

*The
Jungle
of
Night*©

(A Jungle Lord Adventure)

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This is an original short story and has
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I.

The Bronx zoo is the largest urban zoo in North America. It has become a prime breeder for many species of creatures near extinction, or extinct in the wild. It is also a zoo that subscribes to the modern concept of animal-in-habitat-viewing. 'Where the people are enclosed and the animals run free says the advertisements.'

In the zoo's vast expanse is a North and South America, an Africa and a wild Asia which is in itself bigger than many zoos. But even a gilded cage is still a cage; and it was as a cage that John Claxton viewed it. Better than most and worse than many.

"How very different from my home," The man who used the name Claxton thought. Though he had lived in the Jungles of South America for many years Claxton still thought of Africa as his home. It was a place of change where civilization and its god, progress, were swiftly driving his wild home into oblivion. He traveled extensively now, working with the Panamanian authorities in the Philippines dealing with and discovering primitive tribes (he had a distinct ability for discovering lost tribes) and in general searching out the wild places left in the world.

Now for as long as there was oil beneath the land in South America that the jungle lord owned the Jungle and the wildlife would be untouched. All to be overseen by a board of specialists that a trust fund-made from the profits of the oil-will hire. With the Brazilian land contract signed he would be helping to preserve those wild places past his death-whenver that might be. He was waiting in the Zoo for his wife to bring the signed documents and then the two of them could be off from the city again for the safety of the jungle.

Claxton stood almost two meters and was broad shouldered. He wore a white sports shirt and tailored slacks that barely seemed to contain his athletic physique. His hair swept back from his forehead in a black mane Just touching his shoulders.

He might have been a statue carved in teak. The tanned skin of his arms showed

many long healed scars and above his piercing grey eyes a single white scar crawled to his hairline. He stood relaxed except for a barely noticed tightness along his jaw.

Claxton was watching the lion pace neurotically back and forth. The king of the jungle, a hopeless aberration because of his confinement. Well fed with his life prolonged beyond his wild span the lion could look forward to ten or more years of pointless existence in confinement.

John Claxton, heir to the hereditary title Lord Greydon shuddered. He thought of the golden lion, locked in fierce combat, the roar of pride after each victory; the haughty strut of conquest. The beast's repose should be one earned and regal not unwanted and undeserved.

"Better to die by claw," Claxton thought.

Life had been good to him. From a youth that had been filled with a unique sort of motherly love to finding his perfect mate to becoming a father and then a grandfather, John Claxton had lived a full life. Though he was not one to dwell on the past he could think back without regret. Then he stared at the lion's dull eyes and once again felt rage at the steel and concrete world he could never really win against.

"John! Oh, John!" A crystal voice trembled with emotion as Claxton whirled. A hundred meters down the path, walking unsteadily toward him from the gate was his wife. He did not have to see the spot of blood matting her hair on her forehead or the rumpled condition of her clothing to know that something was wrong. Terribly wrong. He raced to her side.

"Joan," he whispered as she slumped against him. "What happened?" Her green eyes barely focused on his features and her pale cheeks told part of the story: shock,

"I was attacked," she managed, "and mugged." Claxton swung her up into his arms as if she were a child. Then he began to run for the gate at top speed.

"John," she whispered in a distant voice, "the wildlife preserve papers-in my purse." She closed her eyes and let his strong arms reassure her that everything was all right. Whenever danger had occurred in the past his strong arms always meant that everything was all right again.

"I'll attend to that later, dear," he said, not the least bit out of breath. "Just

rest." He quickened his pace mindless of the stares from the zoo patrons and raced out the gate, hailing a cab. Only those near him would have heard him growl.

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"I had Just left the elevated station," Joan said, "when these two-ruffians approached me." She was sitting back comfortably in a private hospital bed. Her husband stood quietly on one side of her bed a detective in shirtsleeves on the other.

"Go ahead, Mrs. Claxton" the detective said.

"Alright," she said. Her head was bandaged and she had rested, but her face was still unusually pale. "One was shorter than I-and dark. The other was heavy set and about John's height . He had a mustache."

"Then?" the detective asked.

