



Tangor's Pastiche and Fan Fiction  
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# THE LAND THAT DARWIN FORGOT

*A CASPAK PASTICHE*

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Serialized at  
Tangor's Pastiche and Fan Fiction  
from July 2000 to March 2001

Note: This PDF edition uses the same text of *The Land That Darwin Forgot* as found at Tangor's erblast.com. The text has been formatted to trade paperback size, justified, hyphenated and "prettied up" font-wise. A few spelling errors were corrected and missing punctuation was inserted, some sentence structures were rearranged, but otherwise follows the on-line text. The Foreword has been expanded with a short synopsis of ERB's novel and the addition of notes regarding *Land That Darwin Forgot*.

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*THE LAND THAT DARWIN FORGOT*

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

Mr. Burroughs  
Clemens  
Mr. Leinster  
Dr. Heinlein  
John Henry  
Micky MacDonald  
Ivan Rokoff  
John Running Elk  
Hiro Nagamichi  
Hermann von Borst  
Celeste



Map Note: Billings' crash site is as marked by ERB.

## FOREWORD

I so thoroughly enjoyed participating with and editing the first Internet Barsoomian serial *When the Princess Disappeared* that I knew it was only a matter of time before I got involved in another serial pastiche. I have created a tale which addresses the "between the lines" background adventure that surely must have happened in the course of *The Land That Time Forgot* trilogy penned by Edgar Rice Burroughs in 1916-1918.

The reader is strongly urged to read Edgar Rice Burroughs' landmark adventure romance *The Land That Time Forgot* as the novel you have in hand is a direct tie-in. ERB's novel is highly respected for both prose and imagination, and is just plain fun. *The Land That Time Forgot* can be found in many editions, old and new, and can also be downloaded from dozens of web sites world wide.

While it is helpful that you read at least the first part of *The Land That Time Forgot*, the *Land That Darwin Forgot* does stand on its own.

Bringing the reader up to speed:

Mr. Burroughs, of course, is part of the expedition aboard the yacht *Toreador*, which entered the frigid South Pacific to locate and bring back Bowen Tyler, Jr., son of a powerful West Coast ship-building tycoon who built submarines used by combatants of what we now call World War I.

Young Tyler, a survivor of a torpedoed passenger liner—along with Ms. Lys La Rue—join the crew of an English tugboat and members of the U-33, a German submarine. Together the group experiences an incredible adventure in a land that time forgot. Bowen and Lys

eventually find themselves alone in a strange land. The couple has pledged their lives together in their lonely existence. Bowen records their recent events in manuscript form, puts it in a bottle and tosses it into the Pacific. Ed Burroughs, on a fishing trip off the coast of Greenland, finds the manuscript and delivers it to the Tyler family in California. A rescue mission is mounted, led by Tom Billings, whose adventures are described in part two of ERB's Caspak Novel. Bradley's adventures (part three) run chronologically with part one and part two. *Land That Darwin Forgot* begins shortly after the start of part two and ends at the conclusion of part three.

All are eventually rescued by the *Toreador* expedition; but what Edgar Rice Burroughs never detailed is the adventures of the rescue expedition! Read on to find out what happened to *them!*

The "Mr. Burroughs" found in this narrative is loosely modeled after the character described in Edgar Rice Burroughs' fictitious and humorous autobiography. I thought we should explore *that* character as well.

I hope you enjoy *The Land That Darwin Forgot* as much as I did writing it.

Notes to the 2006 edition of  
*Land That Darwin Forgot*:

Over the years since the release of *Land That Darwin Forgot* on the Internet, a number of readers have inquired regarding plot elements and the included map. These questions are briefly answered in the following fashion:

1. ERB was in error marking the location of Billings' crash site. Those on the *Toreador* could *hear* the aviator's battle with the flying reptile, therefore, the crash site *had to be much closer* to the yacht's position.

2. All "scientific" information regarding prehistoric life forms included in *Land That Darwin Forgot* is based on *then* accepted facts (1916-1918). I chose to remain consistent with the science found in Burroughs' *Land That Time Forgot*.

3. The only things the rescue expedition *knew* about Caprona were in *Bowen Tyler's* manuscript, which is the *first* part of *Land That Time Forgot*. The expedition had *no* knowledge of Billings or Bradley's adventures in Caspak.

## CHAPTER 1

November 29th, 1917  
On board the *Toreador*  
South Pacific, off the  
coast of Caprona

My Dear——

*Of all the confounded luck!*

Here I sit in a canvas deck chair wrapped in coat and muffler, despite the fact it is Summer in the Southern Hemisphere this time of year. We are so far South that Antarctica's infernal cold and icebergs chill and menace us continually. You know why I am here. I am part of the rescue mission to find Bowen Tyler's son—and *that* because I found his manuscript in a bottle floating off the coast of Greenland. Over the last few months we assembled—I say "we," though nearly all of the planning and effort was done by the most able Tom Billings—a ship, crew, supplies, and even a seaplane, then sailed for nearly a month before locating Caprona.

Tom Billings, who is more of a general manager at the Tyler shipyards in Santa Monica than the personal secretary of Bowen Tyler, Sr., took off in his seaplane to examine the interior of the island, which is completely surrounded by incredible cliffs rising perpendicularly from the cold Pacific waters. Not long after he disappeared over the crest we heard his Vickers machine gun give several bursts, then silence. That occurred a month ago.

The captain of the *Toreador*, a stalwart and inventive man, immediately ordered the crew to begin an ascent of the cliffs near the point where Billing's plane had

crossed into Caprona's interior, but it took nearly two weeks to determine a likely ascent. Once found, expending painstaking and near Herculean effort, the crew scaled the cliffs by drilling and securing steel rods into the dense rock. This was not an easy task and several weeks passed before the last spike was driven and man could stand on the divide that lay between the cold, restless Pacific and the tropical hell that is the heart of Caprona.

I can tell you that the ascent, regardless of safety line and the extraordinary path breaking done by the brave sailors, is terrifying to several extremes. By the time I reached the summit with navigator Clemens, Dr. Heinlein, and crew chief Leinster, my heart beat was so accelerated the good doctor bade me sit while Leinster directed the hauling up of supplies and firearms.

In all, our group comprised ten men, including the heroic-figured and always jovial John Henry, the ship's black cook—whose family has been American for several generations—who claimed his great-grandfather was a proud Waziri chief and his great-grandmother the beautiful daughter of a fierce desert Taurag prince. John Henry's many stories during the voyage had been highly amusing and quite filled with ferocious savagery, but when I saw the primitive heart of Caprona, I was certainly glad he was among our company! He exhibited no lack of bravery while working with his shipmates to scale the cliffs, and his strength and matter-of-fact manner, while joking with his fellows, inspired confidence in us all.

Dr. Heinlein had been a horse and buggy doctor in Missouri for more years than he cared to remember. He is elderly, but not old. This is a fine distinction, I realize, but there *is* a difference. Heinlein's medical knowledge was honed over several dozen years of delivering babies, tending farm accidents, burn victims, at least six different epidemics from smallpox to cholera, war injuries for returning Spanish-American war casualties, and a long

time personal interest in how diseases were transmitted from one human to another. His mind is brilliant—it cannot be said other than that. His physical frailties are no more severe than my own, and I am considered quite robust and athletic by my peers—including you! Dr. Heinlein's first glimpse of Caprona from the summit of those cliffs was the only time I saw the good doctor's jaw drop agape. At the time he said: "This is something to tell the imp grandchild." From that moment on, however, nothing he saw or found in Caprona fazed him.

Mr. Leinster is, I suppose, the best organized of us all. His position on the *Toreador* is somewhere between super-man and Second Mate. His actual title is Crew Chief, but this does not describe his position or his talents by one iota. He had served with the major passenger lines as Purser, Chief Engineer, and First Mate—though he was contemptuous of the uniforms and "politics" of such organizations. He also holds an engineering degree from a university you'd recognize instantly if I revealed it to you—but I shall not since Mr. Leinster is not pleased to have been the off-spring of decadently wealthy parents who, though they tried their best at every opportunity, had not *yet* managed to squander the Industrial millions of Leinster's grandfather.

Clemens—no first name known—greeted the question: "*Are you Mark Twain?*" with a raised eyebrow and a delicate sneer that can cut more sharply than a hot knife through room temperature butter. "The only thing that fellow and I have in common is we both piloted paddle boats on the Mississippi when we were young and stupid." Clemens is a crack marksman with a rifle. I have seen him bring down an albatross with a clean shot through the bird's eye from the heaving deck of a steamship and *repeat* the same demonstration when others scoffed. His skills as a navigator are reportedly legendary and his services were added to the expedition by

Tom Billings' plea: Clemens had been just hours away from sailing to Europe to join the British navy to combat the Hun.

Also with us on that wind tortured summit was Hiro Nagamichi, a small-boned Nipon with straight black hair and serious mien. Nagamichi carried a prized family treasure; a razor-edged Samurai sword, in addition to a rather ordinary but quite deadly revolver. I had seen his sailor work in the rigging of the *Toreador* during the voyage and no man alive—other than my friend in Africa—is more agile or dexterous aloft than young Hiro.

Ivan Rokoff surprised me. He is the 17 year old bastard son of a Russian agent my friend Lord Greystoke knew most unhappily in recent years. He is the youngest among the crew, working as the *Toreador's* cabin boy. Ivan was raised by his American mother, a young New York City girl who had thought she was in love with a dashing foreigner—and been used most foul. Ivan loved her intensely. He is of good character, man-sized, and works hard without supervision. Despite his youth, and what I knew about his father, Ivan Rokoff was a welcome asset.

John Running Elk, on the other hand, is a series of perplexities. He is of the Sioux, a tribe which once ruled the tall grass of America's wild interior—a savage race which had never seen water greater than lakes, rivers and streams. He is a tall, fierce-looking Indian who seemed to have mystical visions on a regular basis and was, by all accounts, a crack horseman employed by Tom Billings on the Tyler ranch.

Hermann von Borst, a six-foot giant who laughed with Teutonic gusto whenever the unfortunate similarity of his name with a sausage was noted—and whose family had crossed the Atlantic long before Lafayette came to the aid of the American colonies—was the ship's gunnery officer. Though the *Toreador* was of civilian registry, the Tylers never ventured into pirate-ridden South

Pacific waters without an experienced gunner on board where, several times in the past, the expertise of von Borst had either driven off or sunk attacking ships.

Michael "Micky" MacDonald, is as scrappy and determined an Irishman as I've ever met. His principle talent lay in a near-encyclopedic knowledge of primitive languages—and the fact that he had never been bested in two-fisted combat in 20 years of sailing the Pacific rim from east to west.

This digression in my letter of woe—for I have opened with the statement "Of all the confounded luck!"—is meant to acquaint you with the principle individuals in the following events. What we experienced, what we discovered during our journey—which rivaled Dante's travails in Hell—is something I shall remember for the rest of my life.

•••

"Hiro!" Leinster barked. "Find a way down. Ivan, coil the ropes—and mind you they run free when we need them. Running Elk—go with Hiro. Wait—take a rifle!"

Leinster turned away from the haze-shrouded interior. His business lay in getting the group ready for the descent. Von Borst was already making packs from the supplies lifted from the *Toreador*. Dr. Heinlein was inspecting his medical supplies with a critical eye.

Clemens stood to one side, compass out, scowling fiercely that the device behaved in an erratic manner. We had experienced the same odd behavior earlier while trying to locate the island. He lifted his head from time to time to make sure what he was transferring to a sketch book was accurate, for our lives might depend upon his efforts at some future time.

Micky, among the smallest of us, though by no means the weakest, tested the packs prepared by von Borst. Mine he handed to me, saying, "You've got the corned beef in tins, sir. 'Tis my favorite, try not to lose it."

I discovered I also carried 50 rounds of high-caliber rifle ammunition, 100 revolver reloads, an eight-inch knife with a sturdy carbon steel blade, a hand axe with a hammer surface on the reverse, two canteens, a change of clothing—whose I could not immediately tell—, two packets of beef jerky, a pound of dried apricots, a half-dozen onions, matches, compass (useless!), flint and striker, a quart of lamp oil, a bottle of Schnaps (von Borst's most likely), a flask of Scotch—from which I fortified myself instantly and re-packed—a poncho, a coil of rope perhaps thirty feet in length, binoculars in a separate case, a well-used machete and a King James Bible. The latter was something I had read several times over the years, but did not subscribe to on a personal level. If carrying it would comfort one of the others on this venture then so be it.

You might ask why I felt that at the time and the answer is simple: von Borst's preparations were based on our personal ability to carry what had been delivered. He was carrying a pack nearly twice the size of mine, as well as a brace of large caliber rifles. Ivan's pack, which included a large tent, was almost half-again the size of von Borst's. Hiro and Running Elk's packs lay on the ground, significant, to be sure, but much lighter than the others. They, it appeared, were to be our points and needed to travel farther and faster than the rest of us. Micky, always contentious, complained that his pack only included the two oil-fueled lamps and the oil-stove.

Leinster, voice serious, eyes smiling, said, "Given that you're such a clumsy fellow we could not allow you to carry anything important. Besides," he added before the Irishman could find his temper, "you'll be right flank. I expect your eyes and rifle to be working overtime."

Mollified, and also sensible when faced with facts, MacDonald growled. "And who will it be o' watchin' our left flank?"

"Clemens. Do you have a problem with that, you feisty little devil?"

Micky looked to the long figure of Clemens with a critical eye. "I knows he can find his way through a fog, but can he shoot?"

Clemens looked from his sketching and claimed my eye. "Let me have one of your onions, sir. I shall place it upon yon disbeliever's head and shoot it off, blind-folded and facing backwards."

MacDonald shouldered his pack, scowling fiercely. "You'd be wastin' a good onion, sir, as well as the bullet." His voice changed imperceptibly, indicating the shrewd mind and dedication to the effort. "What do you see, Clemens?" he asked, looking to the soupy atmosphere below the rim. "Damn if I can make heads o' tails of it all."

"We've a good elevation," Clemens replied. Standing, he raised a hand to indicate his observations. "There's a huge river there to the left, obviously it must exit into the ocean via subterranean avenues, but we knew this already from the manuscript sent by Mr. Tyler. Between our position and the edge of the immense lake is approximately fifteen miles, but that does not include whatever vertical distance we must traverse. In the mists to the north you can just barely see the shoreline of a rather large island. To the right is a terrain that is between fifteen and thirty miles in width, densely forested. According to Mr. Tyler's manuscript, he must be on the east side of the island and that will be our direction."

All of us turned our gaze to the direction indicated by the upraised arm. I saw a land of tortured configuration, much of it cloaked in a verdure so intense it appeared a single living mass. Into the far distance the shoreline of the inner lake was a line of windblown surf, a white line between the green-blue depths of the lake and the blue-green depths of the jungle.

John Running Elk came from below, appearing in an instant without sign or sound of his passage. "Hiro Nagamichi awaits." Without instruction from Leinster, the Indian picked up his pack and the Nipon's. Turning on his heel without backward glance, the Sioux led the way down.

Dr. Heinlein and myself formed the central core of our party. Both of us were determined to not be the slowest members, yet the reality of our ages betrayed us. We were not a burden to our fellows, else I doubt the captain of the *Toreador* would have allowed us to join the expedition, but we were not the most hearty, nor the most swift in the bunch. However, we were spry old gentlemen used to hard times and our descent of the first 1,000 feet was made with reasonable dispatch.

That first 1,000 feet, however, left us sweltering in the growing heat of the island's interior. Caprona, obviously from shape and configuration, was the visible part of an extraordinarily large volcano rising from the ocean floor. Beneath the surface of the lake and the land itself must be forces most Vulcan to induce such atmospheric heat in these Southern latitudes. We stopped to shed the cold weather garments, coats, sweaters, and mufflers, and tied them to our packs.

Running Elk and Hiro Nagamichi descended further into the interior as we caught our breath well above the timber line. Dr. Heinlein occupied his time examining a lichen growing on one of the dark rocks which surrounded our stopping place. Clemens, with pencil in hand, added to his sketch of the terrain, constantly checking landmarks and inserting them onto his map.

Leinster spoke to each of the other men, checking to see if their loads traveled well and how they fared. Von Borst's "Hell, sir, it's more work making sausage," brought a smile to our faces.

John Henry, who carried the largest pack of us all, had not yet generated a sweat. "I think back to my Wa-

ziri ancestors, looking at all that is before us, and maybe it is like coming home to the land of my fathers."

Henry, I might add, has a college education from a school you'd also recognize—and might probably smile with a bit of disdain. I am not like you, old friend, to so casually dismiss a man's efforts to better himself. John Henry is of a long line of over achievers who made the most of their freedom as slaves in 1816, one hundred and one years earlier.

"Ivan—how are you holding up?"

Young Rokoff turned his head away from the vista below. In his hands a rifle was tightly gripped. "Just fine, sir. What is that over there?" All of us looked to his gesture. There was a glint in the trees below.

Leinster studied it for a moment with his field glasses then said, "It's metal. Might be Mr. Billings' machine." Clapping a hand on the big youth's shoulder, he added. "You've good eyes, son. Keep using them."

Mr. Leinster hurried down about 100 feet and called out the names of Running Elk and the Nipon. Hiro's face showed, a light olive yellow flash floating in a mass of dark green brush and scrub growth. The Nipon nodded when Leinster pointed the direction to the metallic glint. We gathered up our packs and made the descent.

An hour later we reached a forested level and, guided by Clemens' directions from his constantly updated map and uncanny navigation skills (sun, distance, wind?) to arrive at a particular tree in a forest of unknown size and quantity of trees. Suspended in the growth of this massive tree was Billings' seaplane. The aeroplane showed significant weathering, even from our vantage point on the ground. Hiro scrambled aloft like a monkey to report there were no human remains on board.

Leinster questioned the Nipon more thoroughly when Hiro joined us at the base of the immense tree.

"Are you sure? He might have died there and been consumed by scavengers—"

Nagamichi immediately shook his small head. "No bones. No clothing. Mr. Tom left airship. Broken branches below plane. He come down."

Leinster pursed his lips in thought. After a long moment he said. "Billings survived. He descended. Now what? Gentlemen, I am without a clue as to where we go from here. Running Elk?"

He need not have asked that worthy. The Indian was already apart from us, seated on the ground tailor fashion John Running Elk's eyes closed and a small rattle made occasional sounds as he shook it to the four winds. Though his hair was long-ish, it was unbound. No feather headdress sat upon his head as did the Indians of the dreadful Dime Novels, yet there was something about the man's entire demeanor that indicated his closed eyes were seeing things we could not see. Ivan started to say something, but fell silent when von Borst's ham-like hand gripped his arm. Dr. Heinlein cocked his graying head to one side as a grizzled hand, supported by a crossed arm over his breast, stroked his chin. Three times did John Running Elk shake his rattle to the four winds. He sat in silence for several minutes. Suddenly his eyes opened and he gestured a direction.

Clemens said, "North."

Leinster narrowed his eyes, not sure what he had witnessed. Abruptly nodding his head, the man said, "That's as good a direction as any. Von Borst, Clemens—flanks, Hiro—point. Running Elk—rear. Ivan, you stick with me. Let's go."

