AU JUS

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. AMAZON JUNGLE -- DAY

The Amazon River winds through the dense tropical jungle. The echoing sounds of exotic birds and spider monkeys.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

Primitive. Thatched roof with a hole to let smoke out. Crude cooking implements, arranged neatly. A large pot with a human leg sticking out of it bubbles on an open fire.

Tossing vegetables into the pot is Chef MANNY, 40s and plump. He wears a chef's coat and toque made of albino snakeskin, and a bone through his nose. He is a cannibal of high ideals.

He picks up a book entitled "You Are What You Eat." Flips through the pages.

Manny pinches salt from a banana-leaf bowl, tosses it in the pot. Stirs with a whisk made of vines. Tastes.

MANNY

No.

He adds pepper. Tastes again. Shakes his head.

Manny smashes a bone with a rock, sprinkles the resulting dust into the pot. Stirs once more.

Tastes. Smiles.

INT. DINING HALL -- NIGHT

The entire cannibal village sits down to their evening meal. Chief FUSCIO, flamboyant in a pink headdress, at the head of the table. Around him, cannibal HUNTERS, WOMEN and CHILDREN, dressed in jungle chic: feathers, leaves, animal skins.

Manny emerges from the kitchen. He holds a covered dish. Sets it down in front of Fuscio.

MANNY

Good evening, everyone. Tonight's special is missionary shank braised in a cassava reduction, with just a hint of balsamic vinegar. We also have toe gnocchi with palm pesto. And banana compote on the side. Enjoy.

FUSCIO Looks marvelous. A little cannibal girl, ANA, 8, makes gagging noises.

ANA Gross. We had missionary last night. I want tourist!

Ana's mother, ZUCA, 27, swats the back of Ana's head.

ZUCA You'll eat it, and you'll like it.

Ana sticks her tongue out at Manny.

ZUCA Keep it up and we'll take away the anaconda...

Ana digs in with a grimace.

Chief Fuscio raises his cup in Manny's direction. The other Cannibals follow suit. Manny smiles, ducks his head.

INT. KITCHEN -- MORNING

Manny minces yucca root on a wooden plank.

Fuscio rushes in, clapping his hands.

FUSCIO King Cacao is coming! King Cacao is coming!

Manny stops. Looks up.

MANNY You are not fooling?

FUSCIO He'll be here tomorrow night! Eight o'clock sharp. Says he's really looking forward to trying your famous Tourist Stew! (jumping up and down) Isn't that great?

MANNY That's... remarkable. The chance of a lifetime, even.

FUSCIO And you are just the zesty hombre to do it!

He flicks Manny's nose bone.

Ow!

FUSCIO Oo, sorry... Can you imagine your name scribbled all over the Amazonian Ledger?

Manny's eyes light up.

MANNY

An endorsement from the king himself? All those gossipers would finally have to eat crow.

FUSCIO You could invite them. They can all eat each other.

MANNY I don't see how that's possible.

FUSCIO

(ponders it) You're right. We have got to be on our A-game. Remember Chef Tacacá, two villages over? The one who thought chicken livers would be a nice change of pace?

MANNY

Yes, I remember.

FUSCIO He'll never cook in *this* jungle again.

MANNY Heavens to Marubo... this is all that I know.

FUSCIO (tilts his head) Bon appétit.

EXT. CANNIBAL VILLAGE -- MOMENTS LATER

Children swarm all over a makeshift jungle gym made of vines. Ana plays with her 25-foot pet anaconda. Manny emerges from the kitchen, gripping a knife.

> MANNY Why aren't you in school?

> > ANA

Eat me!

Five Hunters await Manny's orders. The head hunter is LACKEO. He's the brightest of the bunch, but that's not saying much.

Manny paces in front of them, wielding the knife. Examines its sharpness.

MANNY

This... is a most important
expedition. The king is coming.
 (raises a finger)
And the king - you miserable dogs expects nothing but the best. As do
I. So I am telling you now... Scour
the jungle... turn over every leaf...
every large rock... and bring me
back a tourist. He - or she - must
be in good health. Young. Not too
thin. But most of all, delectable.