"The Spanish one grabbed me in a crude manner," she said, "while the dark one grabbed my purse and kicked my leg." Her eyes went liquid and she reached out to hold her husband's hand, "I fell and then the big one kicked me in the head. I grabbed at his leg and tore a patch from his pant leg. He kicked me again. Then they walked away. Just walked!" She sobbed uncontrollably.

"That is quite enough," Claxton said. He patted his wife's hand.

"John," her eyes grew intense, "Don't do anything rash." He smiled down at her.

"Just rest dear," he said, "everything will be alright." He patted her hand again then bent to kiss the back of it. "Rest," he said.

Outside Detective Perez was just putting his notebook away.

"What will be done to apprehend these criminals?"

"What we can, Mr. Claxton," Perez said. "The descriptions will go out as soon as I call them in."

"And the chances?"

"To tell you the truth, not good," Perez said. "This is one of the worst precincts in the city."

"I thought as much," the teak giant said.

"Now, Mr. Claxton, I advise you to heed your wife's advice and do nothing rash. Leave this to the police. We frown on vigilante action here in New York."

"You'll want this, detective." Claxton held up a square of orange cloth frayed around the edges. Before he handed it to the officer he held it up to his nose and sniffed like a dog might. Perez took the patch.

"One last word, Mr. Claxton," Perez said, "stay out of this; it's a Jungle out there." He turned and walked away.

He did not see Claxton smile.

II.

John Claxton wandered outside the huge hospital, trying to get as far away from the sterile smells and the sick smells of the institution as possible. In the jungle every creature was a watchman, and informant who would direct him to his vengeful goal.

But in the city he was alone. His senses were overwhelmed by smells and sounds that dulled his powers of perception. Here his human heritage would have to guide him, his cunning would have to rule. And perhaps, he thought, there was one other avenue to pursue....

The ofis of Sister Endora was located two blocks from the site of Joan Claxton's attack, on the second floor. Like most fortune telling parlors the back rooms were also the living quarters for Endora's family of six.

Sister Endora Timbo was in her late forties with a dark gypsy beauty that was just

beginning to fade. In the background her plastic bladed fan sluggishly moved the heated air of the apartment.

The gypsy was watching one of her favorite soap's when Sylvia, her second youngest, called her from the front room. "A customer?" she thought. It was odd, because she always heard the customer coming up the old wood stairs.

When she parted the beaded curtain and stepped into the incense laden front room she paused. Standing in the street doorway was no ordinary Gadge. There was an awareness in his eyes that marked him as one to be cautious with. Sister Endora trusted her instincts, (in her business she was obliged to), so she did not cross the distance between them. She almost gasped when the stranger began to speak in Romani. "Greetings, sister Rom." John Claxton said. "I seek the man of the house." Claxton stayed in the doorway, his arras folded. He could see in her eyes that the woman was afraid of him and would bolt if he made a move. He waited for her reply to the traditional greeting, but when none was forthcoming proceeded to his point. "I seek the help of the Rom."

"Who are you? You speak Rom-and yet-you are not." The woman was aware that he was waiting to be invited in but she ignored the fact. She gave her daughter a look and shoed her into the back room. She knew the girl understood and would scurry out the back window and down the fire escape to find her father or one of their brothers. The stranger might be from another tribe and could be dangerous. He was definitely not from the Gadge police, but he could be a gangster. "Who are you?" she asked again.

"The Bimbo always knew a friend in the old days," he said, with a smile on his lips. "The Romany know me as Caldwell, but you know how little names mean." He pushed up his sleeve so that his bicep muscle was revealed. There was an ugly scar twisting the length of it. "I have bled for the Bimbo Tribe. Ask those with long memories about how they escaped from France to Spain in 1943."

Endora motioned him into the parlor. "Sit, I make calls," she said. Claxton chose to stand by the window instead while the Gypsy went into the kitchen. He could hear her dialing and then speaking in low tones. She made a half a dozen calls.

Out the window Claxton could see the elevated train and the wide dirty street.

