THE BEAST IN THE CLOUDS

THE ROOSEVELT BROTHERS' DEADLY QUEST TO FIND THE MYTHICAL GIANT PANDA

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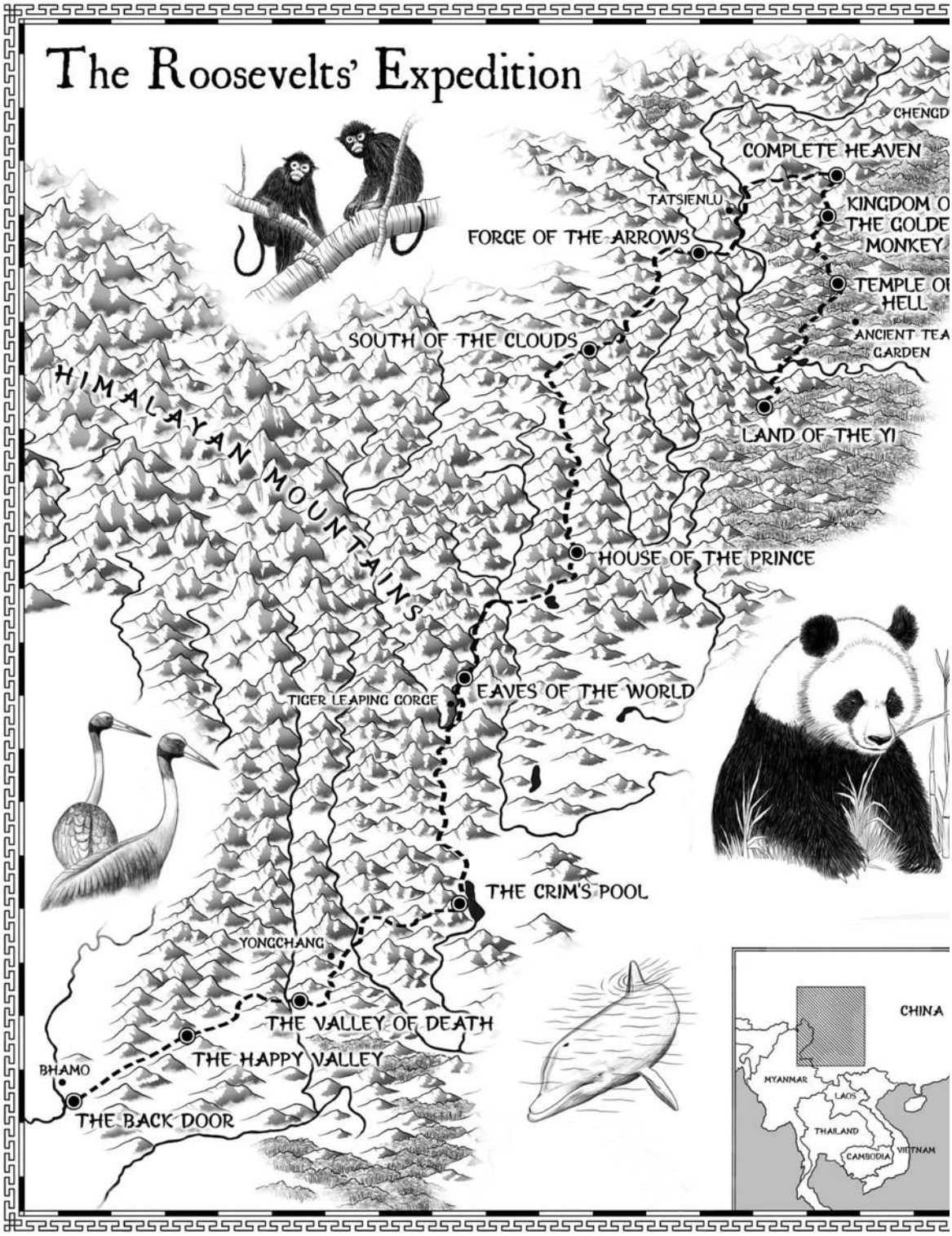


Description 1

For Larkin

There are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm.