He pokes Lackeo in the kidney with the knife.

MANNY

Is this in any way unclear?

The Hunters shake their heads nervously.

MANNY

You go now.

The Hunters scamper away, bumping into each other.

INT. KITCHEN -- MOMENTS LATER

SERIES OF SHOTS: MANNY PREPARES MISE EN PLACE FOR HIS STEW

1) He rapidly chops jelly fungus.

2) Measures out herbs using an array of hollowed-out coconuts.

3) Skims his recipe, muttering to himself.

4) Uses a mortar and bone to vigorously mash a plantain.

MANNY

It will be perfect.

EXT. AMAZON JUNGLE -- AFTERNOON

Lackeo and the other Hunters prowl through the jungle.

Up ahead, a MAN, 30s with a cleft chin, surveys his surroundings through binoculars. He scratches his ass.

A rangy Hunter taps a filthy Hunter on the shoulder.

RANGY

Look.

FILTHY You sure he's a tourist? Out here all by himself?

LACKEO He could be a loner. Like your uncle.

RANGY I told you never to bring him up.

He hums the spear at Cleft Chin.

It flies through the air, headed straight for Cleft Chin's butt. A SHRIEK echoes through the trees.

RANGY

Bull's-eye.

INT. KITCHEN -- LATER

Manny scrutinizes a bunch of bananas. He rips one off.

MANNY

Bruised.

Tosses a swish into a bamboo wastebasket.

MANNY (inspects another) Moldy. (swish; checks another) Misshapen.

He's three for three. The Hunters stroll in, chanting a tribal tune. They lug Cleft Chin on their shoulders. He agonizes, the long ornament still intact.

MANNY (waves them over) Come.

He clears the counter. The Hunters drop Cleft Chin down onto a large wooden plank.

CLEFT CHIN Help me. Please. This really hurts.

Manny shushes him, examines him carefully.

MANNY You stupid nincompoop.

CLEFT CHIN

What'd I do?

MANNY

Not you.

He narrows his eyes at Lackeo.

MANNY

Don't you realize that this is a poacher?

LACKEO

No. I...

Manny yanks at Cleft Chin's bony necklace.

MANNY You see? Jaguar bones. You incompetent.

LACKEO But he's in good health. Like you said.

Cleft Chin groans.

MANNY

Imbecile! He's free range. The meat will be tough. You expect me to serve this to a king?!

Cleft Chin moans even louder.

MANNY Remove the spear from his buttocks. I cannot stand his complaining.

Lackeo and the other Hunters pull out the spear. Cleft Chin breathes a sigh of relief.

MANNY Feed him to the anaconda.

CLEFT CHIN No, wait. Please...!

The Hunters hoist Cleft Chin up and out.

MANNY

Just a moment.

He strides over, removes Cleft Chin's necklace.

MANNY This is good for the stew.

EXT. CANNIBAL VILLAGE -- MORNING

Manny bursts from the kitchen, Fuscio on his heels.

FUSCIO

Bye... Good Luck!

Manny pulls a spear down from a rack. Turns to the Hunters.

MANNY Let's go shopping.

EXT. AMAZON JUNGLE -- LATER

Manny leads the way through the trees and scrub brush, the five Hunters close behind. Bird CAWS fill the air.

MANNY I cannot hear myself think with their incessant chattering.

LACKEO We could kill them, but there are many.

MANNY

Shut up.

He leaps over a fallen tree.

LACKEO Chef Manny. You jump like a man half your age.

MANNY Remove your lips from my buttocks. It's the tourist I want.

He stops short. Fifty yards ahead, a TOUR GROUP of twelve.

MANNY

Smorgasbord...

A busty WOMAN, 23, lags behind. Manny nods to Lackeo, who cocks his spear.

MANNY No. A dart for this one.

Lackeo reaches into his holster, slides out a blowdart. Licks his lips. Licks them again. Thoroughly. Manny glares at him.

LACKEO It helps if your lips are nice and wet.

MANNY

Just do it!

Lackeo's dart hits Busty in the neck, she staggers to the ground.

