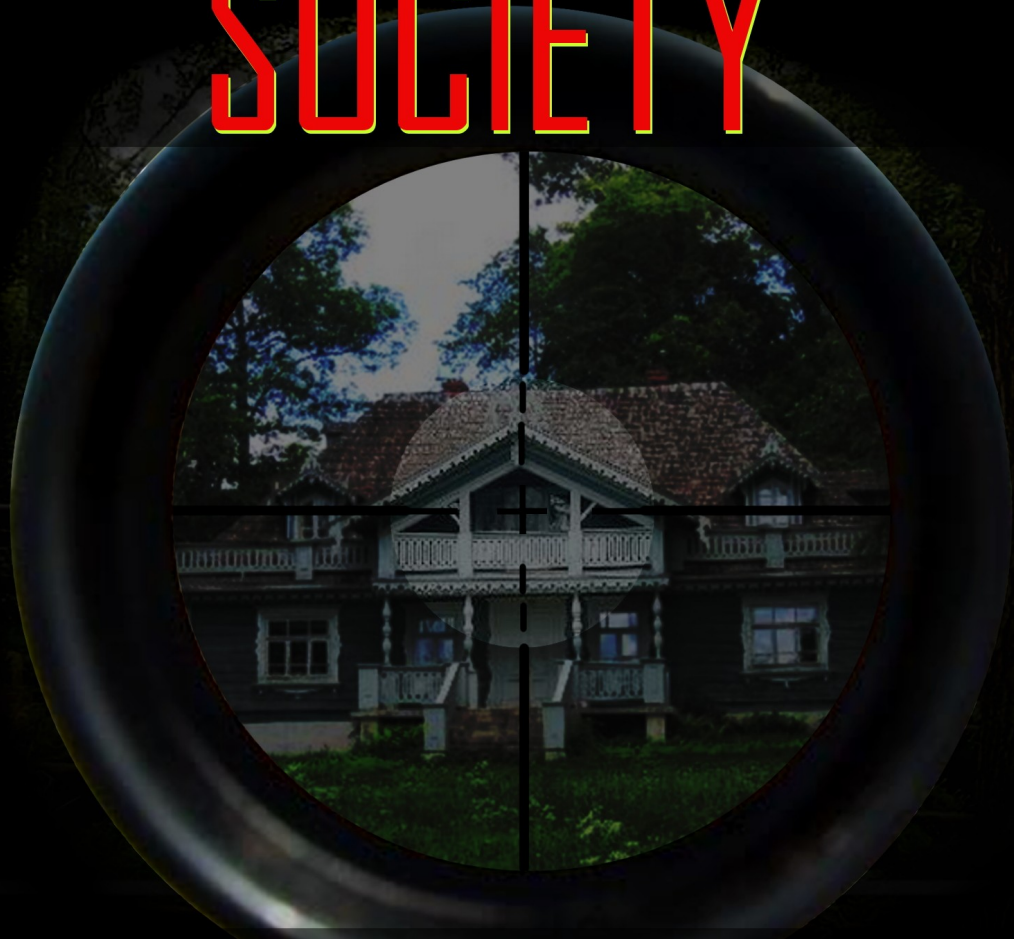


THE
VALHALLA
SOCIETY



BYRON BALES

**The
Valhalla
Society**

By Byron Bales

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Dedication

To the late Seak Naridh,

our Man On The Ground

in Cambodia

Prologue

In the Mata Grosse, Brazil

Time to think. Plenty of time for that. Or maybe not. Aaron Benedict looked over his body, what little he could see of it since he could barely raise his head. He laid, or rather half laid, half sat, with his head arched up helplessly like a Raggedy-Ann doll in a trashcan. Impaled on punji sticks four feet below the mouth of the pit. One spear pierced his left buttocks, another protruded through his right thigh and the tip of another stick appeared through his torn bush jacket. He couldn't feel what damage that one was doing, but his midsection was soaked with dark bleeding, so that couldn't be good. Strange how he could feel the excruciating pain in his thigh and buttocks, but not in his side. Was his spine injured?