—Theodore Roosevelt *African Game Trails,* 1910

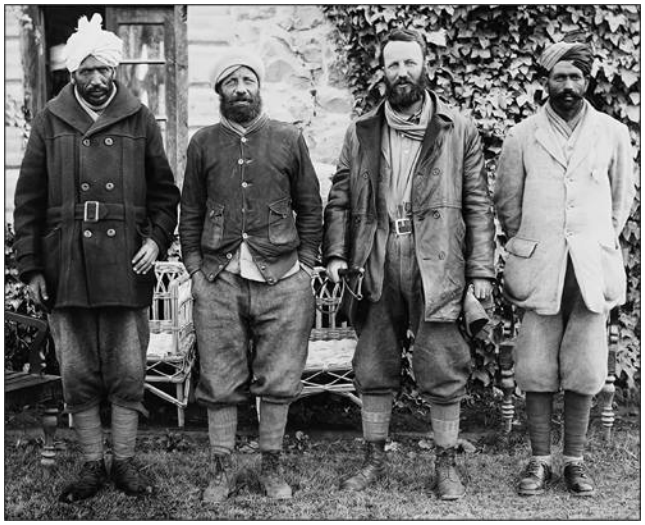
PROLOGUE

THE LAST LARGE MAMMAL

Two brothers smoothed a map on the table in front of them. The land they were examining was colored in greens, browns, and grays. Running across the map, like the stripes of a tiger, were irregular white blotches. Each blank space represented the unknown, a section of the map still unplotted and unexplored. The squiggly dotted line of a river, UNKNOWN printed in small text, cut through the white. It was 1928 and the world was still a checkerboard of wonder, the continents imperfectly mapped.

Ted and Kermit Roosevelt, the two eldest sons of former president Theodore Roosevelt, were planning an adventure. Although they consulted maps from a diverse range of cartographers, including those drawn in China, the unexplored regions persisted. The vast Asian continent dappled with white spoke to them.

The world was full of explorers, all examining maps like the ones the Roosevelts possessed. There was a heady, optimistic feeling that persisted among them. No one could be certain which mountain was the tallest on earth nor which trench in the ocean the deepest. Every expedition held the possibility of making its members world-famous explorers.



Ted and Kermit Roosevelt, 1926, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The 1920s were a decade of discovery, as groups of scientists, adventurers, and hunters ventured forth into the wilderness to fill museum collections. They were successful: every large mammal on earth had been attained, and their bodies mounted in exhibits, except for one.

The Roosevelts desired this one animal so acutely that they could barely speak about it with each other, much less anyone else. “We did not let even our close friends know,” wrote Ted of their shared purpose. Some dreams sound too wild when spoken aloud. The animal the Roosevelt brothers coveted looked like no other species in the world. It was a black-and-white bear so rare that many people did not believe it was real. This legendary creature was called the giant panda. Rumors swirled about the mysterious animal. No one, not even naturalists who had worked in China all their lives, could say precisely where the creature lived, what it ate, or how it behaved.

Brown, black, and polar bears had never been in doubt among humans. Even polar bears, although living in the remote reaches of the Arctic, were well known, and had been kept in zoos for thousands of years. In Egypt, King Ptolemy II had a polar bear in his zoo in Alexandria as early as 285 BC. In 1252, a polar bear was part of the Tower of London’s extensive menagerie of beasts.

Yet the same could not be said of the panda bear. Even among those living in the Republic of China, spanning some 7.7 percent of the earth's landmass, few had ever caught sight of the creature. Dozens of names were used to describe what might be a panda. In different dialects they called it "spotted bear," "giant bear cat," "white bear," and "bamboo bear," although no one could be sure that all these different names were referring to the same species. There were probable references to the giant panda in Chinese literature as early as the third century, although the descriptions were mythical, describing yellow-and-black creatures that munched on copper and iron. "While there are tantalizing stories implying that one Chinese emperor or another knew all about panda," wrote one author, "there's one great mystery. Why is there not a single rendition of this endearing beast in any of imperial China's illustrated natural histories?"

For Westerners, only the pelt of the panda offered proof of its existence. While stationed in the remote mountains near Chengdu in 1869, a French missionary named Armand David hired a group of hunters and asked them to go into the wilderness to collect interesting specimens. One man returned with the lifeless body of a strange animal, small in size, seemingly a cub, but with a striking black-and-white coat unlike anything they'd ever seen before. David inspected the animal closely and then skinned it, shipping the unusual pelt all the way to Paris to be examined by experts.

David gave the peculiar beast the scientific name *Ursus melanoleucus,* translating to "black-and-white bear." It wasn't a name that would stick. Nothing about David's finding was particularly scientific. The hide he'd sent might be stark in its coloration and completely different from any other specimen the museum in Paris possessed, but that did not mean scientists were ready to believe that this odd creature was real. A skin without a skeleton could be anything. Certainly, they did not intend to name a new species that, for all they knew, only a handful of Chinese hunters had ever seen alive. All they had was a vague description of a black-and-white bear and a small pelt of fur stored away in a museum.