Ivan, dear lad, flushed ruddily to have been named explicitly, and I quite agreed with the boy's discomfort. He had done nothing to garner Mr. Leinster's personal recognition. However, all personal interaction became moot about an hour later when we entered a glade with a

pool that was occupied by some sub-human, or perhaps ape-like, females.

Von Borst, large and bristly with weapons at the ready, stepped forward. His weapon was leveled at a group of males beyond the pool. The rest of us stood ready. Running Elk, damn him for appearing like a shadow when no shadows exist!, whispered in Leinster's ear. Leinster held up his hand. "Hold your fire, but be ready. Okay, Injun, see what you can do."

The Sioux gestured for the Irishman to come forward. Together they advanced, not upon the pool where the females had retreated to a distant corner, but to the obviously belligerent and growing fractious males. Dr. Heinlein seemed more interested in the pool itself as we stood side by side, though his hand was firmly gripped on the butt of the revolver strapped about his waist. I noted the doctor's interest, but kept my eyes upon the posturing males, noting they were quite similar to the mangani my friend Greystoke had described on many occasions.

The males were largish, about human size, and quite hairy, They were long in the arm and short in the leg, but the torso was substantial and well-muscled. Beneath a heavy brow-ridge dark eyes, close-set, seemed to become more inflamed as the minutes passed. The group was quite vocal, in fact the volume was discomforting to the ear, yet Running Elk and MacDonald continued to advance in the face of the group's display.

Micky suddenly uttered a handful of sounds that sounded like grunts and squeals to my ears. Had he done this at a restaurant table in Boston I'd have had him thrown out for making a nuisance of himself, but in the present reality his vocalizations brought about a complete and instant cessation of cacophony.

One of the males stepped forward by several inches, though his manner remained threatening. A spate of ani-

malistic jabbering followed, which Micky seemed to listen to with intense concentration. The creature then pounded upon the ground with doubled knuckles, displaying bared fangs that gleamed white in the gathering dusk—and seemed quite suitable to rend flesh from bone.

Ivan gasped when MacDonald threw off his pack and assumed a position that was half-crouch, half-kneeling, and thumped the back of his hand upon the ground while shrieking most abominably. Dr. Heinlein gripped the boy's shoulder, never taking his eyes off the scene before us.

The lead creature paused, seeming startled to have a response, then embarked on a long tirade. The Irishman, pacing back and forth in the same manner as his opposite, listened for a time, then suddenly picked up a stick and threw it at the apish figure!

The words MacDonald then hurled at the group are something I cannot put down on paper, though I shall never forget their utterance. MacDonald's harangue lasted perhaps five minutes, though it seemed longer, and his figure arched and pranced, jerked and stood semi-erect. His voice rose to a fever pitch. His punctuation was a short run toward the males while Running Elk stood calmly to one side, a revolver in his brown hand.

A chorus of hideous shrieks reverberated throughout the jungle. The females evacuated the pool as the male contingent, perhaps twenty in all, evaporated into the dense forest. Running Elk remained vigilant as the Irishman picked up his pack. I now noticed, as he came from the right, that Hiro's blade was exposed and held in capable hands. Leinster, rifle at the ready, walked forward until he was a pace or two away from MacDonald.

"What the hell just happened?"

MacDonald shrugged into his pack. "Damn if I know, sir. Treated them like you treat the old man in the Borneo forest. I mean the orangutans, sir. There's a kind

of language the apes understand. I don't know what I said, but I didn't give an inch. I think I was tellin' them we'd kill 'em all and all their kin, but I don't know. Anyways, sir, they run for it. I suggest we find a place we can defend, sir. Night's a comin' on."

Leinster looked to Running Elk. "What have you to say?"

"Heap big magic," the Indian said. Then, with an accent as American as Cleveland, Ohio he added. "Micky scared them. They are not us, not people, but near enough like us to be frightened. That fright will not last long. Micky is right, we need to find a place."

Hiro stepped forward. "Two miles. Good place. Easy defend."

Clemens drew forth his notebook. "Left or right?"

Leinster ignored the latter byplay. "Von Borst, Ivan, MacDonald, main body. The rest of you keep your eyes and ears open. Lead on, Hiro."

We traveled quickly, but the going was rough. Ivan and von Borst had to hack a trail through something that looked like bamboo but was infinitely tougher. How Hiro Nagamichi found his way though this maze of vegetable matter I cannot imagine, but his directions were quite accurate.

Just as twilight was on the verge of becoming full dark, we saw our first Dinosaur! John Henry immediately killed it—it was not a large dinosaur and that is what we had for dinner.

Dr. Heinlein identified the object of the pot as one of the egg-stealing dinosaurs which current archaeology suggests. The creature was about twice the size of a Rhode Island hen, and not nearly as tasty. John Henry, however, elevated the gamy critter into something that was more than edible. What magic this descendent of the Waziri tribes used I cannot say, but I know that my famished body, and my pack lightened by two onions, was quite pleased.

Leinster, after the meal and in the dimming light of our fire, recounted our accomplishments of the day. "We're in. We're on the trail, providing our far-seeing Indian is on the mark. We have encountered our first inhabitants of Caprona." He looked at Dr. Heinlein. "Any thoughts, sir? Damn primitive land if you ask me."

"More primitive than you might guess, Mr. Leinster," the doctor replied. "I have catalogued at least 50 species of plant and animal life I know to have been extinct for millions of years. I've also noted something else that grabs the attention of a medical scientist, but I'm not yet ready to offer an opinion until it percolates in this aging brain for a while." The man's finger tapped the side of his skull with a smile. "All I can say at this moment is we are in new territory. What should have been dead for millions of years seems to be alive and kicking, and, if I'm not far off the mark, Darwin is eventually going to roll over in his grave."

Clemens, exhibiting a vein of humor we had not seen before, said, "North?"

I laughed with Heinlein and von Borst, who seemed most interested in the conversation. "Is it north, my Teutonic friend?" I asked.

The man's mirth subsided for a moment as his eyes scanned the party. "North or not, I cannot say. What I do know," he said, lowering his gaze to the fading fire, "is that I am honored that you treat me as you do, considering there is a war on-going in Europe and I am descended from those beasts."

Ivan Rokoff leaned forward. His young face was clear of line or dissipation. "My mother told me 'we are us.' I guess that means we are who we are. You're a good man, and no different from the rest of us. I—" Young Rokoff's voice failed, embarrassed to find every eye upon him.

For a long moment there was a silence as dense as the foliage about us—though only to the west and south

as Hiro's "defense" place was marginally above the tree line and bordered on two sides by rock walls. John Henry, passing out sugar biscuits prepared in the iron skillet he carried, offered the following in a deep basso:

"There's niggers in any race, boy, you have that right. Your mama taught you right. Von Borst is no more German than I'm the Pope," John Henry crossed himself as Catholics are wont to do.

John Running Elk, his eyes fixed on the less defensible perimeters of our camp site, said, "The land defines us. The land is us."

Dr. Heinlein and I exchanged glances. He was a man of science. I am a man of the real world. Between us we both recognized the validity of the words spoken. I cleared my throat.

"There is a war being waged by Germans at the moment, but not all Germans or," I looked to von Borst, "Germans by descent, agree with this war. The world is a small place, no matter what there is left to be discovered, as we are discovering this place called Caprona, but it is our world and we have to live within it."

Leinster stood up. "Running Elk, Clemens—first watch. Rokoff and me will take second. Micky, you and John Henry on third."

"What about Dr. Heinlein and myself?" I asked.

"Get whatever sleep you can if you can ignore the insects and jungle noises."

"I protest, sir. I can stand a watch with the rest..."

Leinster almost smiled. "I am sure you can, but I know these other fellows can shoot. No disrespect intended."

It was left there, to my mortification, and remained so for the next five days as we clawed our way through the southern jungles of Caprona. I tried to engage Dr. Heinlein over this mistreatment in duties, though he studiously avoided any commentary in this regard. I had a

feeling that the good doctor was one who learned long before to go with the flow of any situation; whereas I have always been one to take the bull by the horns.

Mr. Leinster paid no attention to my aside protests during our venture to the north on the east side of the lake. Most particularly he paid no attention to me while we were killing extraordinary lizards which Dr. Heinlein identified as *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. The latter—and I had several interesting disagreements to the entertainment of the fellows around the evening fires—that two of the three killed, at an enormous waste of ammunition!, were *Allosaurs* instead of the more terrific *Tyrannosaurus Rex*.

The Schnaps bottle eventually vanished from my pack. I had enjoyed a dram or two at von Borst's magnanimous sharing.

I was amused that young Ivan Rokoff had his first hangover on our fifth day out. Mr. Leinster was most accurate in hounding the young man to execute his duties despite the physical deficiency accumulated by intemperate indulgence. I say this with minor tongue-in-cheek as I had drained the Scotch rather early in our adventure—I was scared as hell. Von Borst made me angry when I threw the bottle away. He picked it up and tucked it inside my bodice.

"You will keep this, sir. And you will fill it with water the next chance we get."

Part of me wanted to say "Damn the Hun," but the reality is he made sense. Too long had I heard the idiot statements of the Kaiser and it was refreshing to hear a German tell me something realistic—then I *again* realized that von Borst was German in name only. He was as American as the proverbial Apple Pie.

On more mornings than I care to remember I started out with a hangover. In this regard Ivan and I became good friends as we continued north under the direction of the Indian and his "vision." Ivan kept me from trip-

ping over my own two feet. His blind belief that John Running Elk's mystical powers could lead us to Tom Billings or Bowen Tyler was amusing. It was the council of Dr. Heinlein that reminded me of where we were and what we were about.

"Ed, get a grip," he said one afternoon as we rested after traveling some eight miles through horrendously thick forest. "You're on the verge of collapse, old man. Out here we cannot have personal opinions as regards the skills of others, we have to rely upon each and every one of us. I fear you are too old and set in your ways. You should have stayed on the *Toreador*."

My response was rather rude. I lived a rather significant part of my life in the Orient where mysticism has been elevated to a high art—but that so-called high art has always been based in chicanery and manipulation. In essence I told the good doctor to: "*Mind your own business!*"

That same day young Ivan Rokoff took a savage's spear meant for me, right after that damn girl came out of nowhere!

## CHAPTER 2

Leinster had kept us moving throughout the hot days inside that monstrous volcanic crater. We knew it was monstrous—measured at a hundred plus miles and more as we had seen from our first day's vantage point—but for us, on the ground amidst the biting insects, the lesser reptiles and snakes that scurried away, the heat and humidity and the eternal muck which sucked at our rotting boots, Caprona was now merely the next step we could take and the next breath of air we inhaled.

Nagamichi and Running Elk ranged well beyond the main troop advance, yet one or the other would re-join us approximately every half hour to make sure we still held the trail. These two men seemed utterly tireless. Equally tireless was that mountain of brawn, John Henry. Always chattering, nearly always amusing in his chatter, the big black carried a load that would have staggered two men and did so with seeming effortlessness. Clemens and MacDonald carried on a running verbal feud that, for all the vicious slanders exchanged, was as innocuous as a schoolyard ballyhoo. Clemens and the Irishman kept us supplied with fresh meat, and usually did so without expending a round of ammunition. Both seemed extraordinarily well versed in the use of knives.

Ivan remained a faithful satellite, always at my shoulder, always there with a respectful hand when I needed it. For several days I had talked with the young man—he was too big to be called a boy—to discover his family background. Ivan was embarrassingly frank at times. He knew he was born out of wedlock and that his mother had suffered terribly in her previous social circles, and been disowned by her family for the affront. He

knew nothing of his father, other than the fact he was Russian. Ivan's mother had, judiciously it appeared, given the boy the minimal necessary information so that he might have an identity that every child needs, but shared nothing more as regards the nefarious activities of the sire. I could have told Ivan volumes as regards his father. Yet, I so admired the lad's strength and good character that it was impossible to speak the truths I knew. Ivan's only fault was being the seed of Rokoff—and that accident of biology was more than mitigated by his upbringing and his own good nature.

"Mr. Burroughs," Ivan said when we stopped for the noon day repast at the bottom of a slope crowned with trees, "you don't look well."

I glanced about to see who was near. All were setting aside their packs and gathering around John Henry who was carving up a creature—without either name or classification—that Clemens had brought down an hour earlier. MacDonald and Leinster were building a fire.

"Ivan," I quietly admitted, "I am not as spry as I used to be, but I suggest, as you have already learned, that strong drink is the culprit as regards my current condition—that and my stupendous lack of discipline in consuming same. Fortunately, for us both," I winked, drawing the lad closer, "all *recreational* alcohol disappeared last night. Dr. Heinlein will not dispense his remaining medicinal stock so both of us, you and I, will not be tempted henceforth."

I was about to continue the joking conversation when Ivan's eyes grew round as saucers as he physically threw me to the ground. An instant later I heard a sickening thud and saw Ivan stagger as a primitive spear entered his leg. His shout was both pain and a cry of alarm.

I rolled over, my right hand drawing the heavy revolver at my hip in the same instant. Charging down the slope between the boles of monstrous trees was a horde

of half-men chasing a young white girl. My pistol was not the first to fire as the camp took defensive positions. I dodged a cast spear and fired, the pistol emitting a blossom of flame that produced a blossom of liquid red on the leading savage's shoulder; the savage spun abruptly to the left and fell screaming to the ground.

Ivan tore the spear from his leg and stood erect, face white and perspiring. In his fist a pistol bucked as he threw out an arm and abruptly drew the running girl to his side. At the same moment John Henry hurled his great bulk forward and tackled a primitive about to close with Ivan and girl. The Negro used his gleaming carving knife with deadly effect.

Clemens and the little Irishman savaged the oncoming horde with deadly rifle fire. From the left flank Nagamichi entered the fray. His sword, brilliant in the reflected light, made two glistening arcs, and in less time than it took to write these words he had slain two; beheading one and a savage cleft through skull to breast bone for the other. The Nipon's sword was temporarily fouled in the body of the latter and, if not for John Running Elk, the Japanese might have perished. The Indian, with only a knife patterned after Jim Bowie's, gutted one of the attackers and ham-stringed another, protecting Nagamichi.

Dr. Heinlein and Leinster stood in the middle of the camp, heroically erect figures firing revolvers as if they were on parade ground. Heinlein shot a savage about to attack John Henry from behind. I then shot a savage about to attack Heinlein. Leinster killed at least three and then it was over as quickly as it began.

"*Where'd they go?*" Micky screamed, his face florid, the grip on his rifle intense.

There was silence all around. We could detect no movement in the trees above. The only movement, as we viewed the battleground, was blood running from inert bodies.

"Doctor Heinlein!" I cried, rising from the ground to put a shoulder beneath Ivan's as the lad sagged earthward.

Ivan swayed, but did not fall, nor did he release the wild-eyed girl he gripped with fierce determination with his left arm. Only when Heinlein arrived did Ivan relinquish his protection of the girl. We placed the youth upon the ground, a few of us gathered anxiously as the rest watched the trees.

Slitting the boy's trousers, Dr. Heinlein set to work immediately. Some of the medicinal alcohol was used—and I begrudged none of it! A few moments later the doctor offered a smile to Ivan and the rest of us. "You'll end up with a pretty scar, my boy, one you can boast to the ladies."

Ivan was in pain, of course, but hearing Heinlein's words did ease it somewhat. "The girl," he said, looking at the frail creature who had not run away, "is she all right?"

All of us looked at her. In my private opinion she was not only all right, she was *very* all right. A beautiful girl, slim, brown-haired, clean of limb and feature. I guessed her age to be near that of Ivan's, but as an old man I have to admit that I cannot always judge the age of youth accurately. She was clad in a crude garment that seemed a mixture of cloth and animal skin, but that as only about her waist. Her budding breasts were covered with scratches and dirt, her hair was matted and heavy with sweat, but beneath all that she was a very attractive young lady.

She was also very frightened.

Leinster barked a command. "Hiro, Running Elk—make sure they have retired." *They*, of course, were the savages. Like twin shadows the grim-faced men vanished into the forest above us.

John Henry, his forearm red with blood, cleansed his knife in the dirt at our feet and sheathed the weapon. He made a hand gesture to the girl, offering her a place by the

fire. She surprised us, however, by kneeling at Ivan's head. She put her tiny fist about the hilt of a bone dagger.

I laughed. I could not help myself. "Ivan, thank you for saving my life. By the same token, you are the luckiest man who ever walked the face of the earth."

Young Rokoff frowned, then winched as Heinlein firmed his bandaging. "What are you saying, sir?"

Clemens burst out with a chuckle. "The only white woman we've seen since we arrived on Caprona, and it turns out she is yours."

"Mine?"

We all fell into silence when the girl said: "I belong no one. *He my friend!*"

Leinster arched a brow as he reloaded his weapons. "Speaks English, Burroughs. What do you make of that?"

Before I could reply MacDonald cradled his rifle across his breast and asked the girl, "Who is your friend?"

She drew her little knife and inched closer to Ivan. "Him. Strong! Come near, I kill!" The girl leaned close to Ivan and spoke other words, words I could not understand.

"That's French!" The Irishman exclaimed. He spoke in a burst of words that startled the girl. She replied, eyes wary, her grip as determined as ever on the knife. He spoke again. We listened as she replied again. The resulting conversation tested Leinster's patience.

"Speak up, man! What does she say?"

Micky ignored the crew chief, waving him aside as he talked to the girl. Heinlein listened as well, standing back after his duties were done. When Leinster started forward the good doctor placed a restraining hand upon the man's shoulder, slowly shaking his head to indicate forbearance.

Nagamichi and John Running Elk returned. Their silence indicated we were presently safe from further attacks, but their arrival seemed to remind MacDonald that it was time to reveal what he had learned.

"She's orphaned," he said. "Jean is her father, Marie is her mother. Both are dead. Two years, at least, if I understand her correctly. Jean was a pirate fleeing the English in the waters to the west—most likely the South Seas. They landed on Caprona before she was born. They built a house, or is it a cave? I am not sure. On the heights above. The Sto-lu, Band-lu and Kro-lu are enemies. 'What are these?', I ask, but she can tell me only they are bad men."

Ivan, much recovered, raised himself from the ground. "What is her name?" Ivan and the rest of us are astonished when the girl offered her support, holding Rokoff across her bended knees.

MacDonald asked the question.

"Celeste."

Before we could comment, John Running Elk interjected a stern suggestion. "Eat now. They will return."

Nagamichi, his small yellow hand wrapped about the hilt of the Samurai sword, instantly agreed. "Lose face. Will come to erase stain."

Heinlein packed his bag. "Ivan, the girl is your responsibility since she has made you hers. Get her to put the knife away. And test that leg. I have a feeling we need to make some distance—and pretty damn quick." The doctor rose and carried his bag back to the center of the unintended camp. John Henry was already boiling whatever it was we had for the pot.

Ivan faced the girl for the first time. She looked at him. Rokoff smiled and gestured that she put the knife away. I'm not sure who was more surprised—Ivan, the girl, or me. She blushed and returned the bone knife to the rude sheath tied about her slim waist. She did not eat with us until Ivan ate. She did not accept us until she saw that Ivan was of the company. She did not allow anyone to approach her, though she was never far from Ivan.

Leinster spoke to MacDonald. "The girl obviously knows the area. Ask her if there is a safe place for the night."

The conversation was relatively short. By the time we had hurriedly eaten the half-burned animal and two cans of fruit Micky produced from his pack, we had an answer. The Irishman said, "I'm guessing as to distance. Celeste does not know measure as we do. She says there is a place about two miles north."

