

Ahead of us was the most beautiful islet either of us had ever seen, a tiny jut of windswept grass surrounded by pristine coral beaches. The whole thing measured less than a hundred by three hundred feet, an unsullied pearl set in the balmy waters of the Flores Sea. We made a circumnavigation, looking for signs of human habitation. There were none.

“Looks perfect,” I hollered from the rear cockpit.

After the confrontations of the past weeks, it would be a quiet spot to decompress for a few days and not have to deal with anyone other than each other. Pulling the *Libra* ashore, April and I gathered driftwood to boil a pan of water, then clambered to the highest point, a limestone bluff with a three-sixty-degree panorama, and sat drinking our evening tea.

“And all is right with the world again,” I murmured happily, gazing at the twenty-two other islands scattered like gems over a bed of blue velvet.

April smiled. “Yes, this is paradise.”

We sat there until dark. When I finally rose to my feet, I heard something in the wind. “Did you hear that?” I said.

April nodded. “Like human voices.”

“Almost like laughing.”

“Yeah. Weird.”

We scoured the island—it didn’t take long. Were the voices coming from Riung? This seemed unlikely. Riung was eight miles away and the wind blowing in the wrong direction.

Back in camp, we resurrected the fire and boiled some noodles.

“Maybe we can sleep outside tonight,” suggested April. “There don’t seem to be any mosquitoes.”

Nor would there be a problem with security, another reason we usually zipped ourselves in the tent every night, our passports and money wedged safely under our heads.

As we sat in the firelight, taking turns spooning from the pan, I watched a column of ants carry a moth to its subterranean doom. The insect was still very much alive, flailing its legs and fluttering its wings, and seeing its futile efforts I thought of frenzied Lilliputian hordes overcoming Gulliver, prompting a strange sense of foreboding to sweep through me.

After dinner, I fired up the GPS and was about to walk down to the water’s edge for a clear signal when something moved at my feet. With its black-and-white-banded flanks, the five-foot snake was identical to one I’d seen while swimming in the Solomons. I pointed my headlamp at the flattened tail. “Banded sea krait,” I said.

“Jeepers,” replied April. “Are they venomous?”

“Highly. Ten times more so than a rattlesnake.”

Flicking its tongue, the serpent slithered past and disappeared into the fleshy-leafed vegetation behind the *Libra*.

April breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, looks like he’s not too interested.”

“Rather knocks the idea of sleeping outside on the head, though, doesn’t it?” I said.

After helping April set up the tent, I turned my attention back to the GPS. Every 24 hours, I sent our latitude and longitude position to my father as part of a date-time group in a satellite

text message. The army protocol had become a nightly ritual, ensuring that if anything went wrong, someone would at least know where to start looking for us.

I heard a shout. “Oh, Jeez, there’s another!” A snake with the same black and white markings was approaching from the opposite direction.

April laughed nervously. “What we don’t know, of course, is what they eat to get so big.”

“And then what eats the snakes,” I said.

“Komodo dragons?”

This wasn’t as far-fetched as it sounded. The same species of giant monitor lizard that inhabited the islands between Flores and Sumbawa a mere hundred miles to the west had been sighted around Riung. Our little island was too small to sustain a permanent population, but the dragons were strong swimmers and known to visit other islands in search of food.

A third snake suddenly appeared. I grabbed the video camera and began filming. “What is going *on?*” I said. Snakes gave me the heebie-jeebies almost as badly as spiders. “Why all these snakes all of a sudden?”

It didn’t make sense. Sea kraits were extremely docile. Moreover, at first sight of a human, virtually every wild animal I’d ever come into contact with had turned tail and scarpered, millennia of extermination rendering them wary of engaging *Homo sapiens*. Why were these snakes taking such an interest in us?

“Third snake over here,” I narrated for the camera. “Fourth snake over there.” We were surrounded. Our enchanted island was becoming less so by the minute.

“No wonder this place is uninhabited,” remarked April.

We found ourselves standing back to back in a defensive position. The snake in my viewfinder had turned away from the water and was now gliding up the shingle towards us.

“Watch to your left,” warned April.

“Got it,” I replied. “This is starting to freak me out.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a bit of prickly skin. This doesn’t make me feel comfortable at all.”

I switched the camera to night vision mode to better track the snakes in the darkness.

“Just keep an eye on that one,” said April, pointing to a length of black hosepipe slithering off the edge of my screen.

“Yup, there’s two of them right here. They’re going for the boat.”

It was a nightmare. The prospect of trying to extract lethal snakes from our cockpits made my head reel.

“Actually,” April said, “they can move a little quicker than you think.”

“Yeah, they’re beginning to wake up.”

The two heading for the boat altered course and made straight for us, their heads raised, crossing and recrossing each other’s paths.

“It’s like they’re working as a team,” I said, noting the rising desperation in my voice.

“Hunting us in a pair.”

April and I began inching down to the water’s edge to make a last stand. With our backs to the sea, we had less area to defend. Of course, this was assuming the snakes didn’t take to the water, in retrospect a fairly likely thing for an amphibious animal to do.

