

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric landscape at night. The sky is a gradient of dark blue and purple, with a bright, glowing light source in the upper left corner. Below the sky, the silhouettes of trees and a forest are visible against the dark ground.

IN

THE

ROHAN ELLIOTT

SHADOWS

'Ranger Three this is Marine One, over.'

Silence.

'Ranger Three this is Marine One, over.'

No reply. Corporal Alexander Wood, callsign: *Codex*, rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration. He ran through his mental checklist; all his equipment was in perfect condition, he had set up everything accordingly, he had allowed it to warm up, he was transmitting at the designated frequency and there wasn't any interference with the antennae. He should be getting something! *Codex* pressed the headset back up to his ear, once again only hearing eerie silence.

'Come on, what the hell is wrong with this piece-' A soft cry of pain interrupted *Codex*, followed by a string of harsh expletives. He waited until it was silent again and continued trying to establish contact, to no avail. His frustration boiling over, *Codex* hurled his headset across the table and stood up, sending his chair tipping over with a loud crash. Captain Matthew Burnett, callsign: *Houston*, appeared in the doorway, M9 steady as he swept the room for any hostiles. Seeing the chair on its side, he holstered the weapon and visibly relaxed.

'Any word from the others?' *Codex* sighed.

'Nothing. I don't understand why though. There's nothing wrong with the antenna, we've got no interference, the equipment's all good. It's like they've just disappeared.' *Codex* paced back and forth, running his hand through his hair. *Houston* watched him pace, waiting. 'I mean, what the fuck was that thing out there?! Jesus, we didn't hear anything, see anything, four of our guys just exploded!'

'Just calm down.' *Codex* stopped pacing and spun to face *Houston*, disbelief written across his face.

'Calm down? Calm down!' he pointed past *Houston's* shoulder, into the jungle outside. 'This was supposed to be a fucking training exercise. We've lost contact with the others, lost four guys and now we've lost our only way of communicating with anyone on or off this godforsaken island!' With that, he pulled the chair upright and collapsed onto it, head in hands. *Houston* put his hand on *Codex's* shoulder.

'Look, I know what you mean. I don't know what that thing is that attacked us. I don't know why it's hunting us, and I don't know where in this jungle hellhole it is. The only hope we have is contacting the other teams and getting a rundown of the situation from their ends. I need you to keep trying with the radio, please.' *Codex* rubbed his hands down his face and without another word turned his back on his commander and put on his headset in silence. *Houston* left the room, closing the door behind him.

Stepping from the dimly lit room into bright spot-lamps caught *Houston* off guard. Covering his face, he looked for the team medic, finding him hunched over the table that was being used for operations. A white sheet had been placed on the table before the work had begun. Now it was mostly a concerning shade of crimson. He watched as the medic slowly put down his bloody scalpel and wiped his hands on his already grimy shirt. Looking up from his grisly task, he saw *Houston* scrutinising the figure on the table.

'I'm guessing that noise wasn't our imminent death?' *Houston's* eyes didn't waver from the body on the table.

'No... just Codex freaking out.' Lieutenant Shane Jones, call-sign: *Merlin*, smiled grimly.

'That bad, huh?'

'He hasn't been able to contact the other teams. It's been five hours since we landed. We should have heard from them by now. Something's not right.'

'Nothing about this is right. God, that thing...' Houston motioned to the figure on the table.

'How is he? Is he-'

'Dead? No. Not yet anyway.'

'Didn't you cauterise the wounds?' Merlin sighed and pulled off the sheet he had been using to cover the figure's lower body. Houston was greeted with a bloody, mangled mess of bone, muscle, and sinew from the knees down. Blood was steadily pouring out the mess, although not at the alarming rate that it had been three hours ago. The ends of the stumps had a black, gunk-like substance stuck to them. Houston reached out to touch it, only for Merlin to grip his forearm.

'I wouldn't-' He held up his heavily bandaged hand. '-did that already. Stuff latches on and it hurts like hell.' He gestured at the blood flowing out of the wounds. 'It also loves fire, really takes hold then, and starts to spread. If I try cauterising the wound again it'll just spread higher and higher up and cause him even more pain.' Houston couldn't tear his gaze away from the horrific scene in front of him.