The Crew Chief inclined his head towards Nagamichi and Running Elk. "That's our direction, men. Scout it."

A half hour later we were on the trail, leaving behind the bodies of the savages who had attacked us. Between us Celeste and I supported Ivan during the trek. I was thrilled that Ivan was not permanently injured, and equally thrilled he was of sturdy stock; he did not complain or unduly hinder us. Equally important was the fact his injury was not severe, a "mere flesh wound, painful, but not debilitating" as Dr. Heinlein reported.

John Running Elk dropped back twice during the long afternoon to direct us around tepid pools where savages congregated. We learned, via Micky's conversation with Celeste these were "sacred places" amongst the savages of Caspak. Dr. Heinlein made notes in the small book carried in his breast pocket, then laid a firm hand to assist Ivan over an obstacle in the trail. Celeste turned a possessive eye towards the good doctor, one that boded no good will as she supported Ivan from the opposite side.

She was a strange girl. Her name, obviously, indicated that she was not of Caprona's rude stock, but where she came from was a mystery. Celeste was tall—by golly she was taller than me! Slim, attractive in a plain sort of way, she was small-breasted and brown-haired and afflicted with a nervous energy that no woman of my acquaintance had ever exhibited. Next to Ivan she seemed dainty, for he was a strapping lad well over six feet in

height. I noted that he leaned more on me than the girl, yet his eyes were rarely far from hers. She had blue eyes, a blue so light to be almost ice.

We all fell in love with her.

"This way! This way!" Celeste directed when we came to a fork in the road. It was up towards the massive cliffs which ringed the island.

Leinster frowned. He was standing next to the trail mark either Nagamichi or Running Elk had made upon a tree. "The way goes there," he said, gesturing.

"My way there," she replied, inclining her head to the slopes above. She did not relinquish her grip about Ivan's waist.

John Henry leaned against a tree, the first indication I had observed that the Negro's immense strength was not limitless. "Why there, Missy?" he asked.

"Home," she replied. She turned her gaze to the Irishman and spoke rapidly in French.

MacDonald approached, listening intently. A moment after she stopped speaking he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and turned to the crew chief. "Mr. Leinster," he said, "the girl speaks of a fort or a safe place on the heights above. A place we can defend." The Irishman looked to the gathering twilight and shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever you decide, sir, but me, I'd be lookin' for a hole tonight."

Leinster scowled. His head turned toward the trail Running Elk and Nagamichi had blazed, then toward the heights cloaked in trees and ferns. Chewing his bottom lip for a moment our leader, for he was that because of his strength and experience, came to a decision. "Clemens, bring in the Nip and Indian. John Henry, can you make it up there?"

Before the black could reply MacDonald took items from John Henry's overloaded pack, then shared several more to Heinlein, myself, and the young girl. Von Borst,

who was already carrying Ivan's pack, offered to take more. "Just a little climb," he said.

"MacDonald, find out all we need to know from the girl. And make it quick, night is falling." Leinster added to his pack the re-distributed items while making sure the extra burden did not interfere with his revolver. Leaning against a tree was the rifle he had carried since we entered Caprona's interior. He caught it up in his strong, weathered hands.

Before MacDonald turned away from the girl our scouts, and Clemens, had returned. "Distance she dinna know, sir. But time to get there she says is short. She also says the Band-lu watch the place so we should be prepared."

The Indian and the Nipon were advised and sent up the tree-covered incline first. Heinlein helped John Henry over the rougher parts while I assisted the girl with Ivan. Von Borst and MacDonald came up the rear. It was a shorter climb than we were led to believe, though there were two steep areas that put our hearts in our throats.

We found ourselves in a cleared area—cleared by the hand of man at some distant time in the past. We gathered before a cave which had been enclosed by human intent. There was a rude door with two small windows open to the elements on either side. A decrepit hide awning sagged over the entrance. Defensive points were near the door—rocks piled high under an overhanging cliff. Leinster gestured to MacDonald and Clemens, who shed their packs and took up their posts. John Henry, meanwhile, suddenly sat down, breathing hard.

"It's my fault," Ivan said to the black. "You're carrying my..."

Leinster's voice cut through the twilight like a knife. "Shut up, Rokoff. Henry knows—you know—I know. But what we don't know is what we face. Pipe down, pup, and learn how to survive!"

The girl continued toward the door, dragging Ivan and myself along. Nagamichi, blade drawn, entered before us. Celeste would not stop, so we met the Nipponese at the doorway, his blade down, indicating the way was clear. Inside the door was a cave perhaps 12 by 60 feet—I could see the end wall in the red light of the setting sun. Near the windows was a crude table of rough-hewn logs and three chairs fashioned from vine-wrapped tree-limbs with leather seats. To the right was a natural ledge upon which were many coconut-like shells containing that which I knew not. There were two beds, mere frames made from animal hides and grasses. We put Ivan upon the larger.

Celeste chattered with animation. Leinster called for MacDonald. "What is she saying?"

The Irishman furrowed his brow, attempting to keep up with the flow of conversation as Celeste tended Ivan's wound with her own medicine, collected from the containers on the ledge. "No fire. Flying things, she says. Band-lu and...I'm not sure, sir...Weiroo, Sto-lu and Kro-lu?, hunt this area. Bad men, she says, bad men all. Best we mount a guard this evening."

The guard mount was already in place. Running Elk and Nagamichi were exterior the cave, Clemens was down slope by 20 yards. John Henry said, "Not dark yet. Small fire inside for hot meal. The men need it, sir."

Leinster nodded. "Hot food is not important, Henry, but brew us some coffee if you can."

Dr. Heinlein spent some time looking through the girl's containers and, with MacDonald interpreting, learned the girl's mother had been a herbal healer. To me, he said, "Native medicines continue to amaze the scientific community. Could there be a wonder drug in this girl's collection?"

"More importantly," I suggested, "can her herbal medicine make a difference?" I inclined my head to-

wards young Ivan, who had been the beneficiary of the girl's healing ministrations.

Von Borst's bulk guarded the doorway which was still open to the setting sun. "Mr. Leinster," von Borst said, "there's deer, or something like a deer, down yonder. Permission to kill it?" A few heartbeats later the big man said, "Never mind. Nagamichi killed it with his sword. Permission to retrieve?"

Leinster nodded, taking von Borst's position at the doorway. Von Borst returned with the animal, perhaps 80 pounds in size, slung over his shoulder. Von Borst expertly gutted the creature outside the cave, casting the entrails down slope. John Henry immediately took over, swiftly carving flank and rib steaks from the hot meat.

"Burroughs..."

Dr. Heinlein's voice was soft, directed to me only. He was deeper into the cave, beckoning me to join him. He was examining some artifacts which apparently intrigued him. I rose, leaving Ivan in Celeste's nearly obsessive care, and joined Heinlein. The good doctor appeared to be holding a weathered journal in his hands.

"What have you found?" I asked.

Heinlein pursed his lips for a moment as he continued turning pages in the weathered book. A moment later he asked, "What do you know of Pierre le Monde?"

I spent a moment in pensive thought. "One of the European pirates of the Pacific, correct?"

Heinlein nodded. "He was among the worst of the South Pacific pirates for many years. Then he vanished about the same time a French royal yacht failed to return in 1891."

"The *Ile de Parma*?" I stated. I was correct—that vessel was the only French royal yacht which vanished in 1891.

Heinlein grudgingly scowled. "Your memory is impeccable, sir. I presume you also recall that Marie of the direct line was on board."

"History has treated her ill," I remarked. "One of the various direct lines who vanished before a good marriage with the Habsburgs and all that ugly interbreeding could be arranged."

Heinlein glanced toward the cave's sealed entrance. Holding the book close to his chest he said, "My French is so-so, but from what I can decipher in this log by *le Monde* is that he took the yacht in January 1892 and then took the *Lady Marie* as his wife—the girl was apparently willing if the journal is correct—and for a year his ship dodged French and American warships. There were several battles and a number of failed piracies that year and in the end *Le Monde*, with only eight crewmen surviving skirmishes against the American and French units, landed upon Caprona."

I cut to the chase, short-changing Dr. Heinlein's historical discovery. "The crew, Pierre, and Marie made their way into the interior of Caprona and managed to survive and build this fortress but at horrific cost. In the meantime Pierre impregnated Marie and Celeste was their child. In the final analysis there is only Celeste to give mute evidence of their existence since all others have perished."

Heinlein's second scowl provided the answer to my real-life comment. Before the doctor could reply a hearty baritone announced: "Soup's on!" John Henry hovered over the small fire, his glistening black hulk dishing plates.

Heinlein and I silently joined von Borst, Ivan, Leinster, and the ever wary Celeste at the group table. Outside the cave MacDonald delivered plates to the Nip, the Indian and Clemens. The shadows were long and the cave quite dark by this time.

"I *hear* something," Ivan announced, his second bite poised between plate and mouth.

Leinster frowned. "What do you hear, boy?"

Celeste answered instead. "Weiroo!" She turned pale, facing the open door. The young girl tightened a

slim fist about the bone knife at her waist. "*Mère!* Save me!"

My plate on the table was instantly ignored, the girl's agitation was so compelling—yet it was the sound of battle in the night outside that actually brought a sweat to my brow. I could plainly hear the Nip's battle cry and the war whoops of John Running Elk. Clemens' staccato rifle shots shattered the quiet of the cave.

Celeste drew her primitive knife. "Not this time—*not any time!*" she cried.

"What?" Leinster barked.

"*Cos-ata-lu,*" Celeste spat on the floor. "*No!* I make my own choice!"

John Henry was already outside. His shotgun spoke twice. Leinster issued commands which merely stated that Ivan, me, Heinlein and Celeste should maintain our positions. He ran outside.

The bedlam of battle, interspersed with weird undulating cries in the darkness, made our hearts beat incredibly! Heinlein stood at my shoulder, his fist holding a revolver. In his left hand dangled the tattered journal. Ivan Rokoff raised himself, a dense sweat wetting his brow, holding a rifle clutched in his strong hands. Celeste refused to stand behind the youth, regardless of the quick motions he made for her to do so.

"Not me!" she cried. "Not ever!"

MacDonald stumbled inside, his face bloody. "*Daemons!* Bloody damn *flying* Daemons!" He fell prostrate upon the hard surface of the cave floor.

Leinster was not slow, the above occurring in seconds only. The crew chef exited the cave with revolvers blasting in both hands. I could hear his shouts and commands through the doorway and, with Heinlein at my shoulder, we raced to the rude windows. We saw strange hovering shapes apparently clad in white robes in the deep twilight and fired upon them.

"These are no angels!" Leinster cried. "Shoot the bloody beggars!"

I could see ten, perhaps a dozen, winged apparitions diving upon our group beyond the cave's entrance. In the gathering darkness I saw the gleam of long blades held aloft, descending in arcs meant to...

I fired my pistol. Heinlein's revolver echoed as harshly as mine.

An instant later it was over.

"Report! *Report!*" Leinster cried, standing tall, a long knife in one hand, a revolver in the other.

"Alive!" John Running Elk bellowed from the darkness. "Well-being!" (I think) Nagamichi cried.

There was a long silence. Leinster stood forth from the cave. "John Henry?"

From the vegetated left approach came a reply. "I got me a damn bird man. White as you!"

Leinster shot a look to Heinlein. The doctor replied, "Consider it a *report*, damn you! What about von Borst?"

We found him unconscious to the right of the cave entrance. There were three curiously fragile, and yet obviously dangerous winged-human bodies nearby. Von Borst had a severe cut over his right temple and a rather deep cut to his left shoulder. Heinlein, Leinster and I carried the big German-American inside the cave.

Celeste shoved us aside, even Dr. Heinlein, as she bent over the massive German. "Go!" she said. "Kill them all!"

This was a curious statement. Heinlein, of course, ignored the girl and offered his expertise, but the rest of us entered the shadowy battleground to bring in the remainder of our troop. Running Elk had suffered no injuries, but there were two winged humans dead at his position. Nagamichi had three at his site, cleaved variously by his keen sword. We found Clemens buried beneath four dead and dismembered creatures.

John Henry, covered with blood from uncounted personal battles, jerked Clemens erect. "*You ain't daid!*" the Negro shouted.

"I took a nap," Clemens weakly responded. He pitifully shoved against John Henry's embrace. "Did we win? Christ! They was Harpies from Hell!"

I left the group. Returning to the cave where Celeste hovered over von Borst's prostrate body, I focused my eye, and hardly hidden fear, as I spoke to the girl. "God-damn it! Is there more to come?"

### CHAPTER 3

We didn't sleep that night. John Henry kept a pot brewing with used coffee grounds and a bit of Caspak bark he'd carved from trees over the last few days. It was a damn bitter brew. MacDonald's facial injuries were slight—and were dressed by Celeste at Ivan's bidding while Dr. Heinlein worked on the German-American. Von Borst came around a half-hour later, badly contused.

Leinster, his right arm bandaged above his wrist, disheveled and bleary-eyed, stood watch for the remainder of the evening. Out in the dark, which seemed more terrifying than any dark I could ever recall in my life, the Indian and the Nipon stood sentry. Clemens sat, his body between the tiny fire and the windows, head hanging between his shoulders. His hands were dark—and I realized it was blood that stained them that hue. John Henry lay upon the stone floor, quietly snoring after Leinster ordered him to rest. Heinlein crouched by the dim ruddy glow of the fire, head and shoulders hunched low as he slowly read through the tattered journal. Ivan slept, his head cradled in the wild girl's lap. I watched as she, too, succumbed to sleep, her tiny form gently collapsed across Rokoff's chest.

I doubt that any of us slept well.

Von Borst leaned against the north wall, a slightly crimsoned bandage across his right shoulder. Though the hour was late the German-American winked at me. "Good fight!" he whispered. "*Good* fight!"

"Go to sleep," I suggested.

Von Borst grinned. "After you, old man!"

That smile, and the twinkle in the man's eye, was welcomed as one comrade to another. And I was not long in accepting his challenge.

It was daylight when I awoke—and that was well after dawn since the high rim of Caprona's east wall kept the cave in shadow until well after mid-morning. A few feet away Running Elk lay sleeping, his knife held in a strong hand across his breast.

Rising as silently as I could manage, I noted Nagamichi curled in a fetal fashion beneath the right window. His family blade was not drawn, but his hand was wrapped about the hilt of the sword he had used to such deadly effect these last few hours.

Ivan's bed was vacant, nor was Celeste in view. Dr. Heinlein sat cross-legged beneath the rock ledge. Before him lay a dozen of the coconut-like hulls and one was held in one fist as he scribbled furiously into his little notebook with the other.

Heinlein looked up as I rose from my slumber, stiff and aching, but thoroughly glad to see the sun shining. "Amazing!" the man breathed. "I do believe these hollowed hulls might contain the cures for a dozen of mankind's maladies!"

I narrowed my gaze as I arched my back to relieve a kink or a dozen. "I am happy for mankind, Dr. Heinlein, but at the moment I am more interested in who I should have to kill to get a cup of coffee."

Heinlein smiled—one old man to another.

"That would be John Henry, outside to the left. He's cooking something very like bacon from a kill John Running Elk brought in just before dawn. There's also some reasonably credible pancakes, though I believe the last of the syrup disappeared an hour or so ago."

Heinlein returned to his work, looking at the native cures, the journal, and his notebook, then abruptly raised his head. "Check your loads, Mr. Burroughs. This is Caprona, and we have learned how deadly it is."

"That task, sir, was done before I joined Winken, Blinken and Nod..." but I drew my pistol and checked the load just the same as I walked to the open door.

The inland sea, the coastline, and most of the slope below was hidden in a dense mist. Over my shoulder the sun's cool light was a brilliant illumination, the shadows cast were quite long. Leinster, sitting to the right of the doorway in the shadow of the rocky overhang, gripped my arm.

"Wait a minute, sir. Give the boys a chance to see you, else risk getting shot."

Arching a brow, I turned to Leinster. "More activity?" He needed no explanation to know what "activity" meant.

"We ran them off last night, we did. And we hurt them badly. There were at least a dozen corpses after the battle but," and his eye firmly afixed mine, "nary a one could we find at dawn."

"Scavengers?" I asked, feeling a chill go up my spine.

Leinster shook his head. "No blood extra than what we spilled, no bones, not body parts, no robes or weapons. Vanished. Almost enough to make one crazy, except for the blood-stained ground. Nagamichi and Running Elk were relieved about 4:30 this morning. I have to ask them if they heard or saw anything—though I doubt much would escape those two."

I looked back toward the black doorway and agreed. "Almost supernatural how those two men work, nothing would escape their notice." Locating a rock of suitable height next to Leinster I sat down, rubbing my forehead. "Like Apaches these Wieroo have come to claim their fallen."

Leinster rubbed the stubble on his square chin. "Maybe not them," he said quietly. "Maybe the Band-lu, Sto-lu or Kro-lu. That girl is a wealth of information but it is all in French—thank God MacDonald made it through."

"Speaking of which, where is Ivan, the girl, and that feisty Irishman?"

"Three trees down and five to the left. Picking something that looks like a plum but tastes like a peach. That boy was determined to go along as a guard and,"

Leinster offered a wry wink, "he's just that much bigger than I and seemingly fired by a sudden sense of brave duty, if you know what I mean."

"Celeste," I smiled.

The girl was yet a puzzle, despite the information Heinlein had gleaned from the pirate's journal. If our calculations were correct, based on the dates in the journal, Celeste had just turned seventeen, and it had been a birthday celebration of one, since her mother's last entries were three years old. Of the father, we found much in his handwriting early in the book, but after reaching Caprona the hand changed, obviously that of Marie, who kept a straight-forward accounting of their time on the island, though from time to time she wept with words as to the terrors of the land, her longing for civilization, and her fears for her daughter's future. On the latter count I hoped Marie might rest easy as it appeared her daughter's future protector was now at her side.

As if the thought had been a summons, the three approached the clearing. Celeste came first with Ivan close behind, towering over her like a mobile mountain. A half dozen paces back MacDonald walked, his flaming red hair concealed beneath a faded and brown-stained kerchief.

"Mr. Burroughs—" Ivan nodded as he and the girl passed within the doorway.

MacDonald rested his shoulder on the wall between the door and the window, his keen eyes attempting to pierce the slowly dissipating mist. "When there's moisture inna air—like that bloody fog below—sound is twisted and the eyes do play tricks. I thought I saw something, Mr. Leinster, on our way back, but when I looked again, it was gone. But there's something there, I ken feel it in me bones."

Leinster casually rose, not looking at the Irishman. With a whisper that scarce moved his lips he said, "I've

been feeling it, too. Wake the Indian and the Nipon and send them out. Warn Heinlein and Ivan—and you stay with them. And Micky," he added, walking at a pace that displayed not a care in the world, continued toward John Henry, "keep Ivan and the girl inside. Burroughs, warn von Borst at the north outpost."

I do not know which peeved me more: that I had not yet had a cup of coffee or that my palms were suddenly drenched with sweat and that my heart was pounding insanely under an adrenalin rush. The distance was twenty paces along the cliff face on a path worked by human hands, particularly where the slope was most steep.

Von Borst saw me before I saw him, which is a good thing as that sturdy fellow had his repeater focused on my mid-section. Before I could warn von Borst, I had to save his life.