Nineteenth-century illustration of the giant panda by Alphonse Milne-Edwards.

To this point in time unnamed, the elusive creature became known as the panda, yet even this label remains mysterious. It arose sometime around 1870, supposedly of French origin, although this has been debated. Some researchers trace its roots to the Nepali words for the red panda, *nigalya ponya*. While unrelated biologically, the red panda was well known in Southeast Asia, and first described by Westerners in 1825.

In 1916, a party of German explorers was traveling in China and Tibet. They sought the legendary black-and-white bear, but no matter how hard they looked, they could find no evidence of the creature. In the small village of Lianghoku, their leader, the German scientist Walther Stozner, asked a group of local hunters to bring them pandas, dead or alive. According to the explorers' written account, the hunters returned with several dead pandas, along with one very young panda cub. The Germans tried to feed the infant milk, then a flour slurry, and finally sought out a human wet nurse, but their efforts all failed. A few days later, in the hands of the first Westerner to glimpse a live panda, it died. No specimens were brought home, however, so the skepticism continued.

Then, in 1919, a missionary named Joseph Milner made an unusual donation to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. "A giant panda," read the announcement in the museum journal *Natural History*,

"from eastern Tibet, one of the rarest of animals.... The striking black and white coat, short muzzle, and curious black patches about the eyes gives it a very extraordinary appearance. Almost nothing is known of the animal's habits." Milner—simply a buyer in this case—himself had nothing else to contribute about the artifact, but even the skin of the panda was enough to excite scientists. Here was tangible evidence that this animal existed.

Expeditions were immediately launched to find the panda. Everyone knew that whoever got the panda first would enjoy immediate fame, both in scientific circles and in the press, so the number of expeditions venturing to China skyrocketed. But even the most experienced explorers came home empty-handed. As the years went by, cynicism grew, leaving many to suspect that the creature was not real at all, merely a black-and-white phantom sent to confuse and plague its seekers.

Ten years passed and the legend of the mythical panda continued to grow. Documenting the animal appeared hopeless to most explorers. The objective was not simply to shoot the bear, although even that would be welcome at this point, but to return with a detailed description of its habitat and diet so that the animal could be unveiled to the public, its existence proven beyond a doubt. Ted and Kermit, experienced in hunting but novices in science, seemed highly unlikely to stun the world with their findings.

The American Museum of Natural History was well known for sending adventurers out into the unknown. Ted and Kermit's connections with the museum ran deep: their grandfather was a cofounder of the institution and their famous father, Theodore Roosevelt, had helped fill its halls with lions, tigers, elephants, and bears. Even Kermit had contributed. In 1909, as a college student, he had accompanied his father on an expedition to Africa. The elephant calf he shot on that trip stood in the center of the Hall of African Mammals, surrounded by seven adults, all poised as if mid-stampede.

Although the calf weighed over two hundred pounds while alive, he looked small compared to the members of his family. While the grown elephants often scared visiting children, with their massive bodies, sharp

tusks, and raised trunks, the calf always drew a crowd of young admirers, some of whom would look into the elephant's glass eyes and dream of becoming explorers and scientists themselves one day.

When Kermit looked at the animal, he was transported back to that moment in time, when he was just nineteen years old and desperate to gain his father's praise. His father had explained to him that this was not a mere hunting trip but a scientific expedition. "I can be condemned," the former president argued, "only if the existence of the National Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and all similar zoological institutions are to be condemned."

The idea of killing animals in the name of conservation might now seem bizarre and even cruel, but Roosevelt's philosophy was not unusual. Naturalists of the era purposely killed endangered species, preferably an entire family of them, in the name of science. Even Charles Darwin, the father of evolutionary biology, was a skilled hunter who used his assortment of rifles to collect specimens. In Uruguay in 1833, the famed naturalist shot several species of deer that would, in later years, become endangered.

For those hunting animals on the brink of extinction, the rationale was clear: if a species was doomed, there was no point in protecting the last few remaining individuals. Nature had made her choice. Instead, scientists should learn as much about the species as possible. This sadly meant killing the animal to study it scientifically. While today human intervention can protect some, although not all, endangered species, it is only successful because of the foundational work scientists have performed over the centuries. Without understanding the basic biology of the species, scientists would not have the means to save them.

