she wondered when it would stop feeling strange and dangerous to be back in the world.

She booked herself into a hotel and took a bath, but the water was only lukewarm and she found herself longing for the lake with its water cabbage and kingfisher.

After weeks of eating fish and fruit and corn, the steak dinner was alien and almost inedible. She left a tip on the table and walked from the restaurant into the street. The sky was dusky pink, streaked with pearl gray clouds. She wished Cleis could be there to see it. And then she knew she did not want to spend three days here in Benque Viejo when she could be at Kuchil Balum. The rains would be coming soon.

There was no time. Because when the rains came, Cleis would go back to New Mexico, and she...

What is happening to me? She did not know. All she knew was that she had to get back.

It was mid-afternoon of the next day when she parked in front of their shack. Cleis was not there. *Probably at the site. No matter*. Jane took her time unloading the supplies, nervous about seeing Cleis again.

Then there was nothing left to do; she had even washed the enamel plates that had been lying on the table—the same plates she and Cleis had eaten from the night before she had left for Benque Viejo. She tried not to worry. Cleis had probably been eating

straight from a can, too busy to take the time to prepare anything. She checked the shack one last time, then set off for the ruins.

The waterfall fell peacefully, a flock of black-and-orange orioles wheeled about the crown of a tree at the edge of the clearing, but there was no Cleis.

“Cleis!” The call echoed back, and Jane remembered the last time she had called to Cleis here. Had something else happened, something worse?

She ran through the ruins, calling, ducking in and out of half-excavated buildings. Nothing. Maybe she was at the village, talking to Ixbalum.

Two women stood at the well, a man plucked a chicken on his doorstep. They looked up when Jane ran into the clearing. “Cleis?” she asked. They frowned. “Cleis?” she asked again, pantomiming curls falling from her head. “Ah,” they said, and shook their heads.

Jane ran to Ixbalum’s hut. The door was closed. She banged on it with her fist. No reply. She banged again, then pushed her way in.

Without the candles, the hut was cool and dark. There was no one there. Jane brushed aside bunches of herbs on her way back to the door, then turned around again and plucked a leaf from each bundle. She could look at them later, see if any matched the ritual leaf on the glyphs.

She was just putting them in her pocket when Ixbalum came in.

The Mayan woman stood there with her arms folded, looking at Jane, looking at the floor where one leaf lay in the dirt. Jane picked it up and put it in her pocket with the others. This woman had already seen her naked, and drunk, and she was too concerned for Cleis to feel any shame at being found in Ixbalum’s hut. “I want to know where Cleis is.”

Ixbalum said nothing. Jane could feel herself being studied. This time she did not cringe.

“If you know where she is, I want to know. She’s pregnant, and I think that fall was more of a shock than she knows. I want to take her away from here.” *Do I?* “I’m asking for your help.”

Ixbalum moved so suddenly that Jane thought she was going to strike her, but Ixbalum reached up past Jane’s left ear and drew a leaf from one of the bunches. She held it out to Jane.

“I don’t understand.” But she did.

Ixbalum shook the leaf in front of Jane’s face. The message was unmistakable: Take it. Jane did. Ixbalum nodded, very slightly, then made a *Go now* gesture and turned her back.

Not knowing what else to do, knowing only that it was pointless shouting when neither understood the other, Jane went back out into the sunshine. The leaf was a big one, dull gray-green now, but it would have been bright when fresh, the color of the paste Ixbalum had smeared on Cleis’s shoulder. It had six points, and a tracery of veins like a spider’s web.

Night came as a rising cloud of living sound. The creaky chorus of thousands of insects rubbing together chitinous legs and wing combs echoed and reverberated through the trees. Fireflies streaked the dark with yellow.

Jane lay on her back on her bunk. Her arms were grazed and scratched from pushing aside branches, being caught by unexpected thorns. She had cut her palm on a frond of razor grass. Her throat was sore from calling. For the first time she was unclothed and not covered with a sheet. She lay naked to the world, as an offering. *Please come back. Just come back safe.*

Cleis returned at dusk the next day. She pushed the door open

and walked in slowly. Her hair was filthy, her face drawn. She stopped when she saw Jane. “You’re back early.” Her voice was flat with exhaustion.

Jane wanted to touch her face, hold her, make sure she was all right. “I got back yesterday. I’ve been waiting, and worrying. I went out looking.” Cleis swayed a little. “It’s dangerous to get too tired out there.”

Cleis sat down on her bunk, sighed, and closed her eyes as she leaned back against the wall. “I didn’t know you’d be here to worry.”

“I just...” Jane did not know how to explain why she had come back early. “I just wanted to know where you’ve been.”

Cleis’s eyes flicked open. Underneath, her skin was dark with fatigue, but the eyes themselves were bright, intense. “Do you? Do you really?”

Jane took a deep breath; she felt very vulnerable. “Yes.”

“The simple answer,” Cleis said, over a cup of hot tea, “is that I don’t know where I’ve been.” They were sitting at the table, a Coleman lamp drawing moths that fluttered against the screen. Jane had insisted that Cleis eat something, rest a little, before talking. “The complex answer... What do you know about dreaming?”