I do not believe half of the stirring tales of gunfighters in the American West slapping leather and quick draws are true. Such gun fighting is laughable: the sheer speed of the draw, along with many various debilitating physical factors, including all the known principles of physics, would strongly suggest an inability to aim and discharge the weapon with any degree of accuracy. I do not believe these tales. I do not! But I can say it is possible, for I had to draw and fire my revolver in the span of time between one heartbeat and the next to kill the axe-bearing savage who sprang from the ground not three feet from the German! The bullet smashed into the savage's face and, without a sound, he collapsed on the ground.

At the same moment a horrendous cacophony of bestial yells broke out around our position and all along the area near the cave entrance. Von Borst's huge hand bunched the slack of my shirt above my now receding paunch and jerked me to the ground behind a rock just as a stone axe whistled through the air where I had been standing. The axe shattered on the cliff wall.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* Von Borst's rifle spoke with instant authority. Three savages lay sprawled on the slope below. Nor was his the only weapon firing from our marginally protected position. I emptied my revolver, nicking one or two severely and certainly scaring a few others into brief retreat as my bullets slammed into the brush and trees.

Crouching behind a boulder I reloaded my weapon with trembling hands. "How many?" I asked von Borst, who now held his fire. To the south there had been a furious number of discharged weapons, but now there was a chilling silence.

"We'll have to call you Wyatt Earp from now on, Mr. Burroughs! *Damn* fine shooting—and right between the eyes! Maybe a dozen by us. I don't know how many altogether."

I was not about to take credit for the sheer accident of luck which guided my bullet. "I was aiming at his chest. I think I hit one or two, you got three—"

"Six," he quietly corrected.

I arched a brow in salute. Before I could say anything further, von Borst threw his body over mine as a dozen or more fist-sized and larger rocks rained upon our position. I felt two jolts to von Borst's body, then he was suddenly kneeling, his rifle pressed to his cheek, firing and swinging the muzzle in deliberate arcs and firing again.

"You are not going to have all the fun!" I cried, rising to a seated position. Whatever adrenalin had driven me before had been purged from my system. I doubt that I shall ever have another day in my life that is so clear and diamond brilliant for clarity of thought and action. I expended six rounds. Six savages expended their lives.

Von Borst cursed, turning his rifle to club a howling savage, who fell with a crushed skull. I had no time to reload—even if the three remaining rounds I had on my

person would have made a difference. I barely had time to draw my hunting knife as a smelly mass of hairy humanity slammed into my body, knocking me backwards upon the ground. It was again an accident of luck that brought the savage's mid-section down upon my tightly gripped knife. Shrieking with pain he suddenly thrust himself aside, but it was no accident my blade silenced his howling forever.

The thud of many sickening blows and the sharp snapping sound of breaking bones drew my attention. Though my breathing was sorely labored and a red-mist hung over my eyes, I leapt upon the savage attempting to strangle von Borst from behind while the big German continued to rain horrendous blows upon those attacking from the front. My blade entered near the left kidney then was quickly thrust into a lung, but his ribs gripped the blade. I could not withdraw the knife as the savage sank to his knees, and worse, as he fell, the blade somehow severed the little finger from my right hand! Ignoring the pain, I picked up a rock and brained the still dangerous savage.

I staggered to my feet, the bloody rock in hand, and looked for an opening where I might aid von Borst without hitting him. I saw a chance and stepped forward with the rock raised, and abruptly went down, tackled about the knees. A grinning savage straddled me, his knees held down my arms and his weight was oppressive on my chest where tortured lungs gasped desperately for oxygen. He raised the stone axe high to crush my skull.

I have always stated I should not wish to die in bed of a lingering disease. It appeared that wish was to be instantly granted. I wanted to close my eyes, but I could not.

*"Hieeyyyaaa!"*

A gleaming arc of light passed above the savage, but the axe did not descend...and then it did, along with both arms and the grinning head, which thumped my

nose with bruising force. A double breath later the body sagged upon me. For an instant I could not fathom the spectacle, but as I felt the flood of hot blood about my head and shoulders I did not need a telegram from God to tell me that sound and shimmer of light was the work of Nagamichi!

I shrugged the corpse aside. I made the mistake of trying to use my right hand to elevate myself from the ground and, very unheroic like, I screamed at the pain.

Leinster's voice penetrated the dark curtain affecting my vision. "Get Burroughs back to the cave. Running Elk, Hiro—*hurt* those fleeing bastards!"

I felt hands under my arms. I tried to shrug them off. "Von Borst? *Von Borst?*"

An arm went around my shoulder. "I'm here, Mr. Burroughs, and thanks to you for it! Come along, let's get back to the cave before those savages try us again."

My friend, this is most painful to relate—as you know I am a man of action and have seen many duty tours in the world's most dangerous places—but I am also a truthful man. Whether it was from the stress of battle, my injury, or my relief to know von Borst was alive, I fainted!

•••

I was not out for long. It was the sound of heated argument that roused me. The cave ceiling was overhead and my back was supported by one of the rude beds. On either side, leaning above me, was Dr. Heinlein and Celeste. Both of their faces were flushed from the heat of their exchange—her's in French, his in the American idiom of the Ozarks. At this particular instant there was a tense silence into which MacDonald interjected a hurried translation of the girl's words.

"Sir, she says her medicine will fix, uh, make new," the Irishman scratched his head, "repair? She says her medicine is better than yours."

"What can this slip of a wild child know about medicine—regardless of the many herbs and plants which have been collected in this cave?"

Glad to be alive and to be able to pass air across my vocal chords to generate audible sound, though just barely, I said, "I've a sore nose and my hand. Are there any other injuries, Dr. Heinlein?"

"No," the man knelt beside the cot, a look of relief upon his grizzled visage. "It is your hand over which we fight. She wants to put some kind of mashed vegetable matter upon your stump before I bind it up."

I was so very tired, but I could see the look on Celeste's face and the way she held a crude bowl between her hands. "What can it hurt, sir?" I asked the doctor. "If it does no good, then no harm. Let her try." I closed my eyes for a moment, then struggled to open them again. "She means well, I'm sure. I think I will sleep now."

•••

I awoke, bedeviled by an unbearable thirst and gnawing hunger. I was wrapped in an animal skin on the cot and it was obvious that someone had recently bathed me.

Only the light of the moon and stars penetrated the windows at the cave entrance. Weaker than any newborn kitten, I struggled to prop myself upon an elbow. Almost instantly a strong hand supported my back and head.

"Who?" I whispered.

"Ivan Rokoff, sir!" The boy's concern and real affection did much for my well-being. "You had us worried! Celeste said it was normal, but Dr. Heinlein said she'd poisoned you. But you didn't die and now you're awake! Can I get you anything? Celeste said you would be hungry."

"Son," I tried a laugh that almost succeeded, "if your arm should pass near my mouth I would gnaw it off to the shoulder. I am starving."

Another figure approached in the darkness, a slim form which knelt beside the cot. It was Celeste. She car-

ried a bowl of thick soup—a cold and pasty textured liquid—but nothing I have ever consumed in my life tasted as heavenly! The dear girl fed me while Ivan held me erect. She spooned a second, and a third bowl until I could hold no more. Ivan gently lay me down upon the cot and, just before I went to sleep, I marveled that Celeste's tiny hand holding my right did not hurt at all. At that moment between awake and sleep, I thought she must be an angel.

All these months later as I write this letter to you, my friend, the eyes mist at the memory of these two children's tender care for a man who *really* is too old for adventures like this!

•••

There were two more dream-like awakenings and feedings, and Ivan and Celeste were always there. On the third awakening it was Dr. Heinlein who sat at my bedside. "How are you?" he asked.

"Your bedside manner leaves much to be desired," I grinned, "but all in all, I feel pretty good!"

Those were true words. I did feel well. To prove it, I sat up and dangled my legs over the edge of the bed, letting the too warm skin fall from my shoulders. The cool air in the cave felt good on my naked skin.

"Where is everybody?" I asked. Heinlein and I were the only two occupants of the cave.

"John Henry and von Borst are outside on watch. The others are scouting for a way through the Sto-lu country to the north."

"I hope I wasn't a problem patient," I began—and it was then that Heinlein told me all that had passed.

"Five days I was out? Uh, now eight? I know I am an old man, but damn it, I'm not that old or in that bad health! What happened?" I rubbed my beard-stubbed chin with annoyance.

Dr. Heinlein, whose expression flickering through emotions ranging from relieved, to perplexed, to con-

cerned, to—eventually—amused, placed a firm grip around my wrist and raised my right hand before my eyes.

I didn't want to look, remembering the severed finger—*then did look because there were four fingers and a thumb on my right hand!*

My pinky finger wasn't pink—it was a weird reddish-orange color and smaller than I remembered, but it flexed in all the right places as I opened and closed my fist. Astonished, I probably dropped my jaw as I looked to Heinlein. "What's this?"

Heinlein let go of my wrist and leaned back, crossing his arms and shaking his head. "It appears our little wild child of Caprona has in her possession—and her knowledge—a combination of herbs and plants that will regenerate lost limbs. Do you realize how humble this fellow feels at the moment? A slip of a girl and her jungle lore medicine has solved one of mankind's most traumatic facts of life: the rejuvenation of bone and tissue and nerves and..." for a moment Heinlein's enthusiasm boggled his command of tongue and vocalization.

I stared at my hand and that finger with equally incredulous eyes. I took a firm hand to my emotions, carefully schooling both thought and utterance. "What is the prognosis, sir?"

Heinlein chuckled. "Nagamichi lost an earlobe to a vicious bite from a savage who did not long live to enjoy producing the injury. Today his ear is normal—and the redness will disappear. Your finger, if what the girl says is true and I now believe she knows whereof she speaks, will soon reach full size and color, and be undetectable as different from your original appendage."

Lowering his gaze, Heinlein's voice assumed a soft, almost apologetic tone. "For all my training and skills—and I have many—I am awed, sir. Simply awed. But what is worse," he confined, "is my having accused the girl of attempting to kill you when she only meant good.

There was no way I could have known the efficacy of her poultice—even now it seems so unbelievable—yet I fear I shall never be able to apologize adequately for the harsh words I said to her while you were recuperating."

I reached for the nearby stack of washed and folded clothing I had worn. Standing to put on my trousers I swayed a bit. Heinlein braced me until button and zipper were secured and I sat down. I felt no pain in the hand, though the finger itched and seemed feverish to the touch.

Buttoning the shirt, then pulling on socks and boots, I said, "A damn miracle of medicine, Dr. Heinlein. It's a damn miracle and we, sir, are witnesses to the birth of a new medical technology."

"Yes!" the man replied with a laugh, all the remorse, regret, and astonishment banished by a sudden enthusiasm. "You do know what makes me most ashamed? When I saw with my own eyes what she had been trying to tell me, even after I accused her of abhorrent action, the girl—I mean Celeste, she *deserves* that courtesy from me at the very least—showed me the combination of leaves and herbs and how to mix them together. She made packets of everything for me to take back when we leave Caprona, but more importantly, she will help me gather living specimens of each plant and herb so that we might grow them back home."

"That might be more efficient in the long run," I agreed, "but we can always find them here in Caprona—and I have no doubt, *not a one*, that any future expeditions into the heart of this savage land will come as well prepared as Pershing against the Mexican bandits. These savages will have to learn to step aside..."

"Step aside from whom?" Heinlein asked with a scowl. "Invaders of their land? Conquerors? Imperialists?"

The blood boiled and a heated retort sprang to my lips, but I squashed it instantly. "I spoke in the emotion of recent events—as would anyone who has been beset

by war when war was never intended. I spoke of benefiting mankind, and do realize that some part of mankind will suffer for that to occur. Before you brand me too severely, my good doctor, tell me what you would do if the plants and herbs will grow nowhere else but Caprona? What trade-off are you willing to accept to achieve your medical results?"

Fully dressed, I rose from the bed which had cradled me for eight days. I was not too steady on my feet, but I wanted to be outside, in the sun, and nothing could deter that desire. I took three steps to the doorway, brilliantly outlined by Caprona's intense sunlight, then felt a steadying hand at my elbow. Heinlein's face looked forward, his expression deliberately uncommunicative.

"You're right, Mr. Burroughs."

That was both an apology and a prediction of the future. Neither of us were satisfied with the future reality.

At the doorway von Borst sprang to his feet. He was bare to the waist, his back still black and blue from the stones the savages had thrown, but he was whole, healthy, and embraced me with a bear hug that left me dizzy.

"For an old man you are some scrapper!" the German said, then blushed. "Not old, I mean, I—"

"Shut up, von Borst, or you'll ruin everything. You're pretty special yourself. Is that coffee I smell?" I sat down upon the first rock that was in sunlight, unable to walk further.

"Hot and black, like me!" John Henry bellowed with a grin. The Negro brought me a battered tin cup of the vilest brew I have ever tasted. I downed it in two incautious gulps and two what-the-hell gulps and asked for more. John Henry fetched it and then squatted down, his teeth gleaming in a broad smile. "See this, boss?" he showed me his upper shoulder.

I saw a ragged scar, mute evidence of a horrific injury.

John Henry explained. "Soon as we knew the girl was right, she fixed me up. Look, it works just fine!" He

rotated arm and shoulder to give proof of the statement. "An' I here'd you kilt sixteen of dose savages, an' I gots ta apologize, I thought you was one of dose parade ground soldiers!"

I easily forgave his lapse into the vocabulary of his youth, but I had to correct his information. "Six—seven," I said, remembering the one I killed with a rock. "Don't believe all you hear, John Henry." It was eight I had killed, including that first savage with the quick draw, but notching kills on the butts of .45's is not my style.

Heinlein settled next to me, placing a hand on the black's shoulder. "Well you can believe this, sir. John Henry and his carving knife killed eight."

John Henry grinned yet again. "And we hauled off twenty-two you and Micky and Ivan killed at the door." Looking to me, John Henry added, "we hurt them boss."

I listened with half an ear. I was looking to a sapling which had been cut and trimmed and leaned against the wall near John Henry's cook stove. More than two dozen scalps hung from the branches. "What's that?" I asked.

Von Borst replied. "John Running Elks' coup pole—scalps. Brings them back from his patrols. Want to see Nagamichi's collection of ears?"

The sun warmed me, that I knew, but for a moment a chill passed through me. My recent words with Heinlein echoed harshly. My voice held an edge: "Are we embarked upon extermination of these people?"

John Henry stood, a towering figure of muscle, bone, and sinew. "You've been asleep a long time, boss. You don't know what we been through. If these people want to fight, they got to pay the price. I been on that side all my life, and all the lives of my mothers and fathers back to when the Arabs slaved us to Europe and the Americas. We don't lay down and die, not even when we are slaves. Life is everything, boss, death is nothing. You pick it. Tell me what you think is best."

He didn't wait for an answer from me. John Henry stomped back to his fire, and his weapons, and sat with a scowl on his face.

Von Borst gripped my shoulder. "It has been bad, sir. Very bad. Up until three days ago we fought savages two and three times a day. You and John Henry were hurt the worst. I have counted fifty-six dead with my own eyes, and adding in the Indian's and Hiro's we're near a hundred. It *is* us or them, and I think *us* deserve to live."

Heinlein muttered, "Such a goddamn waste. Yet, there's nothing else we can do."

I embraced all the of the thoughts stated. All of them. In my heart. I, too, wasn't about to lay down and die. I shook off the hands that Heinlein and von Borst offered and walked over to John Henry. I sat down, the empty coffee cup dangling from my left hand.

"I never liked war," I said. "I've been in it too many times and seen all the suffering and futility. Politicians make wars happen when they fail to do their jobs, for war is the end result of failed diplomacy. I don't like killing, but by God, I dislike dying even more. Is there any more of that atrocious coffee?"

John Henry's scowl abated. He lifted the soot-smudged pot from the embers and filled my cup. Then he said: "This is the only life we get, boss. Sometimes it is good, sometimes it is not. All I know is that all of us here have good hearts even if we must do a little killing here and there."

"Don't give me too much credit, John Henry. I'm not sure where I stand in the overall scheme of things."

"Yes you do, boss," he instantly grinned. "You surely do even if you don't know it."

I needed that cup of coffee and the time needed to absorb a few thoughts expressed by my comrades—for we were all in this together.

•••

John Running Elk was first into the camp, four days later. At his waist was a dark mass of scalps. I did not count them, nor did I wish to know how they had been taken. But I was surprised to see how reverently the Indian arranged the bits of flesh and hair upon his totem.

Leinster and Clemens headed straight for John Henry's fire as the remainder of the party entered the clearing. Leinster, with a cup of coffee that was even more horrendous than that I had imbibed the first day I was ambulatory, greeted Heinlein, von Borst and myself.

"It worked," the black cook said, nodding toward my hand which now displayed a configuration exactly like I had at the beginning of our excursion into Caspak.

Leinster grinned for a moment then gathered our attention with a grim expression. "Gentlemen, we have scared the holy— What I mean to say is the native tribes have retired and I suspect will no longer test our metal. This is a good thing since our ammunition is running low.

"There is a problem we must address," the ship's officer continued. "We followed the path of Celeste's father as related in the last journal entry which you, Dr. Heinlein, most adequately translated." Leinster paused, looking toward each of us. "We found the cache," he said.

There was a thunder of silence in the clearing before the cave. Von Borst glanced to John Henry, who grinned. Heinlein said nothing, his eyes narrowed. I was in the dark, but the expressions on von Borst, John Henry, and Dr. Heinlein's faces intrigued me. "What cache?" I asked.

Leinster narrowed his eyes, cradling the hot coffee between his hands. "We have located the 40 millions in Spanish and French gold Celeste's father cached in the cliffs to the north. The question is: Do we signal the *Toreador* and move the gold, or continue our search for Bowen Tyler and Tom Billings?"

*Forty millions in gold? Now that is a head turner and a half!*

## CHAPTER 4

Though the excitement of all that gold was the topic of conversation around the evening fire for the next three days, our expedition was in no shape to act upon that, or our original intent—the succor of Billings and Tyler, if both still lived in this land of horrors prehistoric and today.

I say "today" as regards the 120 pound leopard that John Running Elk had to dispatch while hunting a primitive form of deer. The cat was as modern as any I have seen in the jungles of South America or the east coast of Africa. Heinlein and I spoke quietly over the odd extremes of flora and fauna we had encountered on the island of Caprona as the evening fire diminished in flame and ruddy glow.

"Dinosaurs and early horses," Heinlein scowled.

"Horses eighteen inches high at that," I chuckled. "This is a land without rules or evolutionary history." I paused, sipping a tea John Henry had endorsed, once Celeste had shown it to him. "What do you make of it, Dr. Heinlein?"

The good doctor frowned, scratching at an insect bite that had left a drop of blood gleaming on his weathered skin illuminated by the faint fire light. "The girl speaks of mysteries—for I must call them that because her statements have little or no bearing upon current scientific thought. Her command of English is spotty at best and her French, if MacDonald is correct, is very limited."

"You don't like Celeste," I said without emotional color. "She does not fit any mold you know."

Heinlein leaned back, glancing to the girl who slept sheltered in Ivan's massive arms on the other side of the cave. "That is not quite correct," he said. "How could

you *not* love her? She is youth and woman, with an agile brain and is forthright to a fault. Celeste is a treasure that some man," we both grinned, thinking of Ivan, "will lay down his life to honor. Damn it, Burroughs, she tells me things that *cannot* be! Am I to revise the studies of a lifetime merely because an uneducated and quite savage little girl babbles on regarding life in Caspak, as she calls this place?"