The American Museum of Natural History agreed, writing, "Should some interesting mammal disappear from the face of the Earth before such a permanent, concrete record of it could be prepared and stored up for posterity, museums would have indeed been derelict in their duty." What they didn't mention, of course, was that a museum fills its halls and pays its

bills not with complex scientific names but with people clamoring for strange and exotic beasts.

By the 1920s, the museum in New York City had funded expeditions to every continent, and its halls were filled with a diverse range of specimens. Most of its specimens, however, would be hidden from the public—roughly 90 percent of museum collections remain in storage. Yet surveys could enrich the scientific community, adding to the field's knowledge of biodiversity, evolution, and conservation. Descriptive field journals would offer explanations of the species explorers encountered, but physical specimens were more valuable, offering proof of their discoveries and baseline raw morphological data (such as the curve of the mandible and the length of the spine) to demonstrate evolutionary change. These collections would become vital to the future of conservation biology.

Although the Roosevelt name could be found throughout the halls of the New York museum, the venerable institution wasn't sponsoring Ted and Kermit's expedition. Neither brother had proven himself as a scientist or explorer. Instead, Chicago's Field Museum was taking a chance on the Roosevelts. The expedition would be funded by Illinois businessman William Vallandigham Kelley. Museums depended on wealthy donors, whose money bought them halls and exhibits bearing their names, even though they never walked a step of a trail themselves.

The wealthiest Americans, the Rockefellers, Carnegies, Astors, Whitneys, and Vanderbilts, were swimming in money in the 1920s. Stocks had quadrupled in value, to peaks never seen before, and the market seemed destined to go up, up, up. Philanthropists were eager to fund expeditions likely to result in popular exhibits, where their name would be touted by the press and admired on brass plates.

During America's Gilded Age, these prominent families had amassed an unimaginable level of wealth. The richest man in the world, John D. Rockefeller, was worth some $400 billion in today's money. Similarly, J. P. Morgan had so much cash that he was called upon, not once but twice, to bail out the federal government. It would take a century, not until today's era

of tech billionaires, before the country would once again see such wealth concentrated among such a small number of Americans. Wealth inequality today is peaking, with the proportion of assets now held by the top 0.1 percent of the population identical to that of the Roaring Twenties.

"Neither Kermit nor I can afford this on our own," Ted admitted as they plotted their course. The brothers' fortunes were not as plentiful as many supposed. Their father, Theodore Roosevelt, had inherited $60,000 from his father in 1878. Less than a decade later, Roosevelt lost most of his fortune in a risky cattle ranching investment out west. By the time of his death in 1919, his wealth was concentrated in the eighty acres he owned on Long Island. He'd been slowly selling off chunks of the property to raise funds. The land and most of his fortune were left to his wife, Edith, while his five children split a trust fund of $60,000, worth $1.5 million today. Ted and Kermit inherited $12,000 each, a massive sum at the time, but not quite enough to make them independently wealthy. However, they did have some experience in the field, and not only alongside their father's larger-than-life persona.

In 1925, the Field Museum had funded the brothers' expedition to Central Asia. At a time when Percy Fawcett was disappearing into the Amazon and Roald Amundsen was leading the first air expedition to the North Pole, the wanderings of President Roosevelt's eldest sons in India and Pakistan in search of an elusive sheep had not caught the imagination or attention of the press. Instead, it was scientists who took notice.

It wasn't just a sheep that the Roosevelt brothers had found, but a legendary bighorn. Called *Ovis poli* (or *Ovis ammon polii*), it had been described by Marco Polo in 1256. This was the first time the animal was displayed in an American museum. When the Field Museum first received the pelt, skull, and precise measurements of the *Ovis poli*, the scientists were in shock. It had been so long since anyone had seen the sheep that the species was thought to be extinct. However, it wasn't long before *Ovis poli* began drawing attention in other circles. The animal's dramatic spiraling horns, unique to the species, were just the thing to tempt hunters. The

brothers had no idea that their actions would lead to the sheep being hunted to near oblivion.

Now the Roosevelt brothers were after the last large mammal unknown to science, and they believed that if they were willing to push farther, deep into the Himalayas, the ultimate prize would await them. "Central Asia… is the mecca of our desires," wrote Ted. However, as with the *Ovis poli,* the unintended consequences of their journey were not yet clear. What was certain was that no one would emerge from the wilderness unchanged, and one of them wouldn't return home at all.

Once on the ship, the first leg of the journey underway, Kermit felt a familiar feeling of trepidation fill his gut. "It's a warning," he wrote, "that something unexpected is about to happen."