Because of a slight turn in the avenue the window commanded a full view of the corner where Joan had been attacked. A group of black children had opened a fire hydrant and were dodging in and out of the spray. Dingy stores lined both sides of the street, though half were boarded up. The windows of the apartments above were like the eye sockets of a rotting skull. It was a ghost street that even in the day was a dark cold place.

Claxton felt fury building in him and he fought hard to contain it. The scar on his forehead throbbed.

"What help do you seek of the Romany?" Claxton turned, cursing the anger that had dulled his senses. The speaker was a tall thin gypsy, dressed in a loud sports shirt. He stood in the center of the room, & was approximately forty, and sported a thick black mustache. He spoke Romani.

"There was a woman attacked there," Claxton pointed toward the corner. "I wish to find the vermin who did it." His grey eyes were like chips of polished flint.

"The Romany-have long memories," the Gypsy said. He remained standing in the center of the room, his arms crossed, his attitude officious. Beyond him, Endora stood in the doorway to the kitchen. "I have spoken to the old ones who remember clearly how you helped the Rom against the Nazi,". He crossed himself and spat, "but-you do not look the age?"

Claxton smiled. "A Booja of time-a trick of age."

"This is a blood debt with these men?" the Gypsy asked.

"The woman-was my wife."

The gypsy nodded grimly.

"Leave a number; I will call before dark," The Gypsy handed Claxton a pad and pencil he produced from a pocket. Claxton wrote down his hotel number and then walked to the door.

"The Rom's memory is long," Claxton said, "and so is mine." He nodded good day and left. As his footsteps receded down the stairs, Endora came out from the back room.

"I would *not* like to be those two devils this night," she said.

* * *

The hours until Claxton received the phone call were the longest the Englishman had ever endured. He visited his wife, relieved to find her condition improved, but he hurried back to his hotel room to await the call.

When the call came it was a different male voice than the tall Gypsy's, but it also spoke Romani. The voice gave an address in the Bronx, not far from the ofis he had visited and the name of the gang that lived there: The Savage Blades.

Five minutes later, clad in black slacks, sandals, and a dark short sleeve shirt-he boarded a train uptown. Behind him--was left John Claxton, Lord Greydon who was sometimes used the alias Caldwell; and with the name, the thin veneer of civilization he wore for his wife's sake, was left behind.

When he boarded the train, he was fully the man who had been the boy-raised in the fetid jungle--who became its *undisputed* master.

The Lord of the Jungle, was hunting...

III.

The "Club House" of the Savage Blades had once been a Vaudeville, then a movie theater. It stood like a stone fortress, towering over a row of two story shops on one side; the burnt out remains of an apartment building on the other. The front facade had been sealed with cinderblocks, but the gang members gained easy entrance through the balcony fire escape door on the side of the building.

The Jungle Lord ignored the stairs, which were undoubtedly guarded, by scaling the back of the three-story structure. The pitted brick was less difficult to climb than

many cliffs he had scaled. Once his sandals were in his back pocket, there was more than sufficient purchase for his fingers and toes. The physical activity after so many tense hours was in fact, relaxing. Once on the roof the jungle man was careful to remain low on the off chance that someone might spot him from the roof of a building from across the street.

Below him was the backstage. It was a confusion of cables, ropes, lights and catwalks. Perfect for the jungle man's purpose. He eased the heavy panes of glass open, spitting on the hinges to minimize the telltale squeaking. He made the four meter drop onto a twenty five centimeter wide catwalk-as noiseless as a leaf falling.

He'd become annoyed at his shirt, so he removed it, wrapping his sandals in it, and tied the bundle with a short length of rope he found laying on the walk. He slung the bundle over his shoulder, poking his head through the space between so that it hung on his back like a quiver. Feeling thus unencumbered-he set off to explore the theater.

Almost immediately the sound of voices drew his attention below. The theater was lit with car headlights that'd been wired to storage batteries. A half a dozen of the lights were spaced around the theater and hanging in various ways so that they illuminated most of the ground floor as if it were a parking lot. Since they threw no light upward, The Jungle Lord felt safe to descend to a lighting scaffold only three meters above the stage to get a better view.