"What if those 'babblings' are true?"

"*That* is what I am most concerned with," Heinlein honestly replied.

We talked into the night, quietly debating this and that, until the hour finally took its toll and we retired. We slept well, assured that Running Elk of the North American primitive mystics and Hiro of the millennia wise Orientals were on guard.

Von Borst shook me awake. "Captain Burroughs," he said, holding a cup of what we now called coffee in his massive fist. "Near dawn. You asked to be awakened."

It was the bitter brew that passed my lips before I replied. "Anything happen during the night?"

"Floating shapes in the sky—Wieroos—but no interaction. I woke you a bit early, sir. John Henry made hush puppies with the last of the corn meal. I figured you'd like—"

"Say no more," I eagerly rose.

Leinster was at the sheltered fire when I arrived. The man looked ragged and I suspected that he slept damn little. He glanced toward me and the German. "We leave today," he said. "The natives have become bolder."

It was true. Another battle we did not need.

"John Henry," I said, "whatever you put on a plate, I'll eat." Sitting next to Leinster I added *sotto voce*, "Is it Tyler and Billings we seek or Le Monde's stolen treasure?"

The man scowled so blackly that I feared the sun might never rise. "I know you are a student of human

behavior, Mr. Burroughs. I doubt not that you firmly believe that our rescue mission has become a treasure hunt to the detriment of those we set out to succor." Leinster paused, his facial expression becoming more intense. "I'll not lie to you, since you'd see it most obvious in an instant that the gold does not attract, but from the beginning of this mission I have held to a prime course of action. I'll be honest, sir. Bowen Tyler means damn little to me. I don't know him from Adam, but Tom Billings stood at my wedding, may she rest in peace, and *him* I owe for his friendship and caring."

Leinster laid a hand upon my forearm, leaning close to my ear with a whisper. "By the same token, sir, while money might be the root of all evil it is also the salvation of want and need. Tom Billings and I both suffer from the same."

"Billings is Tyler's secretary," I replied. "Surely he has no wants or needs."

"All men who work for others have wants and needs. I have no doubt that you and the rest have similar situations that might be resolved by splitting up what we can carry out. We have to go north in any event. What harm can there be in picking up a few items along the way?"

I thought about it for a moment before replying. Many of my military commissions over the years had been based upon mercenary applications. I also recalled Dr. Heinlein's enthusiasm for the medical properties of certain plants and herbs. Hard currency did not seem too inappropriate.

"We still have a mission, Leinster," I said, though my voice was sympathetic to his expression. "Tyler and Billings—*this we must do*. But if we can also do for us all, why should we not?"

•••

We vacated Celeste's stronghold in force. There would be no going back to the cave and there was absolutely no

question of leaving the girl behind, though I sincerely doubt young Ivan would have allowed that to occur—should anyone have been so rash to suggest such a thing.

Our pace was rapid, our direction singularly straight: away from the cave of Le Monde's daughter where so much carnage had been wrought, where we were subject to renewed attacks by the natives. Apparently the advent of our expedition had flushed out the young girl—made her known to the savages—though I also suspect that for a good few years Pierre Le Monde and his equally savage pirates had well-educated the natives. Be that as it may, ammunition was a real concern. Dead, we could not accomplish our expressed goals: locating Tyler and Billings—and returning to the *Toreador*. I observed the intensity on each man's face and could imagine what thoughts passed through their brains. Tyler and Billings were the main objective, of course, yet now there was also the lure of Le Monde's treasure.

At mid-day there was a difference of opinion. Celeste wanted to bear to the east, into the mountains where the terrain was rugged. Leinster argued with the girl. "We took the coastal route without difficulty."

"The Wa-lu lurk this shore," the girl said, eyes wide, trembling. "Much bad. Hurt all people."

Clemens chuckled. "On our first foray on this trail we saw nothing, Celeste. Have you ever been far from your parent's cave before?"

"Far enough!" she scowled, clinging to Rokoff's arm. She carried a long spear with a white-knuckled grip as she contemplated the path Leinster had indicated. "Bad wa-lu! Eat people!" She stamped her little foot to reinforce her declaration.

Amused, Leinster shook his head, discounting the girl's warning. "Ivan, keep her quiet."

When Celeste tried to argue young Rokoff touched her shoulder as delicately as a butterfly upon a flower. To him

she could not say no. As the young couple moved away, in a breathless voice I heard her say: "*This not good!*"

Our entire group moved at a much slower pace than Leinster's original search party. We ended up on the shore of the great inland sea at dusk.

"We had passed this point by noon the first time we came through," Leinster said. "We camped on that rise six miles further on, but we will camp here tonight, and make Le Monde's cache by mid-morning tomorrow."

I was silently relieved when Leinster motioned we make camp under the eerie moonlight, a bare score of feet from the nearly silent waves caressing the yellow sand along the shore. My wounds were fully healed, but the strenuous adventure had begun to sap my once inexhaustible reserves. It was at times like this that I regret not taking Greystoke up on his offer of some mysterious witch doctor pill that was supposed to provide immortality. Even as I wished this, merely because of my fatigue, I laughed at myself and Greystoke, for surely this could never be. And then for a disquieting moment, as I recalled the loss of a finger and stared at it restored by the crude medicine of a girl who lived on a primitive island, I wondered if I had made the right decision regarding those jungle pills.

Ivan and Celeste had quietly conversed away from the group over the last few hours. Von Borst once leaned toward me with a "cute as two bugs in a rug" remark, nodding toward the pair. I refrained from commenting out loud, but I believe my wink was understood by the German. John Henry said nothing about the two youngsters, but he was kind enough to take them plates from the cook fire so they could eat together. I was puffing away on my pipe, creating a satisfactory blue haze about my head and shoulders, when the young man entered the circle of firelight. He squatted next to Leinster to say, "In a cove just north there is a boat her father made."

"Thank the girl for her information," Leinster replied with a tone that was unconsciously a dismissal. The ship officer's attention was centered upon Clemen's hand drawn map, which both men studied in the feeble light of the fire.

Celeste, angry at the snub, turned away, carrying the spear she had brought from the cave. I followed because Ivan did. The boy looked disconsolate. Dr. Heinlein tagged along because he had a few questions he wished to ask Celeste.

"What are the wa-lu?" he asked.

The four of us had settled to the shore, watching the glints of moonlight upon the gentle waves. It took several queries from Heinlein and myself before the angry girl finally responded.

"Water people," she said, looking to the full moon above. "This their time. Father said. Mother said. No hunt sea for food this time. Eat us. Shell-back. Kill spear to head." There was both superstition and bravery etched on her fine features.

"Are these Wa-lu like the Kro-lu and Sto-lu we have fought?" Heinlein asked.

"Live in sea," she said, shaking her head. Her long hair lifted from her shoulders just a little as the breeze off the water strengthened slightly. "Take to island," she added, gesturing with her spear.

I recalled the southern island we had dimly seen when we first entered Caspak. "You think they live there, Celeste?" I asked.

She did not have time to answer as a wave of forms exploded from the sea. The attackers were turtle-like in appearance, that is to say they had shells upon their backs and bellies and human-like limbs for arms and legs. Unlike turtles they moved with great speed!

Ivan and I, being nearest the shore, were immediately captured by these strange creatures with oily limbs

as flexible as an octopus tentacle. We were harshly banged against their shelled bodies. I lost consciousness.

When I came around I could not say what time of day it was—only that daylight shimmered brilliantly upon the water. I could not see higher than an inch or two above the surface and it seemed the world was made of water only. There was a slight swell in the current that elevated my eyesight from time to time—and what I saw terrified me beyond description.

At least a dozen humps floated nearby, dark green and oily looking. The water was dark and filled with sediment or algae. I could see only the barest glimpses of flipper-like appendages sculling through the water. There was a grip about my neck, thankfully mostly upon the collar of my shirt, and I sensed a powerful body that not only kept me afloat but propelled me through the waters of Caspak's volcanic inner sea at some speed.

"You are awake!" Ivan's voice was filled with relief.

"Where are you, boy?" I cried, heart pounding, then coughed as a wave filled my open mouth.

"Ahead of you, sir, held between two of these horrible things. Are you all right?"

"Other than a throbbing headache and wrinkled like a prune, yes. How long as I unconscious?"

"All night. These wa-lu, if these are the ones Celeste tried to warn us about, seemed in no hurry once they took us into the water, but after the sun rose they swim faster."

"So, my young friend, what else did your girl say that we should have listened to before disaster struck? And did they take any of the others?"

"There is just the two of us. I don't know what happened on the beach, only that I have never seen anything move that fast before."

I now noticed that the creature bearing me was swimming more strongly. The beat of its flippered limbs

caused a porpoising effect that alternately pulled me beneath the surface and then exposed my mouth to drag in air. I sensed that the creature had no desire to drown me, that it made sure I had learned the rhythm of breathing as it towed me. Seemingly to understand that I was aware of its intention, the speed increased to an alarming rate!

"I think," Ivan's words were disconnected, as if he spoke when his head was above water then silenced by immersion, "...waited...you awa... My god! ...aster than..."

"Save your breath!" Then I could say no more, diligently timing my breathing to the creature's swimming pattern. How long this high speed travel continued I am not sure, though it was at least a half hour but not more than two.

When I heard a gentle surf in the near distance the wa-lu slowed. I was once more able to breathe normally. I tried to crank my head upon aching shoulders to see where we were headed and was partly able to make out a cliff about 70 feet high to my right. Our path continued in that direction, following the cliff until a small bay opened. The wa-lu carried us toward a beach composed of bright yellow sand. Moments later we were hauled from the water.

I looked upon our captors for the first time—somehow they did not appear as horrible as they had rushing from the night-darkened sea—though they were quite the strangest creatures I have ever seen, even on the island of Caprona. Standing erect on two sturdy flippers that had a bendable knee, each wa-lu was no more than five feet in height. Their turtle-like shelled bodies were wide, almost barrel-shaped, and were colored a dark olive on back with a grayish white belly segmented with overlapping armor plates. The upper extremities were flipper-shaped at the end of rope-like arms that appeared as flexible as any Cephalopod's. Their skull, however, was quite ugly, looking something like the cross between a snapping turtle and

a shark. The large mouth was filled with triangular teeth and the inch-long hooked beak appeared knife sharp. The eyes were stark white, with vertically split pupils and were on the sides of the head, equipped with three clear membranes of eyelids.

My brief study of these extraordinary creatures was cut short by a thump on my back, indicating I was to follow the wa-lu who were dragging the struggling form of my young friend. Ivan gave the pair holding him such a difficult time that a third approached with a bone club raised.

"Don't fight, boy!" I yelled, startling Ivan and the club bearing wa-lu alike. "Relax, Rokoff. We cannot fight this many and it does appear they want us alive. The next knock on your head might not be as gentle."

Rokoff scowled, but nodded his understanding. His eyes narrowed with the promise of terrible retribution should chance allow an opportunity. Viewing that expression, I would not wish to be the wa-lu that met the young man's wrath!

The beach was no more than ten yards wide. We entered into a green belt of foliage that was barely taller than Ivan's head and it, too, was narrow. Almost immediately we climbed a steep slope. Some twenty feet above the plants and bushes we stood, breathing a little heavily, on the edge of a wide ledge. Row after row of hump back shelled bodies lay in the warm sun. Near each were primitive weapons such as clubs, bone knives, or fist-sized rocks bound with curious thongs six to eight feet in length. All of the creatures were of similar size and shape, individuals as indistinguishable as one sea-turtle from another.

It was not a quiet ledge. The wa-lu spoke a hissing speech which made no sense to Rokoff or myself. Worse, it irritated the ears the same way a boiling tea kettle might. At the back of the ledge was a shallow cave and toward it we were led. The entrance had been barred by

the rib bones of some large animal, most likely marine in nature. This island, despite its large size, appeared to have little vegetation except what grew near the coast. The basalt and other igneous rocks which formed the island's heart were jumbled and foreboding masses.

Inside the wa-lu jail I immediately saw two human-like forms crouching as far away from the entrance and the wa-lu as possible. Rokoff was roughly shoved inside. He lost his footing and tumbled in a heap as the wa-lu, hissing loudly in what I imagined to be laughter, secured the gate. Our captors left one on guard then left us alone.

I helped Ivan to his feet. His pride was injured most as he dusted off his dripping clothes. "We have company," I said to him, nodding toward the natives.

Rokoff turned his head, though he had to duck slightly because of the low ceiling. "Not Band-lu or Stolu," he observed. "Look, their features are more regular and there is less hair on their bodies. One of them looks half-dead from starvation."

The boy's observations were accurate. Of the two men present in our cave cage one was very emaciated. His ribs and hollowed stomach were indicative of a long time between meals. The other, though slighter than either of us, was in better condition. Both were dirty and there was an odor that was offensive to the nose; however, I could not fault them for that since it was obvious that bathing and sanitation facilities were not included with the accommodations. In my time I have stayed in hotels equally lacking, and just as absent of having a manager to whom one might complain.

Ivan moved toward the men with open and extended hands. The heavier of the two moved away with frightened eyes. The other stayed where he was, using eyes only to look to the wa-lu then back to Rokoff. He made no move when Ivan lowered his great bulk next to him and placed a friendly hand on the man's shoulder.

I frowned as I looked at this native. I suddenly sensed the reason for his calm behavior. All my life I have had an unexplainable empathy in times of great stress that sometimes reveals the emotional state of friends and enemies. In the case of the former that empathy has usually allowed me to offer help or support as needed. In the case of the latter this sense of mine has warned when treachery or devilment was afoot. Yes, I had a flash of empathy as regards this half-starved creature.

In a quiet voice I told Ivan what I sensed. "You, my boy, are the lesser of two evils. It seems he'd rather die at your hands than the wa-lu's."

"Are you sure, Mr. Burroughs? I don't want to kill him!"

"There's something else I feel, Rokoff. Our friend has been here many days, enough days that he has starved himself into this condition."

"Why?" Ivan nodded toward the other man who was as far away from us and the wa-lu guard as the cave allowed. "He's in fair shape. These beasts must feed their captives."

"It would appear so," I agreed, "but for some reason this man has chosen to starve himself to death."

Late afternoon a half-dozen wa-lu carrying clubs and a like number of trilobites—which looked like horse-shoe crabs—approached the cave. The door was opened wide enough for the wa-lu to toss in the trilobites, which they did with sufficient force against the rock wall to crack the heavy shells. The wa-lu sealed the gate then left us alone, with the exception of a new guard to replace the one who had been with us all day. I still could not tell them apart, not even after hours of studying the nearby wa-lu.

Rokoff picked up one of the trilobites, scowling. "We've eaten stranger since we arrived." He began spreading the cracked shell with strong fingers.

Our emaciated friend, who now had resigned himself to the fact that neither of us would kill him, sud-

denly batted the shellfish from Ivan's hand. Shaking his head as vigorously as he could, he pointed to the other human, who was feasting upon the trilobites with great appetite. Ivan, as hungry as I was, held his temper when I touched his shoulder.

"There may be a reason," I said. "Let us wait and see."

The wa-lu guard, unlike the earlier fellow, watched us intently. He saw that only the one ate while I and my companions declined. My odd empathy detected a twinge of disappointment from the creature, but that was all it was, a twinge—like a minor sprain or an itch one cannot reach.

The light began to fade. I disliked the thought of sitting in that cave all night without a light.

"Look!" Ivan whispered, pointing to the ledge.

A line of glowing globes approached. A moment later I could see each was borne by a wa-lu carrying a thin slat which looked all the world like whale baleen. Impaled at the tip of each was a kind of jelly fish which emitted a pale phosphorous light.

These globes were placed in rock cairns about the cave cage and the wa-lu began to gather. Our friend began to tremble violently, backing away from the gate, seeking to hide himself behind Ivan's great bulk. Five of the wa-lu entered upon their leathery legs. Two faced us with sturdy clubs in hand. The rest rushed upon the other native and carried him out. The two guarding us exited the cave and the gate was again sealed. This time no guard was left at the gate, though it would have been nothing less than insanity to attempt a breakout with such a horrific congregation outside.

"What's going to happen?" Ivan asked. His voice was hoarse with anxiety and alarm.

I did not have to answer him as the wa-lu almost immediately demonstrated what was to be. One of the creatures leapt forward and made a terrific gash upon the

native's leg. A shrill scream of terror and pain echoed from the cave's back wall. Another wa-lu did the same, then another and yet another. Within moments the native lay upon the ground, ham-strung, leg muscles tattered ribbons, bleeding his life upon the still sun-warmed rock. But he was not yet dead when one of the beasts moved forward and nipped off the native's foot as cleanly as a surgeon might have removed it, bone, flesh, and tendons.

This seemed to be the signal for a general attack and for an instant there was an agonized scream that could not have originated from a human throat, then it ceased. For several minutes all we could see was a nightmarish thrashing of hardshelled bodies writhing like maggots on rotted meat—then it was over. Where the man had lain there was nothing but a dark damp spot.

"God in heaven!" Ivan's voice rose. "*God in heaven!*"

I gripped his arm, jerking Ivan's eyes away from the scene. "Keep your wits, son. Do not—" He pulled away, nor could I have stopped him given Rokoff's size and strength. "Ivan?"

"This will *not* happen, sir!" he promised.

Though his eyes were yet wild from what had been witnessed, there was a touch of steel in his voice that I admired greatly. Rokoff turned to our companion. Slowly nodding his head he spoke to the native.

"I understand why you wished death by human hands. I also understand why you do not eat—*they*," he added with a hiss, "like their food nice and fat!" Ivan spat on the ground.

The native abruptly grinned his approval. He lost his uneasiness and for as long as the jelly fish globes gave their dying light, we three sat together. Though we said nothing, we fully understood what the other was thinking. It is said misery loves company, but I am here to tell you today that company in misery, while love many not be found, surely do find strength in that togetherness.

The hour was well past midnight when the native went to sleep. Not long after the native slumbered Rokoff's head occasionally nodded above his broad chest. The young man made every effort to remain awake, but we had been through a lot. We were both utterly fatigued. I, on the other hand, am an old man. Long ago I learned how to do without sleep on many campaigns and safaris. I would not have slept in that cave under any event, and I hoped that Rokoff did not have a hint as to how greatly I was terrified at the prospect of being the next wa-lu buffet.

*But, damn these old bones of mine, I did sleep!*

I awoke when a callused hand covered my mouth and a hurried "Shh!" whispered in my ear. The hand was human, so I complied. I sensed several others in the cave, one by Rokoff and one by the native. Then I realized who knelt beside me, his upper body naked, his long hair bound in twin braids—John Running Elk!

I rose as silently as I could when the Indian tugged me erect. The native and the small form leading him were already outside the cave. I saw starlight glistening upon the carapace of the supine wa-lu guard, nor did it take a novel-length explanation for cause of the dark stain spreading from beneath the creature's half-severed throat.

Though I worried about Ivan and the other rescuer I was not given time to assure myself the dear boy followed. John Running Elk urgently shoved my steps after the native and—I saw for an instant a man's body silhouetted by the pre-dawn light—Hiro Nagamichi! I questioned not how they came to be here nor did I question over much how we were to escape... Well, I *tried* to drive that worry from my mind!