CHAPTER 1

THE HAPPY VALLEY

A trail once traced an ancient path across the largest continent on earth. It started on the coast of the Indian Ocean, before edging into the damp rainforests of Myanmar. It followed a fast-flowing river, its banks teeming with life, then rose high on a ridge so narrow that a mule's hooves inevitably slipped in the dust, kicking the air perilously above a two-thousand-foot precipice.

Not all the explorers along the trail were human. A small seed caught in the crack of a tree. Its roots wrapped around the trunk and then began to stretch across the forest, its reach infinite. It was a banyan tree, and its aerial root system followed the trail as if it too knew the way.

The trail crossed China and Tibet. Humid forests gave way to vast, windblown savannahs, desolate and forbidding. The gusts that rushed down the trail cried to its travelers to turn back, as the danger was increasing. The peaks of the Himalayas rose above the plains, the snow, ice, and wind a permanent, deadly fixture no matter the season. There was no tent strong enough to withstand the mountain squalls and no fire hot enough to warm the explorers' hands and feet. Instead, the cold closed in, stealing away consciousness at the roof of the world.

There were animals and plants in these wilds that no other human being had ever documented. Birds appeared that looked as if sculpted from silver, every feather lying perfectly in place. Strange aquatic creatures, taller than a human from end to end, splashed in muddy pools. Monkeys with long, golden tufts of fur and bright-blue faces hung from the trees. Yet the most surprising animal of all lay deep within the heart of the trail, inside a hidden kingdom whose entrance required months of hard trekking.

No living person can now tread the Roosevelts' path. The trail they walked has been wiped clear, its roads paved, and many of its forests decimated. The people

who once found sanctuary in its walls of green are long gone, along with many of the species they encountered along the way. Still, in the quiet of the wilderness their legacy remains, a murmur in a preserved bamboo forest.

THE SOUND OF THE FOREST at night is different from the serene hum of daytime. The darkness heightens the senses so that the shrill call of an owl or the chirp of the cricket is amplified. Every growl from the brush echoes with ominous undertones. Every rustle of the leaves has the potential to shake the confidence of even a skilled explorer. The expedition had just begun, only a single day spent on the trail, but already the group was groping in the darkness. A scientist, one of their own, had vanished.

Tai Jack Young looked down the darkening trail and felt a spurt of fear. Herbert Stevens, an English naturalist, had stepped off the trail six hours ago, and never returned. The Chinese wilderness, usually teeming with life, had gone quiet around him. There was no telling where Herbert might be, or even if he was still alive.

They were hiking from Burma into China on a path known as "the back door," so named because of its remote and rugged entry point into China. There was no border guard to greet them and no sign to mark the way. Instead, the trail merely narrowed slightly. The explorers would not even have known that they had entered China had Jack not told them.

Tai Jack Young went by "Jack" for the convenience of English speakers. His last name had already been changed, from Yang to Young, by his grandfather, Young Tak Cho, who felt the name rolled off the tongue of Americans better, closer to the true Chinese pronunciation. He was just nineteen years old and devastatingly handsome, tall with thick hair that he liked to comb back from his face into a pompadour. He loved wearing crisp shirts under modern, three-piece suits. Now, however, his hair was disheveled and his clothes dirty.

He'd been hired as the expedition's interpreter and guide. Jack was the youngster of the group, although in many ways more experienced than his employers. He knew China thoroughly, thanks to his upbringing in a small village outside of Hong Kong and his travels as a child. His father had been born in San

Francisco in the United States, his mother in Guangdong, a coastal province in Southern China, but he was from neither country. His birthplace was Kona in Hawaii, an island territory positioned between both nations, reflecting his own fractured identity.

Now Jack was on the trail and eager to prove himself. He admired Kermit Roosevelt's relaxed attitude in the woods. In New York City, Jack had been lured by the brothers' prestige and famous name. Here in the wilderness, the younger brother had a different draw. Kermit was comfortable in his skin, more fully himself while trotting the dirt trails than he had been on the concrete sidewalks. Kermit was a man who had traveled across the world, from Africa to South America to Asia, and Jack, just on the verge of manhood, couldn't help but be awed by his accomplishments. What he hadn't yet glimpsed were Kermit's weaknesses.

Jack had met Kermit earlier that year—1928—when New York City was abuzz with news that the two eldest sons of former president Theodore Roosevelt were undertaking a new expedition. As soon as the trip was announced, men and women of all ages, including an entire Boy Scout troop, began writing letters to Ted and Kermit asking to join:

"I am eighteen. I have always wanted to see the world and this is my opportunity."