Jane was momentarily thrown off balance. “Not much.”

“Dreams are something I researched in my twenties, a long time before becoming interested in Mayan civilization. Simply stated, the human brain exists in three parts, one cobbled onto the other, communicating uneasily, each with different... behaviors. There’s the first evolutionary stage, the reptile or R-complex, the crocodile brain whose realm is sexual, aggressive, and ritual behavior. Then when mammals evolved from reptiles, they

developed the limbic system, which meant they perceived the world differently—in terms of signs and vividly sensory and emotional images. To do this, they had to bypass the crocodile brain, suppress it. They couldn't ignore it altogether, though, because it controlled a lot of the body's physical functions: the urge to fuck and fight and eat."

"What does all this have to do with where you were last night?"

"I'm getting there. Anyway, mammals found a way to turn the R-complex, the crocodile brain back on, harmlessly, during sleep. Which means, of course, that our dreams are the crocodile's dreams: sex and food and fighting." Her eyes were bright. "Haven't you ever wondered why we get clitoral erections during dreams?"

"No."

"Then some mammals developed the neocortex. We became self-conscious. Ever wondered why you can't read or do math in your dreams?"

Jane opened her mouth to say she had never noticed whether or not she could, then remembered countless dreams of opening books only to be frustrated by meaningless squiggles.

Cleis noticed and nodded. "The neocortex handles analytic recollections. It's usually turned off when we dream. That's why dreams are so hard to remember. When I change, I become a mammal with no neocortex. My waking state is like a dream state. When I change back, when I wake, I remember very little. So, in answer to your question: I don't know where I've been."

There was a bubble of unreality around Jane's head, around the whole room. She concentrated on her hands, neatly folded together before her on the table. *My hands are real.* "What are you trying to tell me?"

Cleis reached out and touched those neatly folded hands. "I

think you already know.”

Jane felt very calm. She pulled the six-fronded leaf from her pocket. “You believe in this.”

Cleis said nothing.

“You think... you think that those glyphs on the purdah wall are true. That the ritual wounding has purpose.” She remembered Ixbalum shaking the leaf in her face. “You think your accident wasn’t an accident. That Ixbalum infected you with some kind of, I don’t know, changing agent, a catalyst. That you can become... that you change into a jaguar.”

Now laugh. Tell me it isn’t true. But Cleis just nodded. “Yes.”

“Do you know how that sounds?” Her voice was very even, but her heart felt as though it was swelling; so big it pushed at her stomach, making her feel ill.

“You’ve seen the evidence with your own eyes—”

“I’ve seen nothing! A wall, some pictures, some leaves. You got drunk, pulled the wall on top of you, broke your arm, and probably took a bang on your head. Ixbalum fixed you up. You disappear at night and come back looking like hell, with a pseudo-scientific explanation that basically boils down to this: you can’t remember and you’re not responsible. All the evidence points not to the fact that you’ve discovered some mystical Mayan rite, but that something is wrong in your head, and getting worse.” She put the leaf down carefully on the table. “Look at it. Look at it hard. It’s just a leaf.”

“I’ve read the dates on the stelae, Jane. Kuchil Balum, Place of the Jaguar, was occupied up until the sixteenth century.”

“What has that got to do with—”

“Think!” Cleis’s voice was thin and hard, bright as wire. “The lowland Mayan culture began to die more than a millennium ago: population pressure, some say, and crop failures, but I’m fairly sure

it was more to do with a loss of faith. But not here. Here the power of the gods was tangible. Young girls from every family were sent to the purdah house at puberty. They were ritually wounded, infected. Some changed, most did not.” She searched Jane’s face. “Every family had the opportunity, the chance to join the elite. That welded the community together in ways we can’t even begin to comprehend.”

A moth fluttered frantically against the window screen.

“But even jaguar gods can’t stand against guns and missionaries,” Cleis continued. “So they pulled down their beautiful stone buildings and built themselves a village that appears unremarkable. They hid, but they’ve kept their culture, the only Mayans who have, because they have people like Ixbalum.”

They sat for a moment in silence. Jane stood up. “I’ll make some more tea.”

She busied herself with the kettle and teapot. There had to be a way to get Cleis to see past this delusion, some way she could persuade Cleis to pack her bags and leave with her and have her head X-rayed. She did not know what to say, but she knew it was important to keep the dialogue open, to keep Cleis anchored as much as possible in the real world.

The kettle boiled. Jane brought the pot to the table. “It’s not the same without milk,” she said.

Cleis smiled faintly. “Being an ignorant American, I don’t think it’s the same without ice.”

She seemed so normal... Jane asked sharply, “When you change, how do you think it affects your child?”

Cleis looked thoughtful. “I don’t know.” She leaned forward. Jane could feel Cleis’s breath on her face. She wanted to strain across the table, feel that breath hot on her throat, her neck. “You haven’t asked me how it feels to change. Don’t you want to know?”

Jane did. She wanted to know everything about Cleis. She nodded.

“It’s like walking through a dream, but you’re never scared, never being chased, because you’re the one who’s dangerous. I’m not me, I’m... other.”

“Other?”