Silent as any church mouse on a cheese larder mission, the six of us descended the slope. Once we entered the vegetation I felt somewhat easier, though I could see nothing in the blackness through which we traveled. John Running Elk and the Japanese seemed to have eyes

as good as a cat's, for moments later we were on the beach. At the shimmering edge of the golden beach a large dark bulk was there.

My friend, I cannot tell you how glad I was to see Mr. Leinster step from a boat, or the other faces who were there!

From above us came a sudden explosion of hissing. Rokoff, who had arrived with Celeste, spoke softly. "That tears it! I need a gun or a knife! Quick!"

Leinster demurred. "Get in the boat, Rokoff. We'll out-distance them."

"That cannot be done, sir. Best we fight them on land than in their element. All they need do is capsize the boat then chop us to pieces at their leisure."

"He's right," I said. "And I want a gun and some light!"

An electric hand torch was turned on, then a second. Someone thrust a pistol into my hand and never have I caressed anything so sweet—not even the cheek of a lovely girl—as that cold, hard, engine of destruction.

"*Away from water!*" Celeste's clear voice rang out.

Leinster, to his credit, did not question these sudden advisements. "Von Borst! Secure the boat so it cannot be damaged or towed away. Heinlein, Burroughs, man the torches and use your pistols. John Henry—Clemens—MacDonald, take positions there, there and there!" He said nothing to the Japanese and the Indian. They stood nearest the foliage, their dark-stained blades in hand. MacDonald stood next to Leinster.

"Mr. Burroughs, how many?" the officer casually inquired.

That was an answer I could give. I had had little to do while caged in that wa-lu food larder. "Between 60 and 75, no more than that."

Leinster bellowed. "Make every shot count! We know their shells won't turn a bullet aside from our last encounter. Here they come!"

I don't know who lit the kerosene lantern, but it provided a general illumination that the electric hand flashes Heinlein and I used could not. I carried the kerosene lantern forward, thrilled to see the carnage that Running Elk and Nagamichi had already dealt. The wa-lu were fast, and had surprised us before, but I soon discovered that on land they were no faster than a determined human being and were more poorly armed than we. On the other hand, we were gravely outnumbered.

There was some fighting behind us on the beach. It faded almost immediately. It appeared the wa-lu congregated on that ledge each night and the majority had been there, which was to our advantage—they had to come through the brush, slowing their attack and revealing their locations. We were able to deal with attacks of smaller numbers rather than an overwhelming assault. Yet, even so, we were hard pressed. I could not count the thrashing hardshelled bodies at our feet, or avoid those death throes which proved to be almost as dangerous as a healthy wa-lu by interfering with our combat.

One of the headless wa-lu rolled into my legs. I was knocked from my feet. A heart beat later it crashed into the kerosene lamp, breaking the glass. Instantly the wa-lu burst into flames. Never have I seen anything burn so quickly! I instantly realized the oily appearance of their shells was just that, an oil of some kind that was extremely flammable.

I saved the lantern, which wick still burned, and hunted for driftwood of any type. I found several weathered pieces and soon had them burning. I set a few more of the wa-lu corpses ablaze. We soon had all the light we could use. The driftwood had quickly burned, far more rapidly than common woods I know. The driftwood was as curiously twisted as the brush lining the shore.

The wa-lu still came from the foliage, in greater numbers now, following new paths beaten through the brush to reach us.

"John Henry!" I yelled, "can you throw the lantern into the brush?"

The big black, who had fallen back from the flank assault, reached down with one huge hand and heaved the lantern aloft. The wick burned brightly in a low arc then disappeared into the dark vegetation. Anxiously, as I continued to ignite fallen wa-lu, I waited. Just as I chided myself for throwing the lantern away, a fiery blaze erupted which spread with the speed of an express train. From within the fire's red heart came the tortured hisses of dozens of wa-lu. We could see their frenzied forms rushing about for seconds of time then falling, their oily shells providing more fodder for the inferno. In less than five minutes there was a raging wall of fire which extended up and down the beach as far as the eye could see.

I felt a terrific thump between my shoulder blades. I struggled to catch my breath as I turned to face my attacker. It was Leinster, grinning from ear to ear.

"We'll have to name you Jack, sir, for like that giant killer of old you have killed in one blow more than the rest of us combined. Good work, man!"

While we mutually congratulated ourselves over the victory, there was a sudden flurry of action on the beach near the boat. By the time we turned to face the danger of wa-lu attacking from the water, that battle was over.

To our amazed eyes we saw the pirate's daughter straddled above the dark green shell of a wa-lu shuddering its death throes. Her primitive



spear twisted again and again into the creature's leathery neck. The beast's dark blood stained each receding wave.

Rising to her feet, the girl viciously spat upon the corpse. Still watching the water, which was now taking on a silvery gray hue as the sun rose above the distant volcanic rim, Celeste moved to one side to squat at the water's edge to vigorously scrub the wa-lu's oil and blood from her legs.

Micky MacDonald leaned on his rifle, looking as weary as a man might without collapsing. He scowled at young Rokoff, whose shirt was so tattered from near misses by sharp wa-lu beaks he might as well be bare chested. At Ivan's responding frown, the Irishman explained with arched brow:

"That's *your* woman. Too damn blood-thirsty savage for me."

Ivan's fist clenched involuntarily, then the young man grinned at MacDonald's sly wink. Rokoff's sudden and hearty laugh agreed with the Irishman as Celeste came to stand beside him—her face angelic once again.

"That she is, my friend. *That she is!*"

## CHAPTER 5

I am resuming this letter after pausing for a mug of soup and a sandwich. I am appalled at the number of pages I have scribbled! It is obvious I am re-living our adventure on Caspak and have probably offered too many niggling details; however, I am not about to go back and edit or delete the unnecessary as this would be counter-productive—and might even delay the posting of this missive at our next port of call. I will, on the other hand, make every effort to mention only the high points in this writing. When we meet next at Christie's On The Strand in Galveston in October, for our annual crab and oyster dinner, I will gladly amplify any part of our expedition to Caprona—but only over a bottle of fine Port that *you* will purchase!

•••

As we rowed away from that hellish island a tremendous column of thick black smoke rose above the golden shore. I hoped, with all my heart, that every walu in Caprona was ascending skyward as charred ash into the dark clouds above. The native we had brought down from the ledge with us lay at the bow. A pitiful bag of bones, his bearded face looked toward the distant volcanic rim and, I swear this, there was such happiness and peace upon his countenance that I was nearly moved to tears. Leinster helmed the craft, which was about thirty-feet in length. His strong voice barked oar commands to the four amidships pulling on twelve-foot sweeps: John Henry, Clemens, Running Elk and Von Borst. The officer's eye turned frequently to the lowering clouds—and from his expression it was soon clear to all of us that Mr. Leinster did not like what he observed.

"Pull hearty, mates!" Leinster urged. "There's weather coming!"

Even I could feel menace in the atmosphere. The temperature had dropped and the following breeze had grown stronger.

Ivan's voice, with a touch of urgency, came from the bow. "Doctor Heinlein, we need you forward!"

My old friend jerked erect from an uncomfortable sleep near the aft rowing bench at Ivan's cry and went to the bow, carrying his bag. Ivan and Celeste gave room so that Heinlein could examine the native. The doctor from Missouri did not extend that examination for long. He looked up and shook his head.

There was a moment of silence, especially between young Rokoff and myself. We knew first hand what the man had experienced and why he had come to this condition.

Heinlein looked across the bent shoulders of the rowers to the man at the helm. "What do you wish to do, Mr. Leinster?"

"We have several hours to go before reaching shore," the officer replied. "I think we can wait that long. We'll bury him ashore."

The weather continued to change minute by minute. Soon white caps were visible and the following wind was both aid and hindrance. The four men manning the sweeps pulled with full heart just to keep the boat aligned with the gusts of wind, peppered with stinging rain.

"*Christ!*" MacDonald yelled, jerking back from the gunwale. "What was that?"

"I didn't see anything," Ivan replied, looking upon the increasingly tortured water surface.

"Like the beast of Loch Lomond it was," the Irishman replied. "A fairy beast that... *Look out!*"

MacDonald's rifle spoke with a sudden report as a massive head, with a jaw near a yard in length and lined with needle-sharp teeth, rose a dozen feet above our

boat. The hellish creature jerked to one side and jerked again as MacDonald fired another round.

The monstrous head disappeared beneath the waves.

"Pull! Pull!" Leinster's voice rose.

A solid thump upon the keel turned the boat askew. A following wave filled the bilge. I was suddenly too busy with both hands splashing water out, with MacDonald, Heinlein, and Rokoff assisting when I saw Celeste heave the body of the native over the side.

Ivan, shocked, roared above the rising wind. "What are you doing?" He looked at the native's pale body floating on the surface.

"It hungry!" the girl screamed. Fifteen, twenty—thirty feet the boat passed before a terrific flurry of action created a red and white froth as the native's body disappeared beneath the waves.

"See? *Not* hungry!" Celeste declared. The practical girl began to bail water with the rest of us who were not rowing.

The sea became a nightmare, but as I just promised I will state only the high points. We survived the blow and torrential rains and reached the eastern shore of the inland sea near nightfall—though the skies were so dark it was difficult to attribute a real time of landing.

Sodden to the skin, shivering from the chill rain and nearly blind in the darkness, it was good to set foot on firm soil as Nature raged. Lightning flashed all about, striking the trees and high ground above the shore. Running Elk, von Borst, Clemens and John Henry were worthless—that is to say they had expended so much effort in propelling the craft they were utterly exhausted.

Celeste, her hair tightly plastered by rain about her fine-shaped skull, was the first to exit the craft. She ran toward the jungle savaged by high winds, then returned. "I know this place," she yelled, though her words were nearly carried away by the rising wind. "A cave..."

Hiro Nagamichi drew his sword and followed the girl into the jungle. The rest of us followed at our best speed, carrying as much of our supplies and equipment from the battered boat as we could. About hundred yards, and perhaps thirty feet in elevation, we entered an immense cave. As soon as we were within the cave proper the elements no longer drenched or deafened us.

"What is that *smell*?" Clemens gagged, his chest heaving as he cradled raw and blistered hands.

"Bat shit," Heinlein replied using an uncharacteristic common terminology. "Guano," he amended. The doctor looked to the ceiling above as did the rest of us. Leinster turned on his electric flash and we viewed a million or more of the flying creatures suspended upside down from ledges and ceiling, each wrapped in dark leathery wings.

Von Borst paled. "I hate bats!"

Leinster's comment: "Bats or weather. Take your choice."

Never have I slept so miserably. A raging thunderstorm outside, the noxious aroma of guano, and being pelted by bat defecation during the night was distasteful. Yet, sleeping in the open under wind and rain whipped trees was even less welcome.

The wind subsided long before dawn, but the rain continued, just short of a bucket drenching volume. Breakfast was a dismal affair—no coffee, nothing hot, and all of it spoiled by the stench of bat droppings. If I was not the first to stand when Leinster called the march order, it was only by a fraction of a second. We all rose and shouldered packs that were alarmingly light.

I trudged through the mud churned by those in front of me, head down, hiding from the rain beneath the tattered brim of my hat. Ivan and Celeste walked before me—damn that girl's near naked behind! Like a carrot before a donkey I had no choice but to follow that rain-soaked vision. Of

course, Ivan's naked broad shoulders and the rifle slung across his back as he walked with a steel-thewed arm across the girl's shoulder, was equally compelling.

My friend, I am not dead yet, a pretty girl I can appreciate, but I did not attain my advanced age by testing the young bulls who have staked out their claim. In the end, however I was simply miserable as the day dragged on.

Well after lunch should have been served, my stomach rumbled most rudely. We began an ascent of a not too steep slope that nonetheless soon had us well above the level of the inland sea. The rain continued in fits and spurts as we traveled through primitive ferns and foliage to an area that was more like the outer world: hemlocks, oaks, elms, and flowering plants.

So miserable was I that when the company stopped abruptly I walked into Ivan. The lad grabbed my arm, preventing a spill.

"Shhh!" Ivan placed a finger across his lips. The boy's muscular form was crouched forward and the girl at his side held her spear firmly in both hands.

I drew my revolver, aware of two things: the forest was unnaturally quiet and I had only four rounds left—all in the chambers of my pistol. Glancing around, I saw that Clemens and John Henry were equally alert, each watching opposite flanks. Behind me the Irishman stood with rifle paused between hip and shoulder, his eyes darting left and right.

Suddenly a wild cacophony of sound erupted at the head of the column. A chorus of barks and growls, howls and whines of pain. Before I could make sense of it Dr. Heinlein relayed a command from above to run for it. Ivan already had my arm—and when he and Celeste moved out I had no choice but to follow.

Thankfully I did not lose my footing in the mud, else I have no doubt that young Rokoff would have hauled me up the slope. A moment later we passed

through a clearing where Hiro Nagamichi and his ancestral sword were hard pressed by a pack of *hyenadons*.

"Go!" John Running Elk and Leinster cried, the officer pointing the direction. Von Borst was above and helped each of us over a hummock of rock.

I shook loose from Ivan. Pausing to catch my breath, I looked back to see the magnificent Japanese addressing a dozen of the hideous beasts with his sword. Watching him at that instant I well understood what "samurai" meant. Never have I seen such swordsmanship! The flashing blade cut and maimed, decapitated and disabled a half dozen beasts in a few blinks of the eye. John Carter, it is often said, is the best swordsman on two planets, but I have never seen him in combat; Hiro Nagamichi I *have* seen—and I shall carry that admiration and amazement of his ability to the grave.

Leinster nudged my shoulder. "Move out, sir. The cave is less than a hundred yards up and to the left."

Only John Running Elk stood by the Nippon, the rest of us beyond the reach of the *hyenadons*. "They might need us," I said.

The officer looked back, a grim smile on his face. "Fat chance, Mr. Burroughs. The way I see it the Jap has everything under control and the Indian is there to guard his back. Let's move out so there's nothing to distract him from the killing—such as having to protect us."

There was a perverted sense of logic to the man's statement.

The cave was exactly where Leinster stated. Midway up the rise from the Inland Sea to the island's forbidding cliff rim was a dark hole perhaps three foot by four foot in height. The interior ceiling rapidly rose to a height of more than twenty feet. Heinlein's electric light was on, casting weird shadows as the group milled about.

"Light a fire," Leinster nodded to John Henry. "There's cut wood over there and a hearth. We'll stay the night."

I could hear no sounds of battle below. "Maybe we should go back?" I asked.

The cave entrance went black—twice—before Leinster replied. "Both are here. John Henry! Coffee, and make it thick as mud!" In a softer voice he said to me, "Rest, sir. It has been a long day."

I am not used to being dismissed so casually, but the advice was good, my weariness was bone deep. John Henry's fire soon blazed—and he built the hearth larger than he needed for cooking to warm the chilled air and to dry our clothing.

Darkness soon draped the terrain exterior to the cave, though whether that was due to the setting of the sun or the gathering of more storm clouds I could not tell. I sat near the fire nursing a cup of too hot coffee, gazing at the tiny portal between our troglodyte haven and the prehistoric world of Caspak.

"It has been a long day, Mr. Burroughs." Von Borst settled his large bulk next to mine, careful to not obstruct any of the heat from John Henry's fire.

"Yes," I sighed, hating to admit my fatigue in any fashion. "A long day indeed."

"Perhaps this will help," von Borst said, his voice a bare whisper. From his tunic he drew a small flask. "This will make your coffee taste better..."

I did not argue a bit. Holding my battered tin cup out the big German American poured a dollop of something that, upon first taste, assured me the evening would be brighter than our day had been. I was perfectly content to settle down with that fortified cup when I heard an altercation from the rear of the cave.

"Mine!" Celeste's voice pierced the silence like a knife.

The girl faced MacDonald with a bone knife in her hand. The flickering firelight illuminated her tense body and her naked breasts. Her other hand clutched a string of pearls which the Irishman held in firm grip. Ivan moved closer to the girl as she repeated her claim: "Mine!"

Micky MacDonald shrugged his shoulders for two reasons. Ivan's face was as dark as a storm cloud and, as he relinquished his grip and turned to the back of the cave he said, "There's more where that came from. Is this yours, too?" he asked, hefting a brick of gold bullion.

What is it about gold and jewels and fine art that fills the mind of men—even good men—with ugly greed? Even I, who am a wealthy man, was intrigued by the display of wealth heaped at the rear of the cave. At least fifty bricks of gold lay stacked, next to several chests that revealed contents filled with gems and pearls and coins of gold and silver.

Oddly, John Henry alone seemed unmoved by the display even as he rinsed a gold platter to serve bits of grilled meat and roasted wild onions. To this black giant the utility was more important than...and then I smiled to myself as I saw the man, believing himself unobserved, take up a diamond ring that he quickly slipped into his pocket. It was not my faith in man that was acknowledged, rather my understanding of men—faith is what we hope all men will be instead of what all men truly are. I did not begrudge John Henry's appropriation of the bauble and hoped that he would survive our Caspak adventure and be able to use the ring to better his life in that other world—that world which seemed so distant and foreign to this primitive place we now occupied.

Discussion of Le Monde's treasure had been a frequent topic for days. MacDonald the Irishman had been the most vocal. He had, in conversation, already spent in his mind more than he could possibly carry "to rub raw the English nose in allbody's business." I was not surprised that Micky was first to sniff the treasure, as life in his own land was so rancorous and dangerous that the young men went abroad to find trades elsewhere, then became old men in other countries because there was no reason to return.

Leinster sat cradling a steaming cup of coffee, with his rifle across his knees. He gazed at the treasure with one brow lifted. He watched as Dr. Heinlein examined the more interesting finds—goblets encrusted with emeralds, a diamond and ruby tiara, a handsome dagger with a sapphire nearly the size of a robin's egg on the pommel. Heinlein's interest was limited to the beauty of the objects and Leinster's interest seemed to be making sure that none of our party became *too* insane over the riches.

"Mr. Burroughs, please come here." Dr. Heinlein looked over his shoulder as I approached. "You spent most of your early life in China. What do you make of this?" he asked as I drew near.

And as I saw it I felt the blood quicken in my veins—avarice reared its ugly head. When my eyes fell upon that pristine shape, so delicate and perfect, I knew that even I was not immune to the greed that drives men to possess priceless objects.

Almost reverently, I accepted the ten-inch tall vase intricately decorated by the hand of a long dead artisan. For long moments I was speechless as I gently turned the vase with trembling hands, drinking in the beauty of the work, the flawless form and texture of the porcelain.

Heinlein smiled at my expression, nodding. "I am no expert in these things, but I would say that vase is Ming Dynasty."

Two deep breaths were required before I was able to respond. "It is indeed Ming. It is beautiful!"

Von Borst sat cross-legged before one of the chests, counting and stacking gold and silver coins. He looked up with mild interest, mostly because of the reverent tone in my voice. "That's kind of pretty, sir. What is it used for?"

I suddenly laughed so hard that moisture gathered in my eyes. "My dear friend, it has no *use* other than the joy and delight it brings to the heart and eye!"

