

GRACE

We have a new face.

(turning to Norm)

You're fluent, you've studied the culture. You're non-threatening. The ones we know best -- the *Omaticaya* clan -- may give you a chance. Maybe you can get them back to the table before things go tits-up for good.

NORM

This is failing as a pep talk.

Jake hauls himself across from wheelchair to link.

JAKE

How do we contact them?

GRACE

We don't. They contact us. If they see us taking our samples, treating the forest with respect --

(pointedly to Jake)

Not trampling everything in sight -- they may reach out to us.

JAKE

Or they may skin us and make a drum.

Jake lies back, lowering the sensor array over his body.

GRACE

Just keep your mouth shut and let Norm do the talking.

She closes his clamshell, HARD, and we --

CUT TO:

EXT. RAIN FOREST / AERIAL - DAY

FLYING over a carpet of rainforest, past sheer cliffs and cloud-wreathed mesas. **TRUDY'S SAMSON** TILT-ROTOR chases its shadow across the treetops. Though big as a Blackhawk, it is tiny in the vast primeval landscape.

ANGLE THROUGH the open side doors of the Samson. Trooper WAINFLEET, in exo-mask and body armor, leans on his door gun, scanning for aerial predators.

In avatar form JAKE, GRACE and NORM watch the forest unrolling beneath them, the wind blasting their clothes. Jake mans the other door gun, his feet propped on the skids.

TRUDY flies from a pressurized cockpit. She banks to follow a shallow river.

TRUDY (INTERCOM)
Sturmbeest herd, one o'clock.

Norm grins and points, excitedly. Jake looks in time to see-- A herd of **STURMBEEST** -- massive six-legged creatures reminiscent of buffalo -- thundering across the river.

GRACE
Looks like a bull, six cows and some juveniles.

NORM
The bull has the red on the dorsal armor?

Grace nods approvingly.

TIME CUT -- Hundreds of purple winged creatures take flight from a lake, startled by the Samson. They skim the water above their own reflections. **TETRAPTERONS**.

TIME CUT -- the ground drops away as the Samson flies over a WATERFALL hundreds of feet high. Trudy banks hard, rolling in on the gorge below like it's a gun-run.

Wainfleet WHOOPS while Norm looks like he's about to puke.

WAINFLEET
Yo Chacon! Get some!

Jake grins into the airstream.

CUT TO:

EXT. CLEARING - DAY

A small meadow among towering trees. The fern-like "grass" is beaten down in waves by the rotor-wash as the Samson settles to the ground.

Jake pulls the massive door gun off its pintle mount and hefts it like an assault rifle.

He and Wainfleet leap out to secure the LZ, scanning the tree-line warily, weapons aimed.

Grace jogs forward to the cockpit, motioning Trudy to shut down. Trudy kills the Samson's TURBINES.

Grace, towering over Wainfleet, motions him to hang back.

GRACE
 Stay with the ship.
 (for Jake)
 One idiot with a gun's enough.

WAINFLEET
 Whatever you say, Doc.

Jake takes point as they enter the jungle.

WAINFLEET
 (laughing)
 Ya'll have fun out there.

EXT. RAINFOREST - DAY

The forest engulfs JAKE, GRACE and NORM in cyan gloom. The shadows are alive with the CHITTERING sounds of unseen alien wildlife.

TRACKING WITH JAKE as he moves through the foliage, hyper-alert -- looking around like a tourist in Hell. A monkey-like **PROLEMURIS** leaping from limb to limb overhead, flashing through the sunlight streaming down in shafts.

A PLANT with swaying tendrils which reach toward Jake as he passes.

This forest is more alive than any on Earth, with plants that react and move like animals. Jake white-knuckles his rifle as if every shadow conceals razor-fanged death.

GRACE
 Relax, Marine. You're making me nervous.

She pushes ahead of him on the trail, forcing him to lower his muzzle as he follows her. Grace moves nimbly on the path, seemingly unconcerned.

CUT TO:

EXT. FOREST/ GLEN

WIDE SHOT as the party moves between the huge trees, tiny as ants. The trail has gotten steeper, the going tougher.

CUT TO:

EXT. SCHOOL RUINS - DAY

They enter a clearing with an OVERGROWN BUILDING made of timbers cut from the local trees, with a thatch roof. It is covered with vines as the jungle reclaims it.

NORM
How will they know we're here?

GRACE
I'm sure they're watching us right now.

Norm gulps. Jake looks behind him as they approach the school, feeling unseen eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL RUINS

TRACKING WITH JAKE'S BOOTS as he steps among dried leaves and a few moldering CHILDREN'S BOOKS. Floorboards CREAK.

GRACE (O.S.)
The kids were so bright, so eager to learn... they picked up English faster than I could teach it to them.

WIDER as Jake explores the room. Grace and Norm are selecting INSTRUMENTS from storage cases on a wooden table.

GRACE
Bring the soil probe -- right there, yellow case.

Jake looks up at a RUSTLING among the dark rafters. Roosting STINGBATS eye him warily, fluttering their wings.

Grace picks up a moldering copy of "The Lorax" by Dr. Seuss from the floor and puts it back on a shelf.

GRACE
(wistfully)
The stingbats knock them off. I guess I always hope somebody will come back and read them.

NORM
Why don't they come back?

GRACE
(grimly)
The Na'vi learned as much about us as they needed to know.

Jake sees something, and approaches the blackboard -- reaches out to touch a pattern of holes blasted into the slate. Unmistakably BULLET HOLES.

JAKE
 (turning to her)
 What happened here?

GRACE
 (sharply)
 Are you going to help with this gear?
 We've got a lot to do.

She turns away. Jake watches her as he jams equipment into his pack.