“Here, now, I have a sense of self, I know who I am. I can use symbols. It’s...” She frowned. “It’s hard to describe. Look at it this way.” She patted the table. “I know this table is made of wood, that wood comes from trees, and that this wood is pine. Underlying all that knowledge is the ability to work in symbols—tree, furniture, wood—the ability to see beyond specifics. When I’m changed, symbols, words... they become meaningless. Everything is specific. A barba jalote is a barba jalote, and a chechem is a chechem. They’re distinct and different things. There’s no way to group them together as ‘tree.’ The world becomes a place of mystery—unknowable, unclassifiable—and understanding is intuitive, not rational.”

She toyed absently with the leaf.

“I’m guided by signs: the feel of running water, the smell of brocket deer. The world is unpredictable.” She paused, sighed, laid her hands on the table. “I just am,” she said simply.

The rainy season was not far off. The days were hotter, more humid, and Jane worked harder than before because when she was busy she did not have to deal with Cleis, did not have to look at her, think about how her skin might feel, and her hair. She did not have to worry about getting Cleis to a hospital.

The nights were different.

They would sit outside under the silky violet sky, sipping rum,

talking about the jungle.

“The jungle is a siren,” Cleis said. “It sings to me.” Sweat trickled down the underside of her arm. Jane could smell the rich, complex woman smells. “Especially at night. I’ve started to wonder how it would be during the rains. To pad through the undergrowth and nose at dripping fronds, to smell the muddy fur of a paca running for home and know its little heart is beat beat beating, to almost hear the trees pushing their roots farther into the rich mud. And above, the monkey troops will swing from branch to branch, and maybe the fingers of a youngster, not strong enough or quick enough, will slip, and it’ll come crashing down, snapping twigs, clutching at leaves, landing on outflung roots, breaking its back. And it’ll be frightened. It’ll lie there eyes round, nose wet, fur spattered with dirt and moss, maybe bleeding a little, knowing a killer is coming through the forest.” Cleis’s nostrils flared.

Jane sipped her rum. She could imagine the jaguar snuffing at the night air, great golden eyes half closed, panting slightly; could taste the thin scent molecules of blood and fear spreading over her own tongue, the anticipation of the crunch of bone and the sucking of sweet flesh. She shivered and sipped more rum, always more rum. When the sun was up and she looked at the world through a viewfinder she did not need the numbing no-think of rum, but when there was just her and Cleis and the forest’s nightbreath, there was nowhere to hide.

And so every night she staggered inside and fell across her bed in a daze; she tried not to smell the salty sunshiny musk of Cleis’s skin, the sharp scents of unwashed hair, tried not to lean toward the soft suck and sigh of rum fumes across the room. Tried, oh tried so hard, to fall asleep, to hear nothing, see nothing, feel nothing.

But there would be nights when she heard Cleis sit up, when she could almost feel the weight of Cleis’s gaze heavy on the sheet Jane kept carefully pulled up to her chin, no matter how hot she

was. On those nights she kept her eyes shut and her mind closed, and if she woke in the middle of the night and felt the lack of heat, the missing cellular hum of another human being, she did not look at Cleis's bed, in case it was empty.

But one night, Jane woke sitting up in bed with her eyes open after a dream of sliding oh so gently over another woman, sliding in their mutual sweat, and she saw that Cleis was gone.

I'm alone, she thought, and was suddenly aware of every muscle in her body, plump and hot, of her thighs sliding together, wet and slippery, of her skin wanting to be bare. *There are no cameras here*. She laid her hand on her stomach, felt tendons tighten from instep to groin. And before she could really wake up and realize what she was doing—tell herself that this was not the same as being alone in her room, one she could lock—she was standing naked before Cleis's empty bed, before the wooden corner post. It came to mid-thigh, a four-by-four rounded off at the top and polished. She stroked it with one hand, her belly with the other. Her pubic hair was a foot away from the post; a foot, then eight inches, six. She sank to her knees, rubbed her face on the post, held one breast, then the other. One thick drop of milky juice ran down the inside of her thigh. She pressed her belly to the wood, stood up slowly, feeling the top of the post run between her breasts, down her stomach, her abdomen, then moved away very slightly, oh so very slowly, so the post skipped a beat then skimmed the tops of her thighs.

“Oh yes,” she said, imagining Cleis lying face down in front of her, moonlight on her buttocks. “Oh yes.”

She crouched down, crooning, leaning over the post, palms resting on the bunk, feet braced on the cool dirt floor. She began to lower herself.

The door creaked open. Jane froze. Something behind her coughed the tight throaty cough of a jaguar; another drop of milky juice ran down her thigh. The animal behind her rumbled deep in

its chest. Jane did not dare turn around. It rumbled again: *Don't stop*. Her vulva was hot and slick and her heart thundered. The cough behind her was closer, tighter, threatening: *Do it now*.

Jane licked her lips, felt the golden eyes traveling up her achilles, her calves, the back of her knees, the tendons in her thighs, the cheeks of her bottom. She dare not turn, and she dare not disobey, nor did she want to.

