

# A Deeper Jungle

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The deeper into the dark, oppressive jungle you go, the quieter the world around you becomes. Birds cease to chirp and the air grows slowly stagnant. Even the branches do not want to move at your passing, they groan and creak in protest as you push by. The leaves are as stiff as natural blades and cut into whatever skin is bared by movement or design. Your gloves, made of stiff leather, are the only things keeping your fingers usable.

Ahead of you, the jungle seems to grow away from you without moving, even as you struggle forward, taunting you with its seemingly never ending darkness. There had been some light earlier, but the presence of smoke, long lingering, began to block out the already feeble rays. This strange smelling fog has been with you since the oppression began, tainting your gear with the smell of burning wood and...something else.

The trail you are following seems to be well trodden, but the branches and vines of the forest seem to have existed there for years upon years, and yet the barren dirt has not been disturbed. There is not even a dead leaf or fallen nut or seed on the dusty track. The lack of rough and jutting rocks makes traveling the shoulder-wide path a little easier, and it is all that keeps you moving forward.

There, ahead of you, is a small lull in the branches, where they become more flexible, more natural. Thrusting a lightly armored arm through the bramble, at the risk of your fingers, you are able to tear through, stumbling into a grisly scene.

A bloody corpse grips a sharply angled boulder with fingers still held together by moist tendons. Muscles glitter under an unnatural light where not replaced by empty patches of white bone or darker organs. High above the desperate grasp, mounted on the head of a wooden walking staff, a holy relic glows, casting a sickly light through the darkened, oppressive clearing. The staff is tipping slightly, as if hastily jammed between the two halves of the jagged rock. The rotting hand is grasping what little purchase it can claim on the wooden stock.

Stepping forward slightly, you see more of the ghastly tableau. The stone beneath the corpse is stained red with still glistening blood and skin, at least, where the stone had not already soaked it up. It would seem that this had happened quite recently, for the organs held inside the ribcage had not yet liquefied, in fact, they are held in quite completely.

But how could that be? You heard no tell of magic, you saw no explosions of light nor rustle of a battle scene. The relic held high is that of a dead god, a god long since forgotten and abandoned, a god from before the pantheon which you now hold dear. You cannot even recall its name...

Leaning in closer out of pure, morbid fascination, you come face to face with the eyeless sockets, the skull grinning back at you with the barest muscles holding the jaw intact. Your expression changes from curious to fascinated to horrified realization as a breeze of sickening breath is expelled from between the bared teeth.

Reeling back in revulsion, you stagger away from the living corpse, grasping at the trees for support. The unnaturally stiff branches relent to your grip, but take their toll from you in blood. The light of the relic shakes as the corpse attempts to move. The skull vibrates in agonized stress, and fingers grip the ribcage in tight suffering.

"I cannot see—" A deep, raspy voice, a death rattle formed into words manage to eke themselves out of the putrid flesh. Gasping breaths deepen, then fade to death yet again.

"Who are you—?" Looking up from where you crouch in sickened, stunned revulsion, you have to struggle to keep from retching onto the dusty, barren ground. There is no response from the undead abomination, perhaps it is dead now.

No, it is still alive, still moving slightly, as if searching. He...? He manages to draw in enough breath to speak again, "You are safe here—"

"Safe here?" You gag, out of impulse, and try to speak again, "How am I—"

As if unhearing, the corpse continues. “My god has protected me, and he shall do the same for you—.”

You stand up, slightly shaky, and disbelieving as to what lays before you. The corpse shakes and groans again, and there is a slight *snap-pop-thump* as a knee-cap falls from the rotted tendons to the dry, hard-packed dirt, coming to rest next to a desiccated tibia and fibula. Where the foot is stands as a mystery.

Is he speaking of the relic? You think as the now amputated limb shifts slightly, as if relieved by the loss of weight. Should you back away, or stay and listen, hoping that the raw muscle can still move the jaw enough to reveal the horrible story behind this macabre oasis? Shuddering with the thought of what lays before you, you approach the boulder.

“Who are you?” You try to get closer, to call out, but the non-existent smell you have conjured for yourself keeps you from your goal. There is no response, so you call out again, feeling foolish for speaking to a cadaver. “What has happened here?”

“Ah, you remained—” The ‘voice,’ if it can even be called that, groans weakly from the still moist throat. Moist with what, however, is a mystery. “I can feel your breath.”

“My breath?” It is then you remember that there is no breeze here, nothing to rustle the leaves, nor carry the scent of an animal. If he could not hear, he could possibly feel the movement of your quickened, nervous breaths.

“Come—sit—” A hand, twisted around an empty ribcage, creaks and pops slightly, easily the most mobile limb of all. It rises and gestures stiffly off to your left, to empty air. “We have much to discuss—.”

What else can you do but sit?