INT. KITCHEN -- AFTERNOON

Busty lies on the cutting board. Manny hovers over her, inspecting her teeth. The Hunters await his verdict.

Busty's head sways back and forth, she regains consciousness. She coughs. Manny pulls his head back in disgust.

MANNY

She smokes.

BUSTY (sits up; Boston accent) Who the hell are you?

Manny prods at her breasts.

BUSTY Get your fuckin' hands offa me.

MANNY This is not good.

BUSTY What's not good?

MANNY This woman is made of artificial materials.

BUSTY What? Fuck off.

MANNY Young lady. This is not the place for a foul tongue.

BUSTY

I'm not scared o' you. Every fuckin' guy I know loves my fuckin' tits.

MANNY (wags his finger) But it's what's inside that counts.

LACKEO Should we feed her to the anaconda?

MANNY No. He would just get sick. Send her back.

BUSTY Oh, fuck you. You have got some nerve bringing me in here...

MANNY

You go now.

The Hunters drag Busty away. She leaves behind a trail of profanity. Manny stands, biting his nails.

EXT. CANNIBAL VILLAGE -- CONTINUOUS

Manny marches over to a sundial. Turns and spots the anaconda, significantly lumpier than the day prior.

EXT. RESTROOM -- CONTINUOUS

Crude, roofless stalls, aligned in a row. Manny rushes to the last stall, seals himself in.

INSIDE STALL

A pile of leaves sits in a basket beside the commode. Manny reaches under it, slides out a magazine.

He takes a seat. Pops open "Vegetarian Times."

He skims the pages for a recipe. Hears footsteps, shuts the magazine. His eyes shift back and forth.

The sound of footsteps walking away. Manny reopens the magazine. Settles on a page.

INSERT - RECIPE FOR SOY SURPRISE

Quietly, he tears the page out.

SMALL POOL

Manny washes his hands. Stops. Stares at his reflection.

EXT. AMAZON JUNGLE -- CONTINUOUS

The still waters of the Amazon.

A huge riverboat jam-packed with young, healthy TOURISTS glides by. The Hunters are too busy playing a game of Keep Away (with a coconut) to notice.

FILTHY Shouldn't we be looking for tourists?

LACKEO When the time is right, the tourists will come to us.

RANGY That sounds right.

INT. MANNY'S HUT -- MOMENTS LATER

Manny fastens a fresh albino snakeskin coat. Fusses with his sleeves. His bony buttons bear the engraving: A+.

He sets a red toque onto his head, aligns it just so. Straightens his nose bone.

MANNY It will be perfect.

He strides out.

INT. KITCHEN -- MOMENTS LATER

Manny neatly arranges all of his utensils, herbs, vegetables and fruits. A large pot bubbles over an open fire.

He slides the soy recipe from his pocket. Skims it.

Two cannibal Women in blue headdresses enter. Manny flinches.

MANNY Go! Go away now!

TEAL What's eating him?

TURQUOISE

Vegan!

MANNY

How dare you?!

He raises the knife, they run away.

Manny grabs an unmarked bag from the corner, lugs it over to the counter.

He shells soybeans, piles them onto the floor. His eyes dart about.

The sound of running footsteps. Manny throws a capybara pelt over the beans.

Lackeo scurries in, gripping a coconut. He wears a big smile. Manny turns to him expectantly.

> LACKEO Sorry. We couldn't find anyone.

He hides the coconut. Manny gives him the once-over.

MANNY I see you got some sun, though.

Lackeo shrugs, grins sheepishly.

MANNY

You have been a big disappointment to me from the very beginning. Once again, you have dropped the coconut.

Lackeo drops the coconut. It rolls into the kitchen.

MANNY You would not even make a dismal side dish. You go now.

INT. DINING HALL -- MOMENTS LATER

A table set for a king. Two Women decorate the hall with primitive garlands and tribal masks.

GARLAND I'm so hungry I could eat a tax collector.

TRIBAL MASK Don't say that.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

A covered mound of soybeans rests on the floor. Manny stirs the stew with a long bone.