“Ah,” she said softly, and laid her cheek on the sheet. *Between Cleis's shoulder blades*. Touched the rumpled blanket above her head. *Cleis's rough curls*. And lowered herself onto the beautifully smooth oh so lovely rounded and rich wood. *The swell and heat of Cleis*. She moved gently. “Oh, I love you.” And she felt breath on her own clenching bottom, the close attention of whatever was behind her, and suddenly she knew who, what, was behind her and loved her, it. “Yes, I love you,” she said, but it was a gasp as she felt the wood round and slick between her legs slide up and down and her breath caught and “Ah,” she said, “ah,” and she was grunting, and then she felt a sharp cool pressure against her shoulder where claws unsheathed and rested, possessive, dimpling the skin, and she was pulling herself up and over that wooden corner, *Cleis's soft plump slippery-now cheek*, her face tight with effort, and her breasts flattened on the bed as she thrust and her chin strained forward and the muscles under her skin pumped and relaxed and sweat ran down her legs and the room was full of a rumbling purr. Fur brushed her back and she was pressed into the bed by an enormous weight, a weight with careful claws, and the heat between her and the wood was bubbling up in her bones and “Ah!” she shouted, “ah!” hardly able to breathe, and could not stop, not now not now, and she humped and rocked and grunted and came, curling around the bunk *around Cleis* like a fist. Sweat ran from her in rivers; a pulse in her temple thumped.

Claws slid back in their sheaths, the heat and weight withdrew. A throaty rumble: *Don't move*. And then it was gone.

Jane buried her face in the damp sheets that smelled of Cleis, that smelled of her and Cleis, and cried. *I don't know where I've been,* Cleis had said, *when I change back, I remember very little.*

When Jane woke up, Cleis was fast asleep in her bunk.

The mid-morning sun poured like buttermilk over Jane where she knelt on the turf before the glyph wall.

What is happening to me?

She rested her fingertips on the glyphs. “What do you really say?” she whispered.

She was alone. Cleis had gone into the forest that morning, saying she wanted to examine the area for evidence of fruit tree cultivation.

She found herself standing by the fall, staring into the sheeting water, mind empty.

Wake up! she told herself fiercely. *Think. Don't let this just happen to you...* She jumped fully clothed into the water.

She bobbed back to the surface, gasping. It was cold. *Good.* She swam back to the bank, climbed out just long enough to strip off her sodden clothes.

She did not even think about whether or not anyone might be watching.

She dived back in and swam in a fast crawl to the waterfall, let it thunder on her head for a moment; swam again.

This is real, she told herself. *This: sun, water, air. Not dreams, not Cleis's delusions.*

She swam until she was exhausted, then climbed out onto the bank and lay in the sun. She fell asleep.

When she woke, the memory of the dream, the soreness between her legs, was still vivid. She sighed. Her rational mind told her one thing, all the evidence *All my needs* told her another. Which did she want to be real? She did not know.

Her clothes had dried in a wrinkled pile. Jane shook them out one by one and put them back on.

The inside of the shack was hotter than the outside. Cleis had been cooking.

“Here,” she said, and handed Jane a tin plate. “Beans and tortillas and fresh corn. Let’s eat outside.”

Jane wondered where the food had come from, but obeyed silently. Cleis seemed different. Cheerful. Jane wondered if it was anything to do with last night, felt the world spin a little. A dream. It had been a dream.

They sat very close together on the step, arms brushing against each other as they ate. Jane watched the small muscles along Cleis’s forearm ripple as she chased beans with her fork, wiped at the juice with her tortilla. Her arms seemed thicker, the muscles more solid than they had been. Jane wondered if that was a result of pregnancy. Women plumped out a little, didn’t they? She studied Cleis. Not long ago her muscles had been long and flat, face hollow as though the intensity of her concentration burned away all subcutaneous fat. Her eyes had peered bright from dark hollows. Now she seemed squarer, stronger, more lithe.

“I’d like to take more pictures of you.”

“You already have all the pictures you’ll need for that article.”

Jane had almost forgotten the reason she had come to Belize. She felt as though she had always been here, always eaten from tin plates and drunk rum with Cleis. “I didn’t mean that. I mean of

you, as you... as your pregnancy develops. I want to document your changes.”

Changes. The word hung in the air between them.

“Ow!” A sharp pain shot through Jane’s left breast. “Christ!” Another shooting pain jerked her arm sending the tin plate flying, beans spattering on Cleis’s shorts. Cleis jumped to her feet. Jane clapped a hand to the fire in her breast.

“Move your hand.” All Jane could do was gasp. “Move your hand, Jane. I need to see.”

But Jane was scared. She did not know what was happening, was afraid to see. “It hurts!”

“Move your hand.” This time Jane let Cleis move her hand away, did not protest as she unbuttoned her shirt. She turned her head away as Cleis sucked in her breath.

“What is it?”

“Botfly. It’s eating its way out of your breast.”

“Get it out! Get it out!” Jane wanted to rip at her breast, at the thing that was eating her flesh, but Cleis was holding her hands.

“Listen to me. Fasten up your shirt again. It’s not big. There won’t be any permanent damage, but I have to go get something. Can you do that?”

Jane nodded, thinking Cleis meant to get something from the shack. But Cleis set off down the track that led to the village.

“Wait!”

“I won’t be long. Be brave, bonita.”