'Did you find anything in that mess that could give us an idea about what did this to him?' Merlin shook his head.

'I'd need much more powerful equipment than this small guard outpost provides and even then, it'd be tough. Normally with traditional explosives like land mines, grenades, any type of physical ordnance really, there's always some form of shrapnel that lodges itself in the patient linking back to the explosive. When whatever that thing is out there exploded his legs, it didn't leave any shrapnel except for that black gunk. The best I can guess-' Houston cut in.

'It's a failsafe. To make sure every hit is a kill. It's not playing for sport. It's out to kill.' Houston glanced at the operating table. 'How long till you can get him up and moving?' Merlin's silence didn't reassure Houston.

'Matt... I gave him a mild sedative to slow down the loss of blood. He'll wake up soon, but he's just lost too much blood. He won't be going anywhere.' His face was grim, he'd done his best, but it just wasn't enough to counteract the severity of the injuries.

'Okay. I need to plan our next move, start packing your gear and let me know when he comes to.'

Without another word, Houston entered the communications room where Codex was monitoring the radio. He looked up as Houston entered the room.

'Start packing your gear, we're bugging out. I need a map of the island and all the information we have.' Codex grabbed the information dump that had been transferred to them before they landed. He handed a rough map to Houston, who immediately began marking the map.

The island itself was roughly circular, with a large indent towards the north-east. On the farthest eastern corner of the island was a military base where they would radio the nearby Air Force headquarters for extraction. He circled the location of the base and marked it with a large X. He then marked their current location on the map, almost dead centre of the island. He also included the drop points of the other teams, Ranger Three and Delta Five, at the northern and southern tips of the island. He then drew a straight line from their current location to the military base.

'Twelve clicks. Twelve clicks of dense, humid jungle. We'll have to take it slower than I would like. Anything on the comms?'

'Nothing.'

'We'll have to assume they're dead, especially with that thing running loose. I want you monitoring the comm lines while we're mobile.' Codex surveyed the map.

'What if we run into that thing again?' Houston stared straight at the circled X on the map.

'God help us all.' At that moment, Merlin poked his head into the room.

'Matt, he's awake. Now would be the best time to talk to him, he doesn't have long left.' Houston stood quickly and made his way out to the operating table. Codex folded the map, placing it in his backpack with the portable military radio and silently continued packing up.

As he approached the table, Houston saw Corporal William Turner, call-sign: *Shrimp*, slowly gauge his surroundings, taking in the crimson sheets and starting to feel the pain return. Houston signalled for Merlin to leave the two of them alone. He complied, M4 Carbine at the ready as he took a position outside the room. The silence between commander and soldier, friend and friend, stretched on until Shrimp broke the silence.

'How bad is it?' Houston shuffled uncomfortably.

'It's not that-' Shrimp angrily cut him off with a wave.

'Don't lie to me, Matt. Don't try and make it sound better. There's no way I can walk with this bloody pulp for legs, and besides, I've lost too much blood.' Houston's reply was barely audible.

'It's not good. I'm sorry, I let you down. You deserve better than to bleed out all alone on this godforsaken island.' Shrimp gripped his commanding officer's arm, stopping his rambling.

'There's nothing you could have done to avoid this. But you have a duty to make sure the rest of you get out of here. Now you go and make sure you guys get back home.' As Houston turned to leave, he called out. 'Please Matt, let me go out on my own terms.' Without looking back at his friend, he removed his M9 from its holster and placed it in Shrimp's outstretched hand. He left quickly; speed was their only option now. Codex and Merlin were waiting in silence for him as he grabbed his M4 Carbine and they set off into the jungle. After five minutes a single gunshot rang out. They didn't stop.

Adopting the standard United States Marine Corps wedge formation, they pressed on. Houston was the point man with Merlin and Codex keeping pace behind him. Their M4 Carbine's were constantly sweeping back and forth, searching for any possible danger. This slowed their pace considerably but provided them with adequate firepower in all possible directions, offsetting the decreased speed. After two hours, Houston signalled for a ten-minute rest period. All three slumped to the ground, their packs and the humidity weighing them down. The sudden snap of twigs brought all three guns up and aimed at the sound's origin. A gruff voice called out.