Fuscio scampers in.

FUSCIO King Cacao is here! Manny jumps, drops the bone. It rattles on the floor.

FUSCIO Is everything alright?

MANNY Everything is fine, yes.

FUSCIO He says he'd like to meet you.

MANNY

Of course.

He casts a worried look down at the hill of beans.

EXT. CANNIBAL VILLAGE -- CONTINUOUS

KING CACAO, 50, a large man draped in a jaguar pelt, is flanked by three DIGNITARIES, and a WITCH DOCTOR. The King wears a crown of ocelot teeth, with a giant egg atop it.

Manny approaches.

KING CACAO Manny... I apologize for my early arrival. I was eager to meet you.

MANNY Likewise, Your Majesty.

He kisses the King's ring. A human eye in the center of it.

KING CACAO I have heard many good things about your cuisine.

MANNY Please. You flatter me.

KING CACAO

I trust it is well-deserved. My journey has been quite long. I can think of nothing better than to sit down and enjoy a bowl of your delicious Tourist Stew.

MANNY Yes. And on that note, I must go check and see that it is not burning.

KING CACAO That would be a pity. I have such high hopes for you. And the stew.

Manny turns to leave.

KING CACAO

I have been told that my palate is unmatched. Of course... those chefs, as I recall, had good reason to be so liberal with their praise.

MANNY

Yes, Your Majesty.

He nods, smiles. Shuffles away.

INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

Manny races in, upending cookware, tossing utensils about.

He bumps into the mound of beans, they spill across the floor.

MANNY

What am I going to do?

He looks helplessly through the hole in the thatched roof.

The anaconda snakes on by, Manny studies it. Dismisses it.

He spins in circles, reaches for another sack on the floor. Empties a pile of cassava leaves onto the wooden plank.

MANNY

Cassava is a good source of protein, no? NO? Who am I talking to?

He begins chopping like mad. Rapid fire.

Ana runs into the kitchen, screaming.

ANA

Have you seen Pudgy?

MANNY Get away from me, you little brat!

ANA

I hate you!

She darts away. Manny continues chopping. Misfire!

He slices his finger, hops around in pain.

MANNY It's okay. There is still time. It's okay...

He stops. Panicked. Sucks on his finger.

Manny's eyes grow wide. An epiphany.

He examines his finger. Blood dribbles onto the floor. Manny walks calmly to the cutting board. Sets down his red toque. Puffs it out just so. Strolls about, reminiscing. He stops. Boisterous chatter from the dining hall. MANNY It will be perfect. Manny leaps high in the air... AND INTO THE BOILING POT! Silence. The pot bubbles away. LATER Fuscio enters, aghast to see the kitchen in such disarray. FUSCIO My God. What happened here? (calling) Manny...? He looks back at the dining hall, claps his hands. FUSCIO You two. Get in here. INT. DINING HALL -- NIGHT Candles are lit. Tribal music plays softly. A grand total of twenty are seated around the table. King Cacao beams as Teal and Turquoise serve up the stew. Fuscio nods at Lackeo who tries the stew. He burps, gives a thumbs-up. King Cacao picks up his large spoon. Fills it with the prized stew. Tastes it. Everyone waits on pins and needles...

> KING CACAO I have tasted no one like it.

Fuscio claps like crazy.

FUSCIO

Yay, Manny!

KING CACAO Everyone... please enjoy.

They all dig in. Including the Children, who can't seem to get enough. Ana licks her spoon.

> ANA This is the best Tourist Stew ever!

Zuca ruffles her hair.

Fuscio spoons up stew, finds a piece of albino snakeskin. A sad expression sweeps over his face.

KING CACAO Might we call on Chef Manny to take a bow?

FUSCIO Certainly, Your Majesty. But if I know Manny, he is out scouring the jungle for the perfect dessert.

KING CACAO

Very well.

He raises his glass, they all toast.

KING CACAO To Manny, the finest chef the Amazon has ever known.

ALL

To Manny.

King Cacao swills his drink. The egg falls from his crown, cracks onto the floor.

FADE OUT

THE END