Jane sat with her breast cupped in her hand. *Bonita.*

It must have been from that mosquito bite she got the day Cleis broke her arm. The egg of the botfly had hatched on her skin

and burrowed its way down into her breast. Now it was big enough to need food. It would stay in her breast, feeding on her flesh, breathing through the hole it would chew through her skin, until it was large enough to hatch into a botfly. Unless they could get it out. The pain was excruciating.

Bonita.

Cleis returned, slightly out of breath and slick with sweat.

“Chew this.” She held out a large dried leaf.

“Where did you get it?” Cleis just looked at her. Ixbalum, of course. “What is it?”

“Tobacco.”

“Tobacco? What good will that do? That won’t take away the pain!”

“It’s not for pain. Just chew it.” Cleis tore off a piece, held it out. Jane took it, reluctantly, put it in her mouth, chewed gingerly.

“Tastes terrible.”

“Just chew. Don’t swallow. No, chew some more.” Cleis put down the rest of the leaf and started to unbutton Jane’s shirt again. Jane watched her, saw the way the skin around her eyes wrinkled in concentration, the faint sparkle of perspiration on her lip. Jane wondered how those long brown hands would feel wrapped around her breasts. She could feel her color rising. She was afraid that her nipples would harden. She cleared her throat. “How does it look?”

“See for yourself.”

Jane, still chewing, looked. There was a hole, no bigger than the knob on her watch, about three inches right of her nipple. So small for so much pain.

Cleis held out her hand. “Spit it out.” Jane did, feeling a little self-conscious. Cleis pinched off a tiny clump of soggy pulp and rolled it between the strong fingers of her right hand. “This might

hurt.” She put her left hand on Jane’s breast, one finger on each side of the hole, then spread them slightly, so that the pink under her nails turned white and the larva’s breathing hole stretched open. Her fingers were very gentle, very precise. Very human. Cleis plugged the hole neatly with the tobacco. “Very brave, bonita. The nicotine will kill it. Then we’ll pull it out with a pin.” They watched each other’s faces as Cleis began to fasten Jane’s shirt again, then hesitated. Cleis’s eyes were very dark, and a vein in her throat pulsed.

Jane panicked. “The food was nice. Thank you.”

Cleis studied her a moment, then half turned away. “Don’t thank me, thank our mysterious benefactor. When I got back this afternoon, I found a little pile of stuff, tortillas, corn, fresh fruit for later, on the doorstep.”

Jane closed her eyes against sudden nausea as the real world threatened to come unglued.

Cleis, still not looking at her, did not notice. “They’ve probably finally figured out we’re not burning-eyed fanatics clutching bowdlerized Bibles in one hand and McDonald’s franchises in the other.”

Jane nodded, as though she agreed, but she knew: the food was a gift, to their new god.

Every afternoon when they got back from the site there was something: sometimes fruit, or a plucked chicken; eggs; once a clay pot full of some sticky alcoholic beverage. They drank that on the night Cleis used a pin to pull the plug of tobacco, black now, from Jane’s breast, and then teased out the botfly larva. Jane held the pin with the skewered larva over the gas ring until it was ashes. She had bad dreams that night, dreams of being eaten alive by wriggling maggots, but when she woke up, Cleis was there. “You killed it, Jane. It’s dead.”

Most nights, Jane woke up to find Cleis gone. She did not speak of it. *Don't reinforce the madness*, she told herself, but sometimes she wondered whose madness. She felt as though she were being sucked into an increasingly angled world, where the beliefs of Cleis and Ixbalum and the villagers, the evidence of forest and ruin, all made sense, if only she would let go of everything that made her sane. Everything that made her human.

The forest is a siren, Cleis had said, and Jane could hear it singing, day and night.

Cleis was changing, spending more and more time in her own world, content to drowse on the warm, sunlit terraces, or stare off into the distance while Jane worked.

Perhaps it was her pregnancy. Jane did not know much about the process, but Cleis grew visibly more pregnant every day, which she did not think was normal.

“We should take you to Benque Viejo for a checkup,” she said one afternoon when Cleis was waking from a nap. “You’re too big for four months.”

Cleis shrugged. “The process is being accelerated. Jaguar gestation is only three months.”

For the first time in her life, Jane deliberately broke an expensive piece of equipment: she threw the camera she was using against a rock and did not bother to pick up the pieces.

Now when Jane woke up in the mornings she could taste the damp in the air, a different damp, cold, spelling the end of their time here.

Cleis seemed to smell it, too. She became restless, always moving about, standing up two minutes after she sat down. She was eating less and less, and barely bothered to listen when Jane told her she should eat, for her own health and her child’s.

Sometimes Jane would come back from the site and find Cleis staring at something—a pen, the stove—as though it were utterly alien.

Cleis began to stay away for longer stretches: all night, then twenty-four hours.

“Why?” Jane wanted to know. “Why are you doing this?”

“I can’t help it. It... everything is so simple out there. I don’t need to worry about always having to be better than everyone else just to stay in place. I smell the green and it’s like opium. It makes me forget.”

And Jane knew she was losing her.

Four days later, Cleis disappeared.