'Hold your fire, hold your fire! I'm coming out, my safety's on and my weapon is holstered. Don't shoot me.' A weary soldier stumbled out of the undergrowth, three guns trained on him. He looked around wide-eyed and startled. Houston stepped closer to the man, gun still firmly aimed at his head.

'Who are you?'

'Specialist Michaels of the United States Army Rangers, last surviving member of Ranger Three.' Houston waved the guns off Michaels as he took him by the shoulders.

'What happened to the rest of Ranger Three?' Michaels was shaken but could still articulate himself.

'Wiped out. This... this thing, it came out of nowhere. Just a mass of black, shadowy, gunk-like stuff. Blew everyone 'cept me to pieces. Delta Five had just radioed in about something like a massive shadow wiping them out. That came through about two hours before we were attacked.' Houston froze in place. Something Michaels had said...

'How long was after you landed did that thing attack you?' Michaels was puzzled. That didn't seem like a relevant question at all.

'Ah... I think it was four hours after we had landed, why?' Realisation dawned on Houston.

'We were hit three hours after we landed. That means...' Codex finished it for him.

'It knows where we are and it's just toying with us.' Michaels still hadn't understood the implications of this.

'What does that mean?' Houston's eyes fell on Codex's portable military radio.

'It's been jamming us. Subtly so we wouldn't pick up on it. That's why you weren't getting anything! It was keeping us in the dark on- Oh no.'

'What?' Before Houston could answer, Specialist Michaels head exploded. Blood and grey matter splattered across their faces and gear. The headless body fell sideways onto the ground, sprawled with blood gushing from its neck. Houston turned and barked a simple and straightforward command.

'MOVE!' They didn't need to be told, they were already crashing through the jungle bush. All strict military training and discipline were gone as a savage, primal fear fuelled their movements.

After a period of unorganized, panicked sprinting the group stumbled upon the military base, the creature close behind them. They immediately burst into the nearest room and begin to barricade the entrances. Codex surveyed the state of the military base.

It was not what their information had described. Ten years ago, it might have been a functioning base. Now it was a derelict shell. The main building had massive holes blown out of its side, its windows were shattered, and the ground had been torn apart by ordnance bombardments. Barricades had been hastily constructed and ineffectually placed throughout the base. The hangar for the base was in an even worse condition. Most of the roof had collapsed in on itself and the hangar door hung loosely on its hinges. The walls had been blackened by some sort of past inferno. Defensively, the base was completely inadequate for their needs. Houston came to the same conclusion.

'Codex, I need you to find that communications room and send an extraction request to get us the hell out-' Before he could finish the lights all around the compound flickered and died. Houston swore. 'Okay, the communications room should have a backup power generator. Get to it and send that message. Merlin and I will try and hold this thing off as long as we can.' Suddenly, Merlin unleashed a rapid stream of suppressive fire into the jungle.

'Contact!' Merlin unleashed another burst of gunfire as Houston provided extra firepower, delaying the inevitable. Codex took off, running full pelt into the centre of the compound. As he glanced back, Houston and Merlin exploded into red mist. Now it was just him... and the creature.

Searching, he spied a heavy-duty radio antenna overlooking the base. He sprinted towards it, knowing the thing was hunting him. As he struggled on the incline, he caught a glimpse of a black shadow in his peripheral vision and redoubled his efforts. Reaching the building near the antenna, he slammed into the door.

It wouldn't budge.

He saw the shadow drawing closer as he slammed his full body weight against the door.

Once.

Twice.

On the third try...

Bursting through the door, he fell on his hands and knees and scrambled to his feet. Only to stop dead in his tracks. A cold hand of fear clutched his heart as he looked around the room. The building was missing the wall that faced the ocean.

The wall that had the links necessary for him to access the antenna to send out a transmission.

The only way to get home...

There would be no extraction.

THE END.