“Okay, here comes one,” said April, pointing to the nearest, now a few feet away.

“Son of a bitch.”

“What do we do, kill them?”

As a vegetarian of nine years, one of my guiding principles in life was to avoid killing or eating anything that shat or had a face—both indicators of higher intelligence than, say, a potato. But the situation was getting out of hand. We had no anti-venom. If either of us was bitten, it was a three-day journey to the nearest hospital in Ende.

“I’d say we’re getting to that point,” I conceded.

“Watch!” April shouted. Even backing away, the snakes were gaining on us.

I reached for a stout piece of timber from the fire and dispatched the lead snake, crushing its head in a cloud of sparks.

“Where’s its buddy?” I said.

“Here he comes.”

“Very sorry, Mister Snake.” Again, I swung the timber. The snake convulsed into a pretzel and was still.

The others were nowhere to be seen. Treading carefully, I picked up the two carcasses and laid them under a tree above the high tide mark. If one of us was indeed bitten during the night, we could take a snake with us to Ende to be identified for the right anti-venom—assuming the victim survived that long. We then slipped the covers over the cockpits and retreated to the safety of the tent.

In the morning, April described her dreams. Snakes featured in all of them: “Hanging off my legs, gnawing at my flesh.” It was the Lariam talking, the same lucid dreaming as she’d had on the Coral Sea voyage.

Gingerly, we crawled out of the tent, hoping that no visitors had crept under the groundsheet for warmth in the night. While April took a walk down the beach, I started a fire for tea. A minute later, she was back, her face drained of colour.

“They’re gone,” she whispered.

“What are?”

“The snakes.”

For the first time I noticed a dead tree partially submerged in the shallows, its grey skeletal limbs poking out of the water like the ribcage of an elephant.

“That tree,” I said. “I don’t remember that tree being there when we came in yesterday.”

The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up. April, too, looked rattled.

“Maybe they got washed out to sea?” she offered.

I shook my head. “Impossible. It’s only neap tides, and I threw them way above the high tide mark.”

Later that day, we paddled to the Muslim village of Pota. More than a hundred people crowded around us on the beach, the faces of the women painted ghoulish white with the

cosmetic paste that Indonesians used for skin bleaching.<sup>1</sup> The atmosphere was excitable as we set up camp, lots of laughter and whooping and, “Hello Meester! Hello Meesees!” But when the village elders arrived, the crowd regained its composure.

April and I recounted our earlier experience.

“*Sihir!*” one of the elders hissed. Witchcraft.

“Dukun santet,” said another. Black shaman. This was Haji, a smiling octogenarian in a blue shirt, purple lava-lava, and Peci, a black fez hat. “Indonesia beople superstitious,” he continued. “You break promise in village? You make disrespect? They take revenge with”—he nodded sagely and wagged a finger—“dukun santet.”

Translating was his son, a pint-sized forty-year-old with the flitting eyes of a blackbird. Haji went on to explain how someone seeking retribution could retain the services of a black shaman, a witch. First, you obtained a strand of the intended victim’s hair or something they’d been standing on. Then the dukun santet would concoct the spell. The customer had a variety of options to choose from. Fire was one. If the shaman lit a match or a cigarette and pointed it at your enemy’s house, within a few days the building was sure to burn to the ground. Another was to cause their crops to fail or livestock to die.

“Or snake,” said Haji, raising another finger. Like fire, snakes could be sent long distance and, after eliminating the target, retrieved the same way. Apparently, the most crucial ingredient in any of the methods used was for the client to believe unequivocally in the spell they’d commissioned. Otherwise, it just wouldn’t work. This struck me as an ingenious let-out clause for the shaman. If the magic failed—which, presumably, it always did, unless the victim happened to croak or their property be destroyed anyway—the fault ultimately lay in the client’s lack of conviction, avoiding the irksome business of having to fork over a refund.

Being the target of a grudge wasn’t entirely beyond the realms of possibility. Perhaps I’d offended the owners of the losmen by refusing to pay for a room and sleeping outside on the grass instead. Nevertheless, the notion of black magic being at play, albeit entertaining, was frankly absurd.

“What a load of mumbo-jumbo,” I whispered to April.

It wasn’t until four days later in Labuan Bajo, another tin-roofed town with an open sewer policy, that the truth finally revealed itself. According to the “Fun Facts” of the Sea World website I googled in the town’s Internet café, sea snakes were attracted to light. That explained why so many of them had entered our camp. The snakes had been drawn like moths to our headlamps.

When I told April, she seemed relieved. After all, the light theory solved a mystery that had been playing on both our minds and had us both badly spooked. Then her face fell, clouding with uncertainty.

“Okay,” she said softly. “But where did they disappear to in the night, then?”

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<sup>1</sup> In Indonesia, skin lightening is promoted as an “opportunity enhancer” and social indicator of wealth, status, and beauty by a multi-million-dollar cosmetics industry. I’d found the same to be true in Central America, where darker skin is considered by the social elite to be inferior, even ugly.