What amazed him was how he could be so analytical, clinical even, about his predicament. Survival mode kicking in. More likely, he was just trying to make sense out of his stupidity, trying to justify his decision to enter into this absurd game. He wasn't going to survive this pit and he logically knew it but was emotionally unable to accept it. He wondered when he'd be going into shock.

He laughed aloud at his predicament, laughed hard for minutes until denial gave way to sobbing like a helpless child. He was going to die. He was dying. Horribly, painfully, and worse; slowly. Very slowly.

He trained his ear to listen to a new sound of the jungle. It was a dull rush, like ocean waves in the distance. Shushing sounds, distinctive yet very faint. Another sound: tiny feet padding past the pit. It was a family of capybara. Were they running from that shushing noise?

Suddenly, his body sank lower into the pit and he screamed in agony as another punji stick penetrated his right shoulder, also near his spine. His own weight was sucking him deeper into the pit where more razor-sharp punji sticks awaited him. He prayed again that he wouldn't have long to wait.

He felt the butt of his rifle with his left hand. A thick punji stick that his head barely missed was blocking his vision and he couldn't look down. The rifle was stuck barrel first in the stinking mud at

the bottom of the pit. The stench was from feces smeared across the bamboo spears. If the punctures didn't sever limbs and separate bones, and the bleeding didn't finish him, infection from the feces surely would. Slowly.

No chance of freeing his rifle. Maybe if he could work his left hand down to the trigger, squeeze off a round. If the bore was packed in mud, the round would just split the barrel. Would it be heard? Not likely; the Mata Grosso was one of the most desolate places on the globe. Didn't matter; he couldn't reach the trigger guard.

Nothing to do but think. Think about his suffering and what a fool he'd been. Think about Egghead's rules.

The shushing sound grew stronger, slightly clearer now, coming from where he judged north would be.

He slipped in and out of consciousness. When he came around again, he was light-headed, nearly delirious. Loss of blood. Shouldn't be long now. Dear God in heaven: not long now. He hardly felt the searing pain in his leg and side now, and the punji stick in his back felt more like a brick trying to pass through his body than the razor-sharp sliver of bamboo. Were these bamboo sticks? Did bamboo grow here? So, he was back to applying logic in the face of total helplessness.

It was either getting darker or his life was ebbing away. Not sure which. No idea how long he'd been in the pit.

"Thought that was you," a voice suddenly came from above. "You sounded like a screaming banshee from back in the jungle."

It was Skylar, so well camouflaged that were it not for his voice, Aaron wouldn't have recognized him, wouldn't even have seen him standing rock still in a ghilli suit, watching him from the edge of the pit, rifle cradled in his left arm as if holding an infant. Aaron couldn't make out Skylar's features, but knew that he gazed down with that smug victorious smirk on his mouth. For all he knew, Skylar could have been standing on the side of a clearing all along, blending so perfectly into the jungle that he'd walked right past him. Knowing Skylar's penchant for games, he probably had at some point. This

contest had clearly been a mismatch.

“Spare a bullet for me?” Aaron raised his eyes pathetically.

“That might be hard to explain,” Skylar replied casually, mock concern replacing that superior smirk.

“A mercy killing?”

Skylar shook his head. “The Brazilian authorities might not see it that way, should I be detained for any reason.”

“You’re just going to leave me here?”

Skylar shrugged. “Some might take a dim view of that. And of course we know the Colonel’s bullshit about ‘never leaving anyone behind.’” He removed a digital camera from a haversack slung around his hip. “Still, there are mitigating circumstances: no way to lug your body back. Even if I managed it, by time I reached Culaba with what’s left of you, you’ll be pretty ripe. Too, too unpleasant, wouldn’t you think?” He focused his camera on Aaron in the pit. “As a matter of fact, this hole smells like a fucking toilet. Have you messed yourself?” He fiddled with his camera, said absently. “Besides, providing a proper burial isn’t one of the rules, is it?” He adjusted the telescopic lens in the night mode, clicked off a few pictures, and checked the results on the camera’s LCD screen. He stopped and listened. That shushing, sweeping sound was clearer. Closer. From the sound, one could imagine a large steamroller crashing down through the jungle, crushing everything in its path.

