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Within a minute of beginning his descent to the bottom of the river, Ted Copeland was already unhappy with the lack of visibility. The silt-fed Rio Negro was murky enough in its natural state. Now, with the approach of dusk and clouds of mud still rolling in the current as a result of the explosions—bits of grass with gray flecks of fish parts still tumbling within it—visibility was even worse.

Copeland held his harpoon gun tightly, drawing confidence from the way the lethal weapon felt in his hands. To his right and left he could dimly make out the shafts of light thrown about by the powerful flashlights of the other two divers—already spreading out in either direction as they neared the bottom—and took comfort in their presence as well. Fortunately, the water here was fairly shallow, less than ten fathoms, so an emergency surfacing would not be a complicated maneuver.

Funny he should imagine such a thing now, Copeland chided

himself. What was he afraid of? He was a veteran diver with well over a thousand dives to his credit. He had dived on dangerous shoals and underwater wrecks far deeper than this, where danger from the bends or shark attack was always a real possibility. Once he had an air hose split on him at two hundred feet and had to live off a fellow diver's hose all the way to the surface, his body racked with painful decompression bubbles as a result of the too rapid ascent. On another occasion, a moray eel got a hold of him by the wrist and he nearly bled to death before he finally got to the surface, the eel still firmly attached to his arm. That little "incident" had left him with thirty-eight stitches and a newfound respect for the genus *gymnothorax javanicus*—the giant moray.

So why was he nervous now? The anaconda was certainly dead; nothing could have survived the detonation and underwater shock wave it created, no matter how big it was. He had seen its corpse outlined on the sonar scope himself: still, motionless, its great mass just so much lifeless flesh lying on the river's muddy bottom. True, it was located well to the west of the minefield detonation point, but he imagined it had simply been blown there by the force of the blast. He might have been a tiny bit premature when he ordered the charges detonated, but not enough to make any difference. The beast was dead, its largely intact body lying limp and lifeless somewhere in the dark haze below. It was just a matter of locating.

Copeland cautiously swung his light around, its powerful beam cutting a swath through the haze but providing little in terms of usable detail. The snake was down here somewhere, he believed, probably within a few hundred feet of his present posi-

tion. He wanted to be the first to find the snake but comforted himself with the knowledge that even if one of the other divers stumbled across it first, he would still be the first scientist on the scene, ensuring that his role in the historic event would be secure. It was just better press if he were the first to actually locate the thing and declare it dead.

Besides, he had earned the right. After all, *he* was the one who had led this expedition and it was under *his* leadership and expertise that creature had been successfully stopped before it could do any more damage. This was *his* snake, dammit, and no one was going to take that away from him.

He kicked his flippers harder, willing himself on relentlessly, determined not to be denied. Moving farther into the deepening shadows of the river, his flashlight suddenly grazed across the top of a carpet of swaying seaweed, indicating that he had reached the river's bottom. Unfortunately, the floor of the river was a tangle of ancient logs and algae-encrusted boulders, making it hard to distinguish anything distinctly. Suddenly the light from his flashlight washed over something massive and thick, like a very large underwater log. With a chill of anticipation, he swam over to the shape, concentrating his beam on its immense bulk. The oversized diamond-shaped pattern of scales on its hide confirmed to him that he had found what he was looking for: it was the snake's corpse, lying as he imagined it would be, still and silent amidst the rock and battered foliage of the river's bottom.

Copeland broke into a broad grin.

Signaling the other divers through the use of a previously agreed upon flashing light code, he waited for them to begin

moving toward his position before deciding to explore the carcass further. Convinced they had seen his signal and were responding appropriately, he kicked his flippers hard and closed to within feet of the snake's articulated hide. Shining his flashlight against its smooth scales for a moment, he fought the temptation to reach out and give the creature a little pat, just to assure himself that it was real. He wasn't afraid of snakes, of course, and had handled more than his share of normal-sized anacondas before, yet he couldn't bring himself to touch this one. It was *too* different, *too* foreign to anything he had encountered before.

Excitement bubbling within him, he shined his light in both directions of the snake's sinuous body, trying to decide which direction would lead him to the thing's head. Picking one, he flicked his flippers and moved along the animal's body cautiously, studying the creature's seemingly unending curves with fascination. As he glided alongside it, he grew increasingly impressed with its tremendous size and had to admit to himself that Manhart's estimation of its length and girth was not only close, but perhaps even a little conservative. The beast was *immense*.

Suddenly the snake's massive head loomed into view, temporarily unnerving him. It was far larger than he had been prepared for. In fact, it was larger than he had been able to imagine. Ten, perhaps twelve feet from base to snout and almost as broad as it was long, it was easily the most remarkable sight he had encountered in over thirty years of zoology, he decided as he studied it in stunned fascination.

It looked like a typical anaconda, of course, but of a size so massive it seemed as though it belonged to some entirely new

and remarkable species of snake. He recalled when scientists had discovered the fossil of the fifty-foot-long prehistoric snake *Titanoboa* in Colombia a year earlier and shook his head. This thing made that beast look like a garden variety garter snake in comparison. He couldn't have been more pleased if he had shined his lamp upon a dinosaur carcass, for the thing before him looked as if it well belonged to another epoch of zoological history and would have been comfortable living in some Cretaceous swamp, feeding on the small dinosaurs that drew too near the water's edge for their own good.

Captivated by the thing's remarkable size, Copeland's previous sense of timidity vanished and he swam closer to the massive skull, drawn by the immensity and beauty of the thing's dull yellowish eyes. Each easily the size of a beach balls, they gave the impression that the snake was still alive, though it was only an illusion. Snake's eyes remain open even in death, he comforted himself as he shined the beam of light directly into the closest golden orb, examining it carefully.

Copeland watched in fascination as its slit-like iris narrowed when he ran his light across it, and then fatten when he drew the light away. He had done this several times before a cold shaft of ice ran down his spine as sudden realization struck him. If the snake was dead, the pupils would not be responsive to light.

His stomach tensed into a knot and his lungs refused to ingest oxygen from his tanks as he realized that not only was the snake not dead, but it was very much conscious and, he suspected, fully aware of his presence. Battling the panic rising within him, he pushed away from the creature, kicking hard to put distance be-

tween that massive skull and himself.

But it was too late. A second later the creature's immense head, demonstrating far more speed and agility than he had imagined possible, smashed into him, knocking both the flashlight and the harpoon gun out of his hands. Tumbling over backward, his mask torn from his face and his air hose knocked from his teeth, Copeland struggled against the rising terror that was working its way through his brain but with little success. Deciding his best bet was to get to the surface as quickly as possible, he pumped his legs hard and shot for the surface just a few dozen feet away. He was just beginning to allow himself to believe he might make it when something vast and pink engulfed him, pulling him into its malevolent darkness. No longer capable of rational thought, Copeland screamed, but it came out as only a flurry of air bubbles.

Water filled his lungs as Copeland felt himself being pulled deeper into the snake's throat with each powerful undulation of its body, and suddenly he was no longer fascinated, curious, amazed, or afraid.

Ted Copeland was simply surprised.