

PROLOGUE -- PARADISE OR HELL?

*H*e froze, momentarily stunned by how close his predator was. The adrenaline rush took his breath away as the water gripped his ankles. It took every ounce of strength to break Neptune's surprising hold. Clearing the water's edge the clinging sand felt like wet cement slowing his escape. *This could be the end.*

A second level of adrenaline, one he had never felt before, kicked in as he ran along the firm moist sand toward the opening in the thick tropical foliage at the narrowest part of the beach. Every cell, every fiber of his now frail body would be required to elude his pursuer this time.

Who was this animal, this maniac, who less than a month ago changed his tranquil, if unknown, world. The solitude he had finally learned to accept brought more questions and no answers. But suddenly his lonely paradise had turned into hell, and he had no control over it.

The opening was getting closer. Half a football field, he thought, as his predator's footsteps echoed in his head. Hot breath seared his neck as he felt his chances of escape diminishing. His tormentor had never gotten this close. If he could just make the narrowing exit.

His heart pounded, on the verge of giving out, as he felt the dry sand, warm, usually calming, slip between his toes. Though immediately slowed, he had less than ten yards to the safety of the

dense verdure.

He slammed through the opening, thick emerald hands tearing at him, engulfing him, as he plunged into the darkness; a darkness horrifically frightening when he first found himself stranded, was now his sanctuary, and the only opportunity for preservation. Having reached the cool solitude of the area that defined his refuge from his would be captor, he felt escape was now possible. He knew this area of the jungle and was stretching the distance between them with every step.

There were many places to hide, but he would have to lead this monster away from his makeshift camp, if he was to have any peace in this place.

Every muscle in his skinny legs burned, ready to give out, but he had managed to increase the distance. The deeper he progressed the darker the jungle became. He frantically searched for a safe haven—a sanctum where he could not be found—before his legs betrayed him, leaving him exposed—vulnerable.

Across a small opening thick hanging vines appeared offering a suitable refuge. He grabbed at the slippery green ropes, pulled with his remaining strength, slipped between the vines and settled on the cold hard surface about eight feet above the jungle floor. The crackle of dried dead leaves and branches warned him that this was not yet over.

From his hiding place he watched as the dank and deepening blackness closed in on the pursuer. The engulfing darkness had made it difficult to follow his prey. The creature stopped, leaned down coughing, weezing, unaware that his quarry observed silently from an ebony hiding place directly in front of him. He held his breath, fearful the slightest sound would give him away. The predacious stalker, looked around, then turned away, apparently giving up the chase.

His lungs seared. Finally, the object of his anguish disappeared through the foliage and he was able to gulp the air. He strained to fill his lungs—the first breaths labored and painful but eventually coming easier—thankful that he had escaped this closest of calls.

He listened intently. The sound of heavy breathing, though faint, was cause for deep concern. Was it real; the predator watching, waiting? Or just his imagination? Peering through the entangled draping tendrils he wondered how long he would have to stay hidden from the menace who had become his greatest nightmare. *Longer this time.*

After a time the tension in his body fell away and he finally relaxed. Breathing returned to normal. Moving forward he looked into the void once more. There was nothing but black empty space—no sound, no movement. It would be safer, he felt, if he waited a little longer. He leaned back against the tree that protected him on one side of his newly discovered shelter, spent—physically drained. As he closed his eyes he asked silently, *how many more are here?*