She did not come home one night, or the next day. One night stretched to two, then a week. Jane thought she would go mad. She searched the jungle by day, left messages on rocks and carved words on trees with a knife. She cooked every night, hoping the smell of food would draw Cleis back.

She still went to the site to take pictures. There were probably a hundred thousand glyphs, some of which would not survive another another rainy season. And there was always wildlife to photograph. If she just kept taking pictures, Cleis would come back. She would. They would go back to New Mexico together, and Jane would alternately help Cleis put together her notes and visual evidence, and work on a book of photographs of Belize. Everything would turn out all right. She just had to make sure she had everything done for when Cleis returned, before the rains.

One day, walking through the trees with her camera in search of a purple-throated hummingbird, Jane heard a strange noise. A pattering. Something cold hit her face, then her leg, her shoulder. All around her leaves started to bounce, and the stem of a bromeliad trembled as it filled. The patter became a rush.

Rain.

Rivulets of the stuff began to run down the trunk at her back and the rush became a hiss. There was too much water for the forest to absorb and within seconds there was a muddy brown stream running past her feet. A leaf floated past, with a spider balanced on it, as though it were a life raft.

One week became two, then three. Jane wandered in the rain, imagining Cleis as a jaguar, drinking from the new pools, licking raindrops from her whiskers. Jane no longer left written messages, only her scent, and still Cleis did not come.

One night, something woke Jane. She sat up, listened: the rain had stopped. She got up, went outside. All around the shack there were jaguar tracks pressed into the mud.

“Cleis?” But she whispered, afraid. The windows of her shack were screen, and the door flimsy. There were many jaguars in the forest.

When she woke again in the morning, the rain was thrumming steadily on the tin roof. She sighed, pulled on a long shirt and opened the door to take a look at the world.

There, curled in the mud, naked and still, was Cleis. Jane stood in the open doorway unable to move, throat tight. Then she ran down the steps and knelt beside her. Cleis’s hair was reddish brown with mud and a large scratch stretched over her ribs. She looked nine months pregnant.

“Cleis?” Jane touched her, hesitantly, then jerked back when she felt cold flesh. But Cleis opened her eyes.

Getting her up the steps and into the shack was harder than dragging her down the trail, but Jane managed, eventually. She stripped the covers from Cleis’s bunk so they would not get wet, sat her down. “Now you keep still while I put a kettle on.”

Cleis sat like a cold soapstone carving while Jane rubbed her down with a towel and talked about the rain, the hot tea she would make, the photographs she had been taking. After a few minutes, Cleis began to tremble. Jane kept rubbing.

“That’s right. You’re home now. You’re safe with me.” The trembling became great rolling shudders. Jane wrapped a clean dry towel around her. “You don’t have to worry about anything. I’ll take care of you.” She stroked Cleis’s hair. “While you’ve been gone I’ve been at the site every day, taking pictures. It’s changed with the rains, got more lush.” Cleis’s eyes were still blank, uncomprehending. “The waterfall used to be so clear but now it’s muddy. The other day I saw a turtle sunning itself on the bank...” She talked on and on, about everything and nothing, until she felt a hot tear splash on her shoulder. Then she made the tea, guided Cleis’s hand to the cup. Watched until she was sure Cleis would hold the tea without burning herself.

“Good. Now you drink that all up while I put a fresh sheet on this bunk, and then we’ll get you tucked in nice and cozy and you can sleep for a while.” Cleis watched her while she made the bed. Her eyes were deep sunk, surrounded by grainy brown circles the color of tannin. “There. Everything will look better after some sleep.”

In sleep, Cleis looked fragile. Her eyelids were delicate with purples: lavender, indigo, violet. Her face was drawn, leached of color; a kind of dirty tan. She had kicked the sheet down to her waist and Jane could see that her breasts were a different shape.

She would give birth soon.

But that’s impossible.

Jane sighed. She no longer knew what was possible and what was not. All that mattered was that Cleis had come back. She stroked the lean hand lying on top of the sheet. The fingernails

were filthy now, and ragged, but Jane only saw the way that hand had opened her shirt, weeks ago, had gently moved away her own hand, had made her feel better.

She lifted the hand and kissed it. “Oh, I have missed you.” Cleis slept on. “As soon as you’re well enough, we’ll leave this place.”

She got up and started packing.

Cleis slept for nearly ten hours, then woke up long enough to be fed some soup. When the soup was gone, she went back to sleep.

When it got dark, Jane lit all three Coleman lamps, even though the heat was overwhelming. If Cleis woke up in the middle of the night, the first thing she wanted her to see was light. Bright, artificial light. She stood by Cleis’s bed, hesitating: the other bunk was covered in open suitcases and piles of clothes. Moving them would wake her. Jane drew back the sheet and fitted herself carefully around the strange mix of bone and muscle and pregnancy that was Cleis, and fell asleep almost instantly.

When she woke up it was still the middle of the night. Cleis was whimpering, burrowing into her neck. “Sshh, sshh. I’m here. What is it?” But then Cleis was clinging to her and crying and Jane was stroking her side, shoulders arms side of breast ribs belly-bulge hip and back, up and down, telling her it was all right, it was all right, and then the heat Jane felt was more than the hiss and spit of Coleman lamps, more than the warmth of a humid Belize night. And Cleis was no longer sobbing on her neck but kissing it, and the arms wrapped so tightly around her were pulling her in, until their mouths were almost close enough to touch, and Jane’s arm was under Cleis’s neck, supporting her head, and her leg was wrapped over Cleis’s and her other hand stroking her breast, her hips, her thighs.