"My mother collects things like that," the German American replied with utter sincerity. "Some she uses to hold flowers, or to serve lemonade in the summer, and some she just puts on a shelf and admires. Mother once spent a whole sawbuck on a vase—and boy was my father angry. 'Why?' he asked. 'Because it is pretty.' she said. But after that," the big man's voice softened, "she never bought another, even though I saw her looking at some with a wistful eye. Any time I can afford it I buy her a vase for her birthday, though she always cries for an hour and hugs me something awful. I don't get it, but I know things like that mean something to her."

I looked at the magnificent artifact in my hands, thrilled to have touched and experienced the purity of execution which had created the vase. I looked to Heinlein, who understood what I felt and watched him smile just as broadly when I knelt down and offered the vase to von Borst.

"If you can carry this from Caspak—and all the way home without breaking it—and should your heart be so inclined, please present this vase to your mother with my respects, and those of this company, for raising such a brave and hearty fellow."

Von Borst flushed crimson as he realized the bit of porcelain in his rough hands was a true treasure. "I can't take it, Mr. Burroughs. I believe you set more store by this than my mother or me."

We both looked upon the slender vase. "I know you will not understand this Hermann, but for me it is enough to have seen this work of art and to have held it in my hands. I believe, however, that your mother will treasure it more greatly and," I leaned close to whisper in his ear, "should it ever become necessary to sell, that one little vase is worth more than all of Le Monde's treasure!"

Hermann von Borst rose, ignoring the stacks of coins at his feet. He frowned as he looked at the vase held in his

big, competent hands and I could see that he, too, had some of his mother's admiration for beautiful things.

"It is pretty," he said. "I like it. Thanks, Mr. Burroughs."

The look in his eyes expressed his heart. I knew without reservation that while Hermann von Borst might lack the vocabulary to sing the praises of a priceless Ming vase, he had the sensitivity to understand the value—and to ignore the value for the sake of the pleasure the object afforded.

I clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Good man. But do not be stupid. Stuff some of those gold coins in your pocket! I will do the same."

Leinster overheard the last of my remarks to von Borst because he had finished his coffee and approached to look upon the treasure. "A handful of those for yourself is about five years pay. No one will begrudge that to you after all we've been through."

Leinster raised his voice, calling everyone's attention. "Listen up! We can't carry everything and we must not become greedy stupid this far into the expedition. We still have to locate Billings and Tyler because that is our mission. By the same token it would be incredibly dumb to leave any of this treasure behind.

"Gems and pearls have the greatest value in the smallest form. Gold is valuable but not easily transported in brick so I suggest 30 coins each for our trouble. Twenty pouches of gems and pearls—one for each of us and the other ten for the Tyler family's expense." Leinster quietly added, observing Dr. Heinlein's wistful glance toward a plain gold goblet, "And one other item of personal interest."

The ship's officer's voice suddenly hardened to a tensile strength beyond that of steel. "If anyone is more greedy than what I have outlined I will personally kill him. There will be no squabbles over this treasure, no envy or machinations to obtain it all, for I am here to pre-

vent it and, I remind you of the obvious: there is no way in hell you can get off this island without the expedition's help or the *Toreador*. Have I spoken plainly enough?"

John Henry left the fire where succulent smells continued to fill the cave. Almost sheepishly he reached into his pocket and produced the ring. "I had a lady in mind for this. I shouldn't have taken it."

Leinster grinned, the harsh expression gone in an instant. "Consider that your item of interest—and from the look of what you picked out, she must be some lady."

White teeth suddenly showed in the black man's face. "That she is, sir, that she is!"

"Mr. Burroughs, Dr. Heinlein—I believe you two are the nearest to experts in our midst. Would you please extract the most valuable items from Le Monde's treasure and prepare the division? No man is to carry more than ten pounds combined because mobility is paramount."

I ventured a statement. "Ten pounds? From what I see, sir, each one of us would walk out of here with a million dollars in our packs."

The ship's officer chuckled. "Whew! I was afraid it would be more than that." Leinster produced his battered briar and stuffed it with tobacco. He lit up with a smoldering faggot from the fire and stepped outside the cave.

The voices began to rise as the members realized how much wealth we were about to carry out of Le Monde's treasure cave. Heinlein and I concentrated on the loose white diamonds first, then emeralds and sapphires. As the little mounds of glittering gems grew an excitement began to grip us all.

From outside came a shot then a painful wail. "Aieeeeeee!"

John Running Elk ran to the entrance with Clemens and Hiro Nagamichi in his wake. A moment later Clemens stuck his head back inside. "The natives have captured Leinster!"



Von Borst exited the cave, as did Ivan and John Henry. Dr. Heinlein and I were about to follow when Clemens stopped us. "Stay here. Too many cooks can spoil the broth." And then he was gone, a shadow in the night's drizzle.

Heinlein glanced at me. "Too many cooks, or two old men will slow us down?"

Though it irritated me by that much I said, "At least he has the soul of tact when dismissing us. MacDonald, feed that fire. Celeste, child, please bring those swords and your spear. We may have to defend the cave."

Heinlein stood ready at one side while the girl crouched behind me at the other. She was such a little terror! Celeste leaned forward so eagerly that her shoulder touched mine, her savage spear held between determined hands.

"Sto-lu. *Bad!*"

"What is that, girl?" Heinlein asked. "Sto-lu—" he paused, recalling the contents of Bowen Tyler's manuscript—which I knew by heart, having delivered it to Bowen Tyler, Sr. months before.

"The hatchet people," I said. "White natives with Negroid features and prominent body hair. Bowen Tyler suggested they were between Neanderthals and the Grimaldi people and have a language of sorts. From all accounts they are very savage."

Heinlein looked back to see what MacDonald was doing. A second later the hammer on his revolver clicked to firing position with a sound that startled all of us. The doctor's gun was not pointed outside the cave where we expected an attack, but to the rear. "Step away, Micky MacDonald, or I will personally kill you under Mr. Leinster's expressed order."

I did not want my attention divided between the obvious danger without by something that had prompted the even-tempered Heinlein to show a sharp edge, but

there was nothing for it. I looked over my shoulder and saw the Irishman with a heavy sack, our piles of gems disrupted, and a handful of glittering stones in his hand.

I was filled with a rage of disgust. "Mr. MacDonald, you disappoint me with your stupidity. You cannot leave this cave without passing us. You cannot travel the island without the company of your fellow members. And—" I paused—"you cannot board the *Toreador* without inspection. Were you raised *English*?"

The small man dropped both sack and gems and glared at me. "Mr. Burroughs, of all the things you could say to me—thief, brigand, outlaw—there is no reason for you to *insult* me!"

"Show me by word and deed that I am incorrect and I shall humbly apologize. In the meantime, would you be so kind as to bring your rifle to bear from Dr. Heinlein's position?"

MacDonald came at a run and crouched beside the doctor. The small, plucky Irishman held his weapon at the ready and stared into the darkness. Perhaps five minutes passed before Micky MacDonald spoke again, and when he did it was with anguished tone. "Did you have to say 'English?' Me mother, rest her sainted soul, would be very offended."

I waited until well after midnight before responding. "It was not my intent to offend the memory of your mother."

The Irishman lowered his head contritely. "It were not my intent to be so bloody greedy—it is my shame and I shall have to bear it."

Heinlein reached out and clapped a hand on MacDonald's shoulder. "It takes a big man to admit avarice. Let us call this a learning experience and be done with it. Agreed?"

The doctor offered his hand.

Micky MacDonald stared at the open hand for a moment then shook firmly. "I don't be deservin' this, but

thank you, sirs," he looked to me as well, "an' I won't let ye down."

We took turns sleeping until dawn. When there was good light outside we took a careful turn around the perimeter. I found Leinster's pipe under the fronds of a primitive fern and put it in my pocket. Heinlein shouldered the officer's rifle, which was found nearby.

Celeste raced about, with all the energy of a hunting hound seeking a trail. "There," she pointed to the north. I noticed that she wore the contested string of pearls around her sun-bronzed neck. "We go!"

I reached out and grabbed the girl's arm before Celeste could run down the hillside. "We wait until mid-day, my dear. They may be on their way back. Dr. Heinlein, would you please say again in French?"

Though Celeste was clearly angry, she sullenly agreed.

We stoked the embers of the hearth and had a hot breakfast. MacDonald stood sentry just outside the cave. Heinlein approached me.

"They may be in trouble."

"I believe that is true," I replied.

I began gathering the packs, sorting and re-sorting items since there were only four of us to carry what we might need. Ammunition was a priority, though the paltry amount we had on hand was unnerving. Blade weapons—swords and daggers from the treasure—were added to the small pile of food, lanterns, and perishables. Tents and ground cloths were discarded as well as the extra clothing and, by lunch, a once richly equipped expedition was reduced to the bare essentials.

I called MacDonald in and asked Celeste to join us at the back of the cave. "For Ivan," I said to the girl as I draped a dozen strands of pearls about her lovely neck—each worth a king's ransom. On each of her fingers I placed a ring that would be the yearly salary of a captain of industry.

I beckoned the Irishman to approach. I handed him a leather pouch about the size of a grapefruit. "MacDonald, this sack of diamonds and emeralds represents the bulk of all we might carry out of here."

The Irishman shook his head. "Do not tempt me, sir!"

Heinlein chuckled. "We trust you, lad. You got religion last night and there is none better among us to carry that pouch than you."

The doctor had already filled his belt with the best of the jeweled daggers—not the more functional ones we had set aside for use and were strapped to our backpacks. Heinlein carried a plain gold goblet which he believed to be of early Greek origin, though I politely disagreed with his assessment. His fingers were adorned by rings, and so too, was MacDonald, though those rings discomfited him greatly. I wore nine rings which fit my large hands and a necklace of a dozen more on a strand of twine. Von Borst's vase was in my backpack as well as three dozen gems of startling quality. We carried no gold—but what we did carry between us weighed just under twenty pounds and was probably worth twenty millions.

MacDonald slung his pack over his shoulder. I assisted Celeste in hers, showing the girl how to settle it about her shoulders since it was something new to her experience.

"I am a reformed man, I am," MacDonald said fervently, "but I can't help asking. How much are we taking out?"

I let Heinlein answer. "A kit and a kaboodle. Enough to make John D. Rockefeller flinch."

Heinlein understated the potential figure by several factors since he had refused to give up the samples of Celeste's plants which had regenerated my finger.

"*Mary Mother of Jesus!*" MacDonald cried.

"Mr. MacDonald," I said as the Irishman started down the slope.

"Sir?"

"How much is a man's life worth?"

"'Tis a strange question, Mr. Burroughs."

"I'll rephrase it. How much is *your* life worth?"

MacDonald exhibited the intelligence I knew was there all along. "By God, sir, *more than all these baubles!* I thank ye for the perspective."

MacDonald's face firmed with determination as he turned to Celeste. "Lassie, child, which way do we go? Where is Ivan?"

The girl required no more than one invitation. She headed through the rain-soaked forest at a pace that left the doctor and myself gasping after a mile. Uppermost in our thoughts was concern for our friends and the hard won knowledge that Caspak's indigenous creatures were *definitely* harmful to human life.

•••

Near sundown, some twelve miles from Le Monde's cave, we came upon a scene that chilled my blood. At the edge of one of the ponds that Heinlein had suggested over an evening campfire to be something of a breeding place for the natives of Caspak, we saw 40 or 50 primitives surrounding the other members of our party. There had been a battle which had hurt the natives tremendously if the number of prostrate bodies on the wet sward were any indication. But my heart leaped with pride when I saw Leinster rescued, a bloody rag about his head, standing center.

That the rescuers had been surrounded and fought a difficult battle was obvious. John Henry lay on the ground apparently unconscious, protected by the other members of the party. Clemens knelt over the black, attempting to revive him and watch the natives at the same time. Von Borst faced the natives with his empty rifle held by the barrel and raised as a club. John Running Elk and Nagamichi danced about the tiny perimeter—a heavy Bowie knife and a shining length of Samurai

sword glinting in the diminishing light. Celeste gasped when she viewed the sheen of blood running down Ivan's broad back.

Though the girl wished to bolt forward, she grimly nodded as I indicated by gesture to wait. She watched MacDonald and his deadly rifle melt into the foliage to the left. Heinlein, gripping his revolver moved to the right after giving Celeste one of the decorated steel blades he carried at his waist.

"MacDonald!" I said in a stage whisper which I hoped would not carry to the pond. "We do magic!"

I could not afford to wait for an answer as the situation below was obviously too tense. At any moment the natives could charge forward and the outcome of that event was not in doubt.

I rose to my full height, which is just under six feet, and strode forward at a steady pace. I raised my voice to a near shout and said. "Abracadabra kalamazoom by the lords of distant Barsoom my finger points and there is doom!" A heartbeat after I pointed to the native who appeared to be in charge, MacDonald's rifle barked with deadly accuracy.

Never have I felt so alone as I took those measured and deliberate steps toward the pond. "Bamala Bingo! Bag'im McD!" Another warrior fell as I pointed into the crowd. "Bamboozle Righthanden Kazam!" Heinlein's shot from the shrubbery savaged one of several who came under my gesture.

Sweat poured down my spine as I was less than twenty paces away from the throng surrounding our friends. "Both Handen!" I cried, looking as fierce as I knew how.

Two shots rang out, two natives fell, and an instant later the entire group of savages ran screaming into the forest as I continued to walk forward. I took perhaps three more steps before I sank to my knees, overwrought

by nerves. The next thing I knew von Borst joyously elevated me to my feet.

"My God, Mr. Burroughs, you scared me nearly as much as you scared those heathens! You came in the nick of time!"

Heinlein, MacDonald and Celeste raced to join us by the dark pool. Heinlein bent over John Henry, applying first aid.

MacDonald stopped just short of embracing Leinster and Clemens. "I see the bad boys did not get ye. Too bad." He smiled.

Clemens grinned hugely and threw his arms about the small Irishman. Leinster, standing to the side, clapped a hearty hand on MacDonald's shoulder. Ivan met Celeste's running embrace with open arms. John Running Elk, who spoke seldom, offered a remark that sobered us greatly.

"Here we cannot stay."

I handed out as many cartridges as I carried to rearm the group. "We need a place to hole up for the night, some place we can defend. Celeste, is there a cave nearby?"

The trim girl shook her head, still clinging to young Rockoff. "I not know. Not this far before."

Doctor Heinlein assisted John Henry to his feet. The Negro shook his head, moving unsteadily. "He'll be all right," Heinlein said. "A blow to the head—What is that smell?"

The odor reached me at nearly the same instant that I realized the jungle was deathly silent. Twice before on the main island of Hawaii had I witnessed the same unmistakable scent of underground gases and silence.

"High ground!" I yelled, dragging Ivan and Celeste in my wake. "High ground! The volcano is about to erupt!"

## CHAPTER 6

We had only moments to gather what we could and race toward the looming slopes above. A weird light seemed to pervade the scene. Clemens, Leinster, Ivan, and Celeste raced ahead. MacDonald stayed at my side, matching frantic pace for frantic pace. John Henry plowed steadily upwards, supported by John Running Elk and Heinlein. I did not see Hiro Nagamichi in any direction. Von Borst, carrying most of our remaining equipment, widened our path with broad shoulders and big feet.

The ground shook violently. Someone yelled in panic—perhaps it was me.

Fronds of primitive ferns and low branches of tree-like plants slapped my face during that mad rush. Forever, it seemed, we raced uphill passing through the dense tropical growths found near the lake into the less cluttered forests of the high slopes. The ascent was sharp, just steep enough to make one's heart thunder with effort.

*WHAM!* and *WHAM!* *WHAM!*

Three terrific jolts knocked us from our feet. I listened to the roar and hiss below as I spit grass and mud from between my teeth. Someone grabbed my collar and hauled me erect. I could see next to nothing as a cloud of hot steam rank with the scent of mud and decay boiled up and enveloped us.

Behind me I heard voices shouting, but no words could I comprehend as the chaotic sound erupting below rose in volume. To the left a hideous yellow glow, pulsating and writhing, began to produce heat which grew more uncomfortable with each passing moment.

"Up ye go, Mr. Burroughs!" MacDonald yelled in my ear. His arm went about my waist and hauled me up

the slope away from the molten lava issuing from a newly created vent in the monster volcano's ancient wall.

Old friend it pains me to say this, but my recollection of what could not be more than the next half hour is only that of an old man pushed to his limits, gasping for breath as poisonous fumes descended upon us. On the verge of utter blackout my sole purpose was putting one foot in front of the other. The noise was horrible. Explosions, rock and cinder crashing into the forest, the shriek of unseen animals in pain.

How we survived is a mystery.

What o'clock of the night we finally lay sprawled on a high ledge above the smoke and fumes I cannot say. The cool, clear air I drew into starved lungs finally revived me, though every muscle ached in my trembling body. Looking to my companions I saw they were in no better shape. Von Borst lay face down, his heavy pack and all he had carried in his strong hands lay where he fell. John Henry leaned against a tree cradling his head. Running Elk lay sprawled nearby on his back, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

Near the vertical rock face which prevented us from going higher was Ivan and Celeste. He leaned against the rock, the girl leaned against him. Clemens, oddly perverse as regards our situation, calmly sat on a boulder. He stoked a battered old pipe and sucked avidly upon the smoke generated by his tobacco.

Leinster stood erect. His jacket had been singed by heated pumice falling from the sky. "Nagamichi!"

I sat up as breathing and heart beat settled down.

"*Nagamichi!*"

John Running Elk was on his feet. The Indian's muscular arms reflected the orange glow. A tense moment later Running Elk faced Leinster. "I find!"

I was looking directly at the Indian, but when he turned, he seemed to vanish rather than leave. I recalled

the same supernatural feeling as regards the natives of Southwest America from my time as an advisor for General Pershing. Like smoke on a windy day does the native warrior of the American continent remove himself—ghost warriors they have been called. The sudden grip MacDonald put on my shoulder merely reinforced my feeling.

"Where'd he go?" the Irishman breathlessly asked.

I lay a dirt-covered hand over his. "To find a comrade. Help me up, Micky, and not a word of doing it!"

"Aye, sir!"

Leinster approached as I found my unsteady stance. He offered his hand. "Thanks to you, sir, we're still breathing. And how fare you, MacDonald?"

"Fit for duty, sir."

"Good man. Aren't you a little overdressed?"

MacDonald looked upon the bags and drapes of riches he carried. "Brought your share, sir," he said with flushed memory.

Leinster grinned. "You wear it well, Mr. MacDonald. If it is no burden, I trust you with mine." Leinster turned away. "Von Borst, how are you, man?"

MacDonald turned to me. "Just like that?" he asked, a bit wide-eyed.

"Just like that," I grinned. I ran a hand through my thinning hair—where I had lost my hat I could not recall. "We'll be here a while," I said. "Can you scare up a fire to make coffee or tea?"

"Consider it done, Mr. Burroughs."

The volcano's eruption now held no terrors for us since it was defined and confined to the slopes south of our location. The prevailing wind was from the north which kept the fumes and smoke away from us. Out of danger, we viewed a spectacular sight of Nature in the raw. Several ribbons of lava raced down the slopes to collide with the waters of the inland sea. Billowing clouds of steam and ash rose over the land and water,

glowing rutilant above the molten lava. An astonishing sight.

To one side I saw Heinlein sitting on the ground. His head was bowed. He appeared to be weeping. I sat beside him. "What's the matter, old friend?"