The gang had torn out the majority of the first floor seats and used the flat area as a common living space. Old mattresses' stretched along one wall and were occupied by

several couples having sex. At a card table in the center of the room four young toughs were playing poker with swears and boasts apparently part of the 'card etiquette'. Two young girls, no more than fourteen, were bent over a camp stove preparing soup. Others lounged around reading comic books or talking in small groups. One teenager was stretched out, his head in a young girl's lap, his eyes drug glazed. All total, twenty-two gang members were in the dark-cool theater.

And everywhere-dirt and signs of decay.

"The hyena has more respect for himself than these children," *The Jungle Lord* thought.

Meaningless conversations continued for some time beneath the jungle man and he almost despaired of finding any useful information that way. Then one of the card players, a short Hispanic named Pinto, exclaimed loudly and drew *The Jungle Lord's* full attention.

"Mira, Ca? *I got good credit, man,*" he said. The boy he was playing cards, shook his head.

"Alright, man, I'll put this up-" He reached under the seat and produced an oversized expensive handbag. "There's no money left in it," Pinto said, "but it's worth an easy five. I got it from that *Anglo* cow this af-"

Something-*primal*-in the jungle man snapped. With a hideous growl he *launched* himself into space.

He landed square in the center of the card table, the force of his weight, *snapping* the wooden legs of the table. It crashed down onto the legs of the players, trapping them painfully in their chairs.

For a moment the room was deadly silent.

All eyes, save those too drug-dulled to care, fixated on the jungle man. *The Jungle Lord* grabbed up his wife's handbag, leapt nimbly over Pinto, catching hold of the boy's hair and dragged him from his seat.

"Hey, help!" the shocked boy yelled. The words seemed to thaw the gang members. They all struggled to their feet, arming themselves for what they assumed to be a full scale invasion by a rival gang! Their defensive action, seemed like *slow motion*, in comparison to the jungle man's speed. With Pinto held tightly under one arm, he'd already reached the lighting scaffold.

He paused-long enough to *cuff* the squirming boy once-just enough to render him quiet and passive. Then the jungle lord placed both his burdens under his left arm and leapt for a vertical cable. Using one hand and both feet, he *raced* up the cable with the speed of a monkey!

By the time the gang had realized that no great assault was forthcoming, *The Jungle Lord*-had gained the roof.

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Tito Suarez, six foot four and as muscled as a bull, was taking his turn standing guard at the fire escape door to the club house-when a sound from above drew his attention. When he looked up, he nearly choked.

Midway between the theater roof and the burned out shell of the next building, was a strange apparition. It looked like a tall-dark man, with a body tucked casually under one arm, in the middle of a jump! It was *impossible* of course, because it was a four meter leap at least; and with the roof of the burnt out shell having collapsed, the only place to land was the building's narrow brick ledge.

He watched the phantom complete the astonishing leap, balancing his landing atop the wall with a crouch. Then impossibly, he stood upright, racing along as if he were on the *widest* boulevard.

Then-all hell broke loose!

The door behind Tito *burst* open; the members of the Savage Blades flooded through-armed to the teeth! "*Did you see him?*" one asked.

Tito, stunned by what he had seen was slow to reply. "There he goes!" Someone shouted. The tiny figures of *The Jungle Lord* and Pinto could just be seen as the jungle man leapt from the burnt building to a lower apartment building.

The gang clattered down the stairs in pursuit.

The Jungle Lord moved easily across the rooftops, the now covered boy held firmly with one steel cabled arm. He knew he could not stay ahead of the gang indefinitely; his luck or the rooftops had to give out. Behind him he could hear the sounds of pursuit.

He had already formed several tentative plans-when the rooftops came to an abrupt end. Ahead of him was a broad avenue with the buildings across the street much too far a leap-even for the jungle man. Below him, the coal-black shape of an elevated track, straddled the road like a great *beast*. He hesitated on the edge of the flat roof, shifting the weight of the boy for balance. He drew great breaths, resting while he considered his next action.

Behind him, the sounds of pursuit grew nearer.

A new sound met the jungle man's ears and he growled, terrifying Pinto further. It was footsteps ascending the stairs to the roof that The Jungle Lord was on. "I-underestimated them," he thought, "they must have phoned ahead to allies." He knew at once which course of action he must take.