“Kiss me,” Cleis said.

Jane expected her lips to be dry and rough, but they were soft as plums.

At first they made love as though they were underwater: coming together too fast, bumping, drifting apart, but then they were moving together, rising toward the surface, a roaring in their ears, and the muscles in arms and thighs and belly were clenched tight as each breathed the other’s breath as though it were the only oxygen available.

“Show me I’m real,” said Cleis, and slid her palm up to the hot slick between Jane’s thighs. “Come in my hand.” And Jane did.

They lay in each other’s arms, slippery as newborns, while Jane kissed Cleis’s forehead, again and again.

“I’ve packed almost everything,” Jane said as they ate breakfast. Cleis was wearing a long shirt. Nothing else would fit her. “We need to get you to a clinic as soon as possible. You look like you’re ready to give birth any minute.”

Cleis rested a hand on her belly. She nodded but did not say anything.

“I’ll check the Jeep as soon as we’ve had breakfast.” Jane decided not to mention her worries about the passability of the trail in this wet weather. “Will you be all right for the journey?”

Cleis moved her eyes sideways, lifted her shoulders slightly in a *Who knows?* gesture.

“Well... do you feel well enough at this moment?”

Cleis nodded, then seemed to realize she would have to give more than that. “Everything is very strange for me. Different. Sitting here, talking to you, is like looking through a kaleidoscope. Someone keeps twisting it out of shape, and then I don’t know who

you are, or who I am, or what we're doing here. Talking is sometimes... difficult."

Jane did not want to ask the next question, because she was scared of the answer. But she had to know. "Do you... is leaving what you want to do?"

Cleis hesitated, then laid a hand on her belly and nodded. Jane knew she would get no more from her for a while.

They set off at midday. It was cold, and pouring with rain. Jane helped Cleis to the passenger seat, more because of Cleis's mental state than any physical disability. Cleis moved easily, muscles plainly visible beneath her skin. Once she was in the Jeep Jane wrapped several shirts around her bare legs.

It was slow going. Twice, Jane had to climb out of the Jeep and tuck canvas under rear wheels that could find no traction in mud. But she did not mind the rain or the mud or the cold: she was getting Cleis to safety.

All this time, Cleis sat in her bundle of clothes, silent and distant.

Eight miles down the trail they came upon a tree that had fallen across their path. Jane turned off the engine. "Stay here. I'll go take a look."

The trunk was too big to drive over and the undergrowth on either side of the trail too thick to drive through. Jane walked back to the Jeep. "I'm going to try to hack us a path around this thing." She reached under the driver's seat and pulled out the machete. "Just stay here and keep the windows and doors locked." Cleis did not seem to hear her. Jane rolled up both windows and locked the doors, hesitated, then took the car keys. "It might take a while."

Jane hurried, swinging the machete heedlessly through vines and flowers. Her arms were aching and her face itched with spattered sap by the time she had a path cleared.

She hurried back to the Jeep. “That should—”

Cleis was gone. A pile of empty clothes lay on the passenger seat.

“No,” Jane said quietly, “not now.” She would not let the forest have her. “Do you hear me?” she bellowed. “I won’t let you have her!”

She crashed through the undergrowth, smashing past branches, pushing through tangles, the machete forgotten. She had no idea how long she trampled through the forest, blinded by grief and rage, but eventually she found herself by a stream, sobbing. She wiped the tears away from her eyes. Maybe Cleis was already back at the Jeep. Maybe she had just wandered off for a moment then remembered who she was. Yes. She should get back to the Jeep.

But the Jeep was still empty. Jane sat behind the wheel, staring into the trees until it was dark. Then she switched on the lights and drove back to the shack.

She did not unpack the Jeep. For the next five nights she left a Coleman lamp burning on the step, just in case. She barely slept anymore, but wandered through the trees, calling. On the sixth night she did not go back to the shack. Perhaps if she stayed out here, lived as Cleis lived, she could understand. Her back itched; her shirt was filthy. She took it off, left it hanging on a branch.

That night she slept curled up on a tree bough, like a jaguar. Like Cleis. She woke hours later, heart kicking under her ribs. Did jaguars dream of falling?

The next day she wandered aimlessly through the forest, eating fruit where she found it. She ran her hand across the surface of a puddle, wondered what it would be like to have paws heavy enough to break a paca’s back, how it would feel to lean down to

lap with a great pink tongue, to see the reflection of round golden eyes and white whiskers. She wandered. Time ceased to mean anything much.

Maybe it would not be so bad to walk through the forest on four feet. The world would look very different, but things would become very simple. And she would be with Cleis.

She found herself back at the shack, taking a large knife from the table. It did not take long to get back to the ruins. She knelt by the glyph wall. She would cut open her own shoulder and ask Ixbalum to give her the change salve. Then she could join Cleis. They could be together. She laid the knife against the muscle of her left shoulder, and cut. Her blood was shockingly red, the pain incredible.