“You could bury me, you son of a bitch,” Aaron hissed vehemently. A pain suddenly shot through his back and he screamed. He tried not to, didn’t want to give this bastard the satisfaction. But he couldn’t help it. His scream brought a cacophony of screams and jeers from the communities of birds and squirrel monkeys inhabiting the jungle canopy. And it brought that cruel smirk back to Skylar’s face.

Skylar shook his head again, checked his watch. “Someone else will handle that little detail. Besides, it’s too hot for such work. And it’s getting late; we know the jungle is no place to be at night,”

he snipped sarcastically, as though the prospect was too daunting. He dropped his camera back in his bag. "I must say, Mister Benedict, you haven't provided much of a challenge." He shook his head in disappointment.

"Yes, well, I see that you're staying in tonight, so I should mosey along." He looked up, in the direction of the sound, and then smiled down at Aaron. "You'll be getting some company later. Lots of it, I believe." He gave Aaron a mock salute, and was gone.

It wasn't long before Aaron slipped into another void, and it was pitch black when he regained consciousness. Something was biting him, biting him everywhere. Sharp, painful bites, followed by a burning itch that would send Aaron over the brink into insanity. The bites were marching up his leg, spreading to his crotch. Ants. Soon, areas covered with bites became numb, a poison mercifully taking effect just as other regions of his body were attacked with insanely irritating itching. But the itching would return once the poison wore off. Only it would be even worse than before. Aaron slid expediently back into logic to hold a grip on sanity. He'd studied an uncle's ant colony as a boy. What did he remember? Yes, Army ants. If that's what these creatures were. Family: formicidae; genus: eciton. Wasn't it eciton? Yes. That's it; sub family: ecitoninae; class: insecta; order: hymenoptera; species, E. eciton. Well, well, Mister Benedict. Doesn't that just make you one smart son of a bitch. "Yes," he screamed for the jungle to hear. And the jungle screamed back, birds and primates screeching. He yelled at the top of his thinning voice; "carnivorous, yes." And blind little bastards, these ants. First, a few of their scouts would pop out of the brush, and then retreat back. Soon, the jungle floor boiled over with them, their march sounded like a train. Swarm raiders, millions moving at a meter per minute. Fast little bastards, devouring everything in their path, chemically signaling new trails for their aggressive incursions. Aaron laughed wildly, his grip on sanity fading. "Anything too big that can't be ripped apart will be left behind. So...hello," he addressed the interruption. "Who's this?"

Someone was on top of the pit now. Skylar returning, after all? No, it wasn't someone; it was some thing, its hot breathe smelled like rotten meat, its sibilant snarl so close that Aaron thought he might reach out and touch it. It was a jaguar, maybe a jaguarondi, drawn by the smell of Aaron's blood. Whatever it was clawed around the edge but knew better than to jump in; the beast's night vision missed not one detail in the pit. It circled the pit, whimpering its frustration, and finally settled down and lay near the opening until the victim's crying below trailed off. "Here, kitty, kitty," Aaron coaxed between flooding tears that nearly blinded him. "Would you like some ants? Huh?" Shortly, the great

cat jumped wildly away, turning and spinning around to rid himself of the ants. He disappeared. Yes, the ants were defending their find, leaving their victim in the pit to their supremely efficient dissection.

Now the jungle seemed to be splitting apart, and with the last of his mental processes, Aaron imagined how in the old King Kong film the ape parted jungle foliage with ease to claim his captive prize. But this was the rolling thunder of billions upon billions of ants parting and cracking and snapping and eating leaves and branches, everything in its trillion army path, a million of those microscopic mandibles slicing him apart.

Aaron screamed a laugh at his unrelentingly insane pain, and the stench of everything in the hole beneath him that now included his own waste. He railed against the god he'd worshiped his lifelong, the demons of agony so consuming him. How could God do this to him? Death; yes. Please, yes. Please not an instant longer of this hell. What if life after death was an eternity of this torment, each nanosecond of this mind-searing misery his punishment for wantonly taking the life of another for the sake of a pathetic game?

By morning, all that remained of Aaron Benedict, age 27, American citizen, architect, affianced bachelor, and sports aficionado, was his skeleton. His heart hadn't stopped for nearly ten hours after the first bite, seemingly eons ago and it beat on long after his mind went, reducing him to a feces-soaked, drooling, raving lunatic.