"This is their territory," he thought. "I must *fight* them on mine."

The Jungle Lord's next move was so rapid that it appeared as if he had been launched with a spring. He crouched, then hurled himself into space with a prodigious leap that carried him to the center of the elevated tracks. Pinto barely drew breath for a scream of fear before the jungle man had tightened his grip to prevent it. Then The Jungle Lord was running down the tracks, balancing on a single rail.

Behind him The Jungle Lord could hear the startled exclamations when the Savage Blades reached the roof then a shout of, "There he is!" The jungle man smiled. He could already smell the scent of green and the animals, of his destination:

The Zoo.

His already dizzying pace quickened. At the point where the tracks came closest

to the zoo *The Jungle Lord* climbed down one of the supporting stanchions. Then he *raced* to the cyclone fence that he scaled by leaping from a nearby lamp post. Once inside, he paused, and savored the smells and sounds of the nocturnal veldt.

"What do you want with me?" Pinto asked, speaking for the first time. The *Jungle Lord* ignored the question and trotted down one of the oaths toward the enclosures. He smelled the zoo-keepers off to his right and gave them a wide birth. "'What do you want?" Pinto's voice was strained to a whisper. The boy's mind was close to snapping after his nightmare ride and the silence of the teak giant.

Finally the giant stopped and Pinto felt himself suddenly lifted from the secure perch beneath the jungle man's arm. The boy was hoisted over a fence and suspended at arm's length into the enclosure. "*You attacked a woman this afternoon,*" The *Jungle Lord* said with a low growl. "What was the name of the one with you?"

Pinto's fear of the man, who was holding him aloft as if he were a rag doll, trebled, and then he heard the annoyed snarl behind him and his heart-almost stopped.

"Tell me or the lion eats well tonight." The terrified boy stared into the steel gray eyes of his captor and never for a moment doubted the outcome of silence.

"Let me down man and I'll tell you," Pinto whispered. *The Jungle Lord* shook him vigorously eliciting another growl from the lion. "Alright man, alright. It was Tito Soares! He kicked her, man, I just grabbed the bag." His voice was a whimper.

The *Jungle Lord* lowered the boy to the ground outside the enclosure. "Not tonight, my brother," he said in answer to the lion's curious stare. "He will soon have a cage of his own." The *Jungle Man* began to turn away from the lion's compound when something small buzzed past his ear. There was a startled gasp from Pinto.

The boy went limp in the *jungle lord's* hands, with an ugly hole in the side of his head. A second shot whizzed through the space where *The Jungle Lord* had been, but he was already in flight. He vaulted the fence into the lion's enclosure, leaping the moat with ease. He raced across the plateau of grass so swiftly that the lion had barely time to snarl disapproval at the intrusion. In a flash *The Jungle Lord* had vaulted the far fence into the deer pen and was lost amongst the dark shapes.

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"He's *dead*, Tito." One of the gang members was kneeling over Pinto's inert form. "I think it was your shot." The massive Tito was standing defiantly with an air rifle balanced on his hip. "So? I didn't do it on purpose. It's that mother's fault." He stared in challenge to the other Savage Blades standing around him.

"Hey, man," one of them said, "We know you're a good shot." The speaker barely came to Tito's shoulder, but he was broad and muscular. His name was Pedro.

"What are you gettin' at?" Tito surged forward and grabbed Pedro by his vest. Tito's swarthy face mottled in anger.

"I meant that hitting Pinto was a' accident. Even you couldn't help it." He eased out of Tito's grip and moved away quietly.

"Hey you guy's," an out of breath Blade in dirty jeans and T-shirt raced up to Tito's group. "We got the guards on ice. The zoo is ours."

Tito smiled an ugly smile, and patted his rifle. "Then let's go kill us a sittin' duck."

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The Jungle Lord stayed hidden within the foliage of a tree that grew at the edge of the deer compound. He had used Sara's confusion to conceal his leap, knowing that the gang members would assume he had fled. He listened to the exchange between the gang members, his eyes glowing with contained fury when he heard Tito's name mentioned.