She blinked at the knife. “What am I doing?”

She had to find a way to get Cleis out, not to lose herself. She threw the knife away from her, and stood up, holding her arm. The cut was deep. It needed cleaning up. She had to get back to the shack.

That night, as she lay on her bunk, bandaged shoulder aching, the endless chorus of frogs and insects fell silent. Jane was suddenly full of hope. She pulled on her boots and went to the door. Then she heard it, a low moaning yowl, like a cat in heat. A big cat. The yowl leapt to a scream, then another. The scream turned into a tight cough. She heard harsh panting, hissing, and then that terrible scream.

“Cleis!” Cats sometimes fought over territory. Jane snatched up the lantern and ran out into the dark, following the noise. Fifty yards into the trees, the screaming stopped, and there was a thrashing in the undergrowth, then silence. Jane ran harder.

There was no sign of the cat, but it had flattened an area of undergrowth with a diameter of about ten feet, and the grass was covered in blood. She cast about for tracks, or a trail of blood,

anything. There was nothing. Exhausted, she headed back to the shack and lay down, refusing to imagine what might have happened to Cleis.

Someone was shaking her shoulder. Jane opened her eyes. Cleis stood before her naked, gaunt, holding something. Must be a dream. Cleis was pregnant.

The shaking did not stop.

Gaunt. Jane sat bolt upright. Cleis was holding a baby. “Take her. She can’t stay with me.” Cleis thrust the child at Jane, then opened the door.

“Wait!”

“I can’t. She’s been fed. Take her away from here.”

“No. I’m not going anywhere without you.” Jane climbed out of bed, scrunched the blanket into a nest, and laid the child down. “I’ll follow you, leave the baby here.”

“You can’t.”

“I can. I will. You’re not well, Cleis. You need to leave with me. I want you to. Please.” Cleis stood, uncertain. “Don’t you want to?”

“Yes!”

“Then why don’t you?”

“I can’t!” Cleis backed up against the wall.

Jane sat down. She did not want Cleis to bolt. “Come and sit. Just for a moment. We’ll have some tea.”

“No. I can’t, Jane. I really can’t. I have to stay here. Under the trees. It’s where I belong now. I need to stay.”

“You need to look after your child.”

“No. Don’t you see? It’s stronger even than that. I need to be out there, to live. I need it, like I need water, or air.”

“I’ll follow you. I’ll leave the child here and I’ll follow you.”

“Then she’ll die,” Cleis said sadly. And it was that sadness, that resignation that finally told Jane that Cleis would not change her mind. Could not. That Cleis would rather run through the trees than stay here, or anywhere, with Jane. If it was not for the tiny life on the bed...

“What if she... what if she grows up to be like you?”

“She won’t. If you take her away. She won’t miss what she’s never had.”

“I love you.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” She moved to the bed, picked up the baby, put her in Jane’s arms. “Love my child for me.”

They did not say good-bye.

She wrapped the child carefully in a clean shirt and walked down to the village. Two women took one look at her face and went back inside their huts. Ixbalum’s hut was empty. A bunch of children gathered at the edge of the trees. Jane stood in the middle of the clearing and addressed the air. “Where is Ixbalum?”

A chicken clucked.

“Where is Ixbalum?”

A woman put her head out of a hut and called to one of the children, shouting instructions. The girl listened, looked sideways at Jane, then darted into the forest. Jane waited patiently. The baby in her arms yawned and opened its eyes. They were the color of brand-new copper pennies.

The girl came back with Ixbalum.

“You did this,” Jane said finally. She thought she saw pity on Ixbalum’s face, but perhaps she imagined it. “I need your help. I’ll need milk.” She pointed to her breasts, then the child. Ixbalum walked over to her hut and disappeared inside. Jane waited. She did not know what else to do.

Ixbalum came back out holding a pile of soft rags and a gourd. She held them out. The gourd was full of milk. Some spilled on Jane’s thumb as she took it. She sucked at it: rich, not cow’s milk.

“You knew, didn’t you? You knew.”

But Ixbalum shook her head wearily and pointed to Jane, to the baby, and made a flicking motion with her hand. It was unmistakable: *Go away*.

“I’ll go for now, because that’s what she wanted. But you better... you keep her safe for me. Just keep her safe.”

The journey to Benque Viejo was not difficult. No more trees had fallen across the skidder trail and the baby, whom she called Penny, because of her eyes, slept soundly in the cardboard box Jane had strapped into the passenger seat. She stayed in Benque Viejo only long enough to buy diapers and baby formula and a feeding bottle, fill tanks with enough gas to get her to the capital city, Belmopan, and to make a phone call to the niece of the ex-governor, on Ambergris.

“Katherine, I want someone who will fill out a birth certificate, no questions asked.”

“Who on earth for?”

“My adopted child.”

Silence. “Well, that’s a turn up for the books. Are you sure? What will people think if you get back to England with a baby in tow?...”

“I don’t care about that anymore.” And she did not. She really did not.

She climbed back in the Jeep. Penny opened those startling eyes, stretched. Jane wondered if she would look like Cleis when she was older.