CUT TO:

EXT. RAINFOREST - DAY

CLOSE ON Grace's blue hand gently brushing away soil, exposing a tangle of ROOT TENDRILS.

GRACE
 See, right here where the roots of the
 two trees interact.

WIDER -- GRACE and NORM crouch among enormous octopoidal roots. She takes a tiny sample using a needle-like probe. Norm uses a digital DEVICE to scan the roots.

JAKE, bored, scouts ahead a few meters.

He comes to a GLADE filled with shoulder-high SPIRAL PLANTS called **HELICORADIANS**.

He BRUSHES one and SHTOONK! -- it SUCKS DOWN into a tube in the ground so quickly it seems to simply vanish.

Curious, Jake touches another -- SHTOONK! And another -- like popping balloons after a party. SHTOONK! SHTOONK! SHTOONK!

A chain reaction begins and the whole colony pulls down into the ground, REVEALING --

A **HAMMERHEAD TITANOTHERE**. Like a six-legged rhinoceros, but twice that size. Its massive, low-slung head has projections of bone giving it the look of a hammerhead shark.

Its baleful eyes lock onto him. Jake raises his rifle.

Grace, alerted by the creature's SNORTS, runs to where she can see the tableau. She presses her THROAT MIKE.

GRACE
 Don't shoot. You'll piss it off.

The bull HAMMERHEAD bellows and lowers its 3 meter wide sledgehammer of a skull.

JAKE

It's already pissed off!

GRACE

Jake, that armor's too thick. Trust me.

Jake starts to back away. The hammerhead bellows again, pawing the earth.

GRACE

It's a territorial threat display. Do not run, or he'll charge.

JAKE

What do I do?

GRACE

Hold your ground!

The hammerhead SLASHES its head sideways, splintering saplings. It bellows again, lowers its head and CHARGES --

Jake SCREAMS at the top of his lungs, spreads his arms wide and runs straight at the thing.

It STOPS abruptly, with an oversized BLEAT.

ON JAKE -- amazed the gambit worked.

JAKE

Oh yeah! Who's bad?! That's right.

SOMETHING rises up behind him out of focus --

A **THANATOR**. The most awesome land predator the universe has ever conceived This thing could eat a T-rex and have the Alien for desert.

It is a black six-limbed panther from Hell, with an armored head and massive distensible jaws.

JAKE, unaware of the advancing thanator, is still bracing the hammerhead --

JAKE

That's what I'm talkin' about, bitch!

The bull wheels around, TRUMPETING in fear, and CRASHES away through splintering undergrowth.

JAKE

That's right motherf--

A guttural SNARL behind him. Jake spins in time to see --

THREE TONS of rippling thanator LAUNCH over him, landing between him and the hammerhead. The ground shakes.

The thanator emits an earsplitting ROAR, enraged that the hammerhead got away. It twists on itself, turning to face Jake, and bares its fangs with a lethal HISS.

JAKE

What about this one? Run, don't run?
What?

GRACE

Run. Definitely RUN!

Jake BOLTS as --

The thanator LEAPS after him and --

Jake launches himself between two large trunks, forcing the beast to claw its way around to the side while --

Jake scrambles up -- around -- over a tangle of roots and --

SK-RASH!! CLAWS SLASH the air behind him, EXPLODING bark off a trunk as --

JAKE wills himself forward in a frenzy. With rippling muscle the beast is airborne again, blacking out the sun but --

JAKE dives under a massive root system, and --

CRASH! Kindling rains around him as the beast tears into the root-trunks above him. Claws SLASH down next to him as he rolls and crawls --

Glistening jaws SMASH and SNAP against the barrier trunks, sending chunks of wood flying. It's spittle sprays across Jake, jaws inches away as --

He rolls onto his back, and FIRES his AR point blank but the rifle is SNATCHED out of his hands. The beast SCREECHES an ungodly WAIL of pain and rage and -- RIPS the ENTIRE TRUNK away. Jake scrambles to escape but --

GLISTENING JAWS lunge downward, SNAP SHUT and --

The creature rips Jake out of the tree, shaking him like a junkyard dog with a rabbit, only --

It has him by the BACKPACK, so Jake unlatches it and --

He FLIES FREE as the thanator crushes the pack with its teeth. Giving Jake a moment to sprint away, but --

With a hideous BELLOW the thanator crashes after him, splintering trees.

JAKE RUNS in a blur, dodging between trunks as a glistening black tornado shreds the forest behind him and --

He sees WATER ahead and DIVES OUTWARD with all his might --

The thanator's jaws SNAP SHUT inches behind him as he flies out into open space and --

JAKE SPLASHES down into a swiftly moving river.

The thanator LEAPS DOWN AFTER HIM, pursuing from rock to rock, its claws swiping like a grizzly fishing for salmon.

Jake ducks under as -- FWHOOSH! -- black claws SLASH past his face amid turbulent bubbles.

A WATERFALL ahead. Jake is swept over the falls, with the thanator SWIPING at him from a rock, just MISSING and --

Jake disappears down the throat of the thundering cataract.

EXT. RIVER BELOW FALLS - DAY

The water boils below the cataract. Jake's head bursts through the surface, and he gasps for breath.

He is carried along by the current, but manages to grab a limb on a fallen tree. He weakly pulls himself up, and just lies there gasping on the trunk.

Above him, on the cliff, the THANATOR BELLOWS, a roar which echoes across the jungle.

CUT TO:

EXT. RAINFOREST - DAY

JAKE, wet and bruised, crouches under a screen of giant leaves. He hacks manically at the end of a cut sapling with his knife, forming a crude but sharp tip.

EXT. RAINFOREST - DAY

TRACKING with Jake as he walks through the forest like it's a minefield, carrying his SPEAR white-knuckled. He is freaked and hyper-alert.