But he did not have to hear the name to recognize him. The wind, which had concealed the approach of the gang from him, had changed and he caught the scent of the patch that Joan had torn from her attacker.

'No use speculating,' he thought, 'the Savage Blades are hunting The Jungle Lord; and The Jungle Lord does not like to be hunted.'

**

Tito first suspected something was wrong when Pedro failed to answer his hail. They were fanned out in a wide line, each with a gun or baseball bat. Pedro was on Tito's left and Anasto was off to his right.

Tito felt like he was in a jungle war movie. All around him he could hear the night sounds of the zoo chattering away, overlaid with the whispering of the gang members. The moon passed behind a cloud and the walk was plunged into darkness. That was when Tito whispered to Pedro to cover his fear.

"You shakin' in your shoes yet, Pedro?" he asked. He could just make out Pedro's shadowy form, heavy set and lumbering. But the silhouette failed to respond.

"Ca. Pedro?" he asked more insistently.

Still no response.

"Manasto?" Tito noticed that Anasto was further away than he had thought. Just a dark shape. "You guys are just trying to freak me!" He sneered at them.

He turned his eyes forward trying to peer through the gloom, his mind dwelling on just what he'd like to do to the dark stranger who had 'stolen' Pinto. His face twisted into a sick grin.

Ahead was the skeletal shape of cages. It was a large building made of chicken wire fence. But there was something odd about it. Just then the moon escaped from the cloud and he became aware of a number of things simultaneously.

Above the cages ahead were the words "*Monkey house*" in wrought iron. He realized that the background chatter of the animals and the whispering of the Savage Blades-had stopped.

All around him was an eerie silence.

All at once-he knew what was odd about the cages ahead of him.

All the doors-were open.

A *chill* raced down his spine. The need to hear a friendly voice became overpowering.

"Pedro; Anasto?" he said in a small voice. "Please you guys-don't *jive* me." He

turned to face the dark shape on his left. "Say something!" he shouted.

The dark shape moved toward him slowly, gaining definition with each lumbering step. Tito's mouth opened in a silent scream.

It was a gorilla!

The boy raised his rifle to fire in a doomed gesture. The anthropoid snarled, its teeth drawn back to reveal yellow canines. As the boy started to squeeze the trigger a guttural voice from behind him froze his' back and paralyzed his fingers.

"You should have been kind to women and dumb animals, Tito Soares."

The boy gave a cry and whirled, his gun still ready to fire. He forgot the ape completely in the face of greater terror. It was a man, tall and dark, stripped to the waist. His face was a mask of rage and hatred more frightening than if it had beetle brows and fangs because the eyes burned with a fury deeper than bestial. It was an elemental force totally opposed to the Tito's of the world.

It was too much for the boy to face. He fell to his knees, still pointing the gun at The Jungle Lord but his mind totally shut off.....

When the police found Tito he was in no condition to tell them what had happened. All the other live members of the gang had fled, and all the animals were back in their cages and compounds.

There was no one to explain the three bodies, and no one to explain the strange savage cry that everyone for miles around had heard in the middle of the night. One of the keepers, who had been tied up by the gang members, thought it might have been the cry of a bull ape.

But even the keeper agreed with everyone else that it was one creature-he hoped never to meet.

Joan stirred restlessly, reaching out in her sleep for her husband. With that movement, she awoke and sleepily called his name.

"Here, dear," came his quiet answer from nearby. She opened her eyes and saw him seated in a chair by the side of her bed. Then she remembered she was in a hospi-

tal.

"Oh, *John*, I had forgotten."

"You should, Joan," he said with a quiet smile. "Bad dreams are meant to be forgotten."

She returned his smile and held out her hand. He bent to kiss it, and then held it in both of his. She noticed that his shirt was wrinkled and that there was dirt on it, and remarked about both.

"It's nothing, my dear," he said, "I imagine the city has just been a bit hard on them."

She wanted to question him, but she was suddenly tired. She closed her eyes and delighted in the warmth that cruised into her body from his hands; the overwhelming sense of security and permanence, and his love.

She could ask questions tomorrow, for with her & *The Jungle Lord*, there would always-be a tomorrow.

The End