"Well, Colonel, when do we start?"

"I would like to go with you on one of your expeditions, and I saw in the papers that you are going on another one.... I am 11 years old and my chief occupation is going to school gee its awful."

Instead of applying directly to the two Roosevelt sons, Ted and Kermit, Jack had approached the Chinese embassy, where he worked part-time, and explained the situation to his boss. He was a journalism student at New York University and had no connections, but he did have one skill they needed. He was adept at languages and knew multiple Chinese dialects—and, what's more, had traveled through Southwest China as a child with his father. He was young and had never served as a guide on an expedition or as a scientist on a field mission, but he knew if someone like the Roosevelts gave him the opportunity, he could prove himself.

"He was a slight, nice-looking boy," Ted wrote, after they decided to hire Jack. They immediately sent him to the Field Museum in Chicago so that he could begin

an “intensive course” in the scientific techniques of specimen collection. The curator, however, was skeptical. “Doubt if Chinaman can be trained in two weeks to be of value to the expedition,” he wired to the Roosevelts.

Jack felt the weight of expectations as night approached. The group was on the verge of descending into panic. “We have only an hour until it’s dark,” Kermit explained to his brother, Jack, and Suydam Cutting, another naturalist on the expedition. “We’ll have to split up into search parties around the site where Herbert left the trail. Be back at camp by nightfall. We can’t risk losing more of us out here in the dark.” They agreed, and Ted and Suydam veered to the left while Kermit and Jack took the right. It was a strange, reckless sensation to lift one’s boot off the safety of the dirt trail and plunge it into the green of lush vegetation, but they had no choice. They had to find Herbert.

From left to right, Suydam Cutting, Theodore Roosevelt Jr., and George Cherrie having breakfast on the hunt for *Ovis poli*, 1925. Courtesy Field Museum, CSZ51815.

Jack didn’t know Herbert well; they’d only met a few weeks earlier. Herbert Stevens was a biologist originally from the University of Cambridge who now lived in India. As a scientist, Herbert was invaluable. He was an expert in zoology and botany, able to identify a wide range of species, from birds to insects to trees. However, his reputation was lacking within the scientific community. The Royal Geographical Society had rejected him as a fellow, stating his lack of fieldwork and publications. Jack suspected the real reason was that he preferred to live abroad, rather than moving within London’s social circles. Similar to Jack’s

motivations, this expedition gave Herbert an opportunity to prove that the revered geographical society was wrong about him.

While Kermit called out Herbert's name, Jack looked back toward the trail. He couldn't spot its flat contours, and for a moment he felt a surge of panic. The prospect of failure—becoming lost during this trip, or losing a member of the party—had not crossed Jack's mind until now. These were the Roosevelts. They bore an air of invulnerability that had carried the entire group forward into this treacherous environment. Even Jack, one of the few who understood what he was getting into, had been blinded by the brothers' glamour. With his gun slung over his shoulder, Kermit held a compass pressed tightly in his fist. Although the light was fading, Kermit was doing his best to keep track of their position on the map.

They soon came upon a mossy green embankment and Jack could feel his boots slip dangerously in the loose dirt as they hiked down. The trees were so dense in this part of the forest that they first heard water before they spotted it. It started as a low rushing growl and then grew progressively louder, eventually filling Jack's ears as they approached.

"This isn't the Taping River," Kermit yelled over the noise of the water. "It must be a tributary." Jack wasn't sure—the stream seemed wide enough to be a river—but he nodded in agreement. Water lapped against the banks and swirled around the rocky streambed. The trees had thinned along this section of the forest, and the open sky above the water was like a funnel for the last gasps of daylight. Kermit and Jack scanned the water hastily, but it was Jack's young eyes that spotted it, a small raft, just a speck of black on the edge of the blue water.

Kermit called out again, this time as loud as he could, but he was too far for the sound to carry over the rush of the water. "Let's chase it!" he yelled.

They ran down the streambank. It wasn't as easy as it seemed. Even though the path wasn't crowded like the jungle's interior, there were still tree roots rising from the mud to trip them and thick, chest-high brush that ripped at their clothing to slow them down. Kermit yelled again, and this time, the men on the raft looked up.

Jack felt some trepidation about calling out to the strangers; after all, they had no idea who they were, and here in this remote jungle, it could be just about anyone. When he was twelve, he'd traveled through this region with his father. That trip had taught Jack—unlike the Roosevelts, who moved through the world