Heinlein raised his head. There were no tears on his grizzled cheeks, but the shudders which wracked his body were those of remorse. "I lost it. The plant specimens. Gone. I had a choice—to try to save the pouch or my own life. Did I make the right choice?"

I, with a re-grown finger, knew better than any of our company of Heinlein's upset. "We always save ourselves and family and friends first, my dear Doctor. Always."

My words seemed to comfort Heinlein. I attempted further comfort by saying, "We can always come back. We can—"

Heinlein shook his head. "As Celeste and I gathered the plants she told me they grew in only one place and that place—" he turned red-rimmed eyes toward the maelstrom of lava and ejecta to the south "—is where that damn volcano decided to vent! Millions will suffer! Millions!"

Oh, how I hated to be the breath of reason at that moment, for I had experienced the what-might-have-been by having a whole hand. "Doctor Heinlein," I said with an urgent whisper, "how many suffered before you knew there might be a treatment?"

He looked at me with equal measures of anger and regret upon his face. "You are a bastard, sir, but a bastard with a sense of reality. You and I know it can be done. I know something of what was done and I promise you I will dedicate the rest of my life to discover how it was done. Whatever those plants contained can be duplicated in a laboratory—if not today, then tomorrow."

Heinlein's strong hands gripped my shoulders with reborn enthusiasm. "This I will do, sir. I will also return

to Caprona to find these plants, if any survived. Can I count on you?"

"I will privately fund the expedition and we will come back with twice the resources. I ask nothing more than 40% of the profits—if any. How is John Henry?" I asked. Heinlein's future considerations needed to be rooted firmly in our current reality.

Gathering his medical bag, which fortunately had not been lost during our recent adventure, Heinlein went to examine the big black.

Von Borst sat near the small fire MacDonald had built. He sorted through the packs and bags he had carried up the steep slope. I was reminded that I still carried a number of packs which I placed next to those MacDonald, Celeste and Ivan had carried. Compared to our original provisions, the collection of necessities seemed wholly inadequate.

"How do we stand?" I asked the big German-American.

"Fair amount of rifle ammunition. A dozen rounds of revolver—and most of those for your weapon. A lamp with an hour or two of fuel. Two hand axes. A hundred feet of rope. Enough flour for eight biscuits. Two electric flashes, one about spent. One pot of beans—enough to give us all a fart or two. A tin of ham. Two tins of peaches. Three more pots of coffee—six if we do it twice. A dozen candles. A skillet. A two quart pot. Micky's coffee pot—have some, Mr. Burroughs, in one of the three cups we have left. Two extra knives—still have yours? Good. And this—"

Von Borst brought out the Ming vase. He set it on the ground between us. Tinted red from the lava flow on one side and yellowish from the fire on the other, we silently admired it for several moments. Von Borst sighed then packed it away inside an extra woolen shirt.

The big man grinned at me. "Hell, sir. The way I see it, we're in pretty good shape!"

I chuckled. "I ever admire the optimist, my friend. Pessimists give me a pain in the—"

"Burroughs, may I see you for a moment?"

I rose at Leinster's polite summons. We stood just outside the circle of firelight. The ship's officer seemed nervous. "What is it, Mr. Leinster?" I asked.

"John Running Elk has been gone an hour or so—my damn watch is broken. I'm concerned. Worse, and I don't think anyone else has noticed, Ivan and Celeste are gone."

What few hairs I have on the back of my neck rose. I took a deep breath before replying. "Running Elk can handle his own. When was the last time you saw Ivan and Celeste?"

"About the time you did the inventory with von Borst. They were over there," Leinster said, indicating a deep shadow created by both the fire and the ruddy lava flow down slope. "I heard nothing out of the ordinary," he added, "but I'd like to know where they are. There's too much wild life fleeing the area at the moment. I don't want them to be hurt. MacDonald is watching the lower ledge, I'm on this side. Will you take a look over there? They can't have gone far."

"Happy to be of service."

I did look into the shadows, revolver in hand. I looked twice, flushing the second time with happy memories of my own encounters with the fair sex. Ivan and Celeste were earnestly engaged in an activity, most energetically, that brings the divergent sexes to their most intimate contact. For half a moment I considered embarrassing them, then realized the minor amusement I might obtain as a result meant nothing compared to their mutual, and all too apparent, desperate desire. I turned my back, gave Leinster a high sign, and watched the forest edges until Rockoff and Celeste entered the light of the campfire.

I gripped Ivan's shoulder as he passed. "Send her on," I whispered.

Celeste made a pout of disagreement, but did as Ivan bade. When we were alone I thrust my revolver into his hand. "You're a lucky man—in more ways than one," I said. "How *dare* you place your woman in danger?"

"What?" the boy sputtered. His face crimsoned under my harsh remark.

"There is a time and a place, Ivan," I said. "Get your butt on the perimeter and keep watch for monsters or barbarians—and stay out of the shadows where we cannot protect you and Celeste while you..." I repeatedly tapped the side of his skull with a stiffened forefinger. "Don't be *stupid*, son. And treat that girl right. She's better than you deserve."

Ivan lowered his head, chewing his lip as he gripped the revolver. "You're right," he replied. "It was stupid. I—"

"Don't explain it, boy. I've been there and know exactly how wonderfully stupid it can be. But this is Caprona and stupid *here* is *dead*! Keep that in mind."

Ivan exclaimed, "I *will* marry her!"

I put an arm about his shoulders and leaned close. "Son, I don't give a fig about what just happened because it is so damn obvious you two are meant for each other. What concerns me is your lack of smarts on when and where you express yourself. What needs to be in your head *right now* is surviving long enough to marry the girl. Understood?"

At that moment Ivan Rokoff's face matured as he suddenly realized the difference between being a boy and a man. When I saw that determined look I knew Rokoff's life had changed forever. There would be no need to worry about him again. We parted without exchanging words, there being none to say when understanding is so complete.

A voice called from the darkness. "Leinster! Running Elk and Nagamichi."

"Come into the light," Leinster said, though his rifle was held firmly in both hands.

John Running Elk half-carried Hiro into the camp. The Nipon's right pant leg was shredded and bloody from several long, parallel scratches to his thigh. Dr. Heinlein and Clemens hurried forward to take charge of the Japanese. In Running Elk's free hand was one of those miniature prehistoric horses we'd seen over the last few days. The animal, about the size of a spaniel, was already gutted and ready for the fire.

"What happened?" the officer asked.

"Nagamichi in tree. Clawed by lion thing with two big teeth. Kill lion thing. Kill baby horse. Bring here."

The Indian rarely spoke much, and this was a long speech for him, but I had no doubt that a complete adventure novel might be written from what could be inferred from this succinct report. Running Elk took the carcass to the fire and began carving strips from the hindquarters.

John Henry, much improved, took over the skillet. He looked up when Celeste knelt down, her arms filled with a dozen tubers that looked like yams. At least we'd eat well.

•••

I managed to sleep while the eruption continued. When Rokoff shook me awake in the morning and handed me a cup of hot coffee, the eruption had subsided to a release of gases. The lava, though still incredibly hot, had ceased to flow. The clouds of ash and steam had dissipated.

"Long night," the young man said.

"Too long," I agreed after scalding my tongue with coffee. "How many days has it been, Ivan? Lately the days seem to run together for me."

"Twenty, I think." His brow, too, furrowed in thought. "Twenty or thirty— Forever, if you ask me." He

suddenly grinned. "There's a mush of some kind that Celeste helped make. Doesn't taste bad at all. I'm relieving Clemens. See you later."

In the morning sunlight I saw that Ivan Rokoff's walk had changed as well as his mental attitude. What a fine, handsome fellow he turned out to be!

At the campfire I admired the huge lump on John Henry's skull then wrapped my stomach around a bowl of mush. It did have a reasonable flavor, but more importantly it filled that hole in the middle—even so, I had to take in another notch on my belt. I do not recommend Caspak as a weight loss program, my friend. Not at all!

I saw Hiro Nagamichi moving about—favoring the clawed leg a little—but still more spry than I felt. Having lived in the Orient a good part of my life, I knew of men such as Nagamichi who were filled with incredible stamina and will. It was men like him who had created the many tales of legendary saumari who could—single-handedly—defeat entire armies. We were fortunate to have him and John Running Elk in our company.

Von Borst, too, gave an impression of the mighty warriors of Teutonic history, a large and powerfully-built berserker in combat, a solid and dependable man in all respects.

Clemens was a thinker and skilled with hands. His brain was a catalog of all he'd ever seen or done and he knew how to use that information to good advantage in strange, new places.

Leinster sat on the other side of the fire nursing a cup of coffee. His voice, when he spoke, was ordinary in tone. "We've had setbacks, Mr. Burroughs, enough so that I begin to wonder if we, as a group, can complete this mission."

"What do you mean, sir? All in all, I believe we'd done quite all right—considering what we have faced."

"Yes," Leinster said, letting his eye touch upon all in sight—most of whom were preparing packs for travel. "Not a slacker in the bunch. A fine, brave company."

"But?" I asked when he paused.

"I think two men moving swiftly have a better chance of locating Mr. Tyler and Mr. Billings. The larger the group, the slower the travel—that is a given and not a comment upon you or Dr. Heinlein who both seem able to march us into the ground. It is merely a matter of logistics."

"Who would you take?" I knew without a doubt that he would be one of the two men.

"Running Elk has special skills. Von Borst is another option. He's strong and fights like the devil."

"So?"

John Henry had moved away just after Leinster started talking, sensing this was a private consultation. Leinster scowled into his coffee for a long moment.

"I am torn in my responsibilities, sir. I am charged to lead this expedition to locate Tyler and Billings. Implicit in that charge is my duty to this expedition—to lead it there and back safely. How can I if I leave the expedition behind as a matter of expediency?"

Rubbing a chin in dire need of a shave, I pondered the officer's words. He was correct on all points. He could travel faster with one man and he was in charge of the expedition. I made a suggestion.

"Do not give up your command, sir. You and Running Elk take the advance scout, leave a clear trail, and we will follow at our best speed. Divide the company, but keep the mission the same."

"Re-defining the moral responsibility with high-sounding words does not reduce the obligation. Still—"

Leinster sighed. He put down the cup and rose. I accepted his hand for a lift then stood beside him.

"Mr. Burroughs, I see no other choice. I fear the longer it takes the more danger there is for Tyler and Billings. *Clemens!* Stay with me, Mr. Burroughs," he asked when I turned to leave.

Clemens arrived at a trot. "Yes, sir?"

Mr. Leinster outlined all that he had said to me, then added: "I'm placing Mr. Burroughs in charge of the second body. His orders are my orders. Make sure the rest of the men understand that. Mr. Burroughs, you have field training as an officer and while Clemens is a damn fine navigator, he's not experienced in leadership. Will you accept this position?"

What else could I say?

"I will, sir. Mr. Clemens, I suggest you and John Running Elk agree upon methods of marking the trail that we might follow as quickly as possible, otherwise than that I have no orders."

"Yes, sir," Clemens replied. He shook hands with Leinster. "Good luck to you, sir. Godspeed."

Leinster and the Indian left ten minutes later. Within a half hour we were on the march. There was little-to-nothing for me to administer as we had been working together as a unit for some time. The only thing that I changed was that Hiro Nagamichi was to stay close in as flanker rather than scout. Clemens or Micky MacDonald raced ahead to locate the next marker and in this fashion we made quite good time for the day. I estimated 12 to 14 miles covered.

Before night set in Clemens and I took a look at the terrain for tomorrow. "Looks more like a forest back home than these awful jungles we've been traveling. See there, Mr. Burroughs?"

Following the pointing finger with my eyes, I saw a tiny flickering light several long slopes away. "Leinster?"

"Could be, sir. We haven't seen the natives using fire very much. Looks to be five, maybe six miles away. They did make good time."

I nodded. "And we'll have to do better tomorrow or they'll be twice the distance away from us and we might not be able to assist if they find trouble."

"Yes, sir," Clemens quietly replied.

Gripping his shoulder, I chuckled. "That was not a complaint, Mr. Clemens, merely an observation. Considering the look of that forest ahead we should do better than we did today. What's that?" I asked with a sudden whisper, dragging Clemens down from the hilltop that we might not be silhouetted against the skyline.

Approaching us, from the direction of the forest, were two shapes, light in color. A man and a woman. They carried something between them. Clemens rose, lifting me up. "It's all right, sir. Rokoff and Celeste. Looks like they have a deer."

We waited as the two worked their way up the slope then, before they reached us, I spoke—harshly.

"Ivan! What the hell are you doing away from the camp?" I startled them both out of a year's growth at the very least.

"John Henry was talking about the evening meal and how there wasn't much to fix. We went hunting. Found a deer real quick."

"John Henry does not have the authority to order a hunt, Rokoff."

Ivan hastily spoke. "He didn't, Mr. Burroughs. We—I," he amended, "went hunting on my own. Sorry, sir."

"In the future, clear all hunts with me or Mr. Clemens. We need to know where you—or anyone else in this company—are at all times. Clear?"

"Crystal," he replied.

"That is a fine looking deer. Get it up to John Henry. By the way, how did you kill it? We did not hear a shot."

Ivan lowered his head, grinning a bit sheepishly. "I didn't kill it. Celeste used her spear. Damnedest thing I've ever seen."

Clemens and I looked the girl over with new appreciation. "I suggest you never give her cause to be angry, Ivan. Get along. We'll be down shortly."

The navigator and I chuckled quietly after the couple departed. Clemens confided, "If I could find me a woman who could hunt and cook and fight and heal like that, I'd settle down quicker'n lightning."

"She does seem to be extraordinarily competent. Have you wondered why she took up with that young bull when there are so many older and more experienced bulls in this herd?"

"Experienced or set in their ways?" Clemens' smile was broad in the moonlight.

We rose well before dawn cleared the eastern rim of the volcano. We ate deer meat and tubers broiled on sticks. John Henry had cooked most of the deer during the night and wrapped individual lunches in broad leaves plucked from a plant Celeste happily declared edible. A little salad after the entrée. The girl stopped the Irishman from peeling something that looked like a banana by knocking it out of his hand. She bent over, holding her stomach and made retching noises.

Clemens shook his head. "Saved by a girl. Mac-Donald, you have the luck of all the saints of Ireland looking after you."

"Aye, my over-tall and non-believing friend. And who were it about to sit on some nasty stinging thing wi'h too many legs by half last night? An' saved by a wee slip o' girl?"

It was cheering to hear those two again at their banter. "Sling packs!" I called. "Mr. Clem—"

"I go," Celeste said, gripping her spear. "More fast than Meester Clemens. Mickedonal more fast."

"Not alone. Ivan, can you keep up with that girl?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Lead the way."

The two raced downhill in the growing light. I looked around, all where ready. As we moved out Mac-Donald quipped. "*More fast than Meester Clemens.*"

Clemens, smiling, said, "you better hope her evaluation of your abilities is not mistaken, old man. I'll even give you a head start when the time comes."

MacDonald narrowed an appraising eye over Clemens' long frame. "An' I'll be a takin' it. When the time comes, o'course."

Wishing I still had a hat against the coming sun I said: "Quiet down. It's early and the morning is cool. Let's make the best pace we can."

I cannot say for sure if our extraordinary twenty miles that day was due to the more forgiving terrain or the speed of Celeste and Ivan and MacDonald for fetching the trail markers. Twenty miles with a wounded man who made no complaint, nor held us up at any time! At each rest stop Heinlein would examine Nagamichi's bandages to see if the wounds had opened.

"Surface scratches, really," he had said. "Dangerous only if the bleeding can't be stopped or if infection sets in. No muscles were injured."

Von Borst, during the march, had secured our dinner by bringing down four birds—feathered, such as we know back home—that were the size of chickens. He killed each, on the fly, with thrown stones. His arm and eye is amazing.

"Used to pitch for the local high school team," he explained when John Henry remarked on von Borst's accuracy. "Right now I'd rather be facing a dangerous batter than all these other dangers."

John Henry grinned. He plucked feathers as we traveled. By the time we made night camp he had four birds ready for sharpened sticks, a mess of greens, a half dozen tubers and small pot full of berries.

"Like walking through a grocery store," the big black said, building the evening fire. "If you know what to look for, of course!"

Our night camp was higher on the long slope leading to the towering cliffs. The forest had thinned some-

what. There were large clearings with lush grasses between bands of trees which generally followed the water courses from the heights above. The cliffs which helped contain the tropical and sub-tropical temperatures of Caprona in these freezing latitudes were also the reason why so much fresh water was available. The mists of the extreme South Pacific released their moisture on the cliffs. Were it not for the extreme monsters of Caspak, this might be a garden land of plenty.

Hiro Nagamichi was declared fit for advance duty on the morrow by Dr. Heinlein. "He's an amazing fellow," the doctor told me after dinner. "He'll have scabs for a week or more, but the skin has knit very well. Tomorrow night I will probably take out the half dozen stitches I used to close the more ragged wounds."

"How are you holding up, old friend?"

"About as well as you, *old* friend."

Two old men looked at each other with gentle smiles. Heinlein patted his belly. "John Henry outdid himself. I'm off to bed. I suggest you do the same. Rested we can keep up with the youngsters."

I was fagged out. "Mr. Clemens—please set the watch. Wake me during the last watch." At his acknowledgment I lay back on the soft grass, stretched out my legs, and went straight to sleep.

•••

Ivan and Celeste took the first scout just before full light. We followed along at a brisk pace, breakfast still warm in our bellies. Entering a clearing, we double timed for a twenty count and walked twenty, maximizing travel while conserving energy. We were well into the second half-hour when two figures burst from the trees a quarter mile away, running flat out.

"Spread!" I shouted, drawing my revolver.

Rokoff and Celeste fairly flew through the knee high grasses. The girl was without her spear.

"*Wot'n'ell?*" MacDonald excitedly cried.  
"Standfast!"

An instant later we saw why our companions were running for their lives. Three large cats came out of the shadows, one dragging a long spear embedded in its side. There was no way Ivan and Celeste could reach us in time.

"Aim!" I shouted, hoping my voice would carry the distance. "*Down!*" followed almost instantly with "*FIRE!*"



Ivan and Celeste heard me, throwing themselves to the earth. All three of the huge cats shuddered as our bullets hit. Racing toward the couple was brave Hiro Nagamichi, his deadly blade drawn.

Still the cats came. "*Fire!*" I shouted.

Ivan and Celeste sprang to their feet and ran toward us. Clemens and MacDonald moved sideways to get better positions and commenced firing. Nagamichi had reached the young couple, but had the sense to return with them as rearguard.

I did not have an open shot until the three reached our lines—and by that time it was almost too late. One cat, a giant specimen, bleeding from several hits, was only a dozen feet away when I leveled my revolver and fired. My friend, I could say that I intended my bullet to crash into the brain of that creature, but I would burn in hell for telling that tale. By *sheer luck* that round entered near the eye and shattered inside the skull.

Like flipping switch that engine of destruction went from live to dead, but such was the momentum of its

charge that the body rolled forward and knocked me to the ground. No more than an instant did I lay there before John Henry hauled me to my feet.

"I'm all right!" I brushed his hands aside. There were two more of these fearsome creatures and—it was over.

Ten seconds of sheer terror. Looking down upon that spotted coat, the massive body, the eight inch fangs, I suddenly wondered how John Running Elk had killed one of these "lion things" by himself!

"Any injuries?" I asked with a voice more unsteady than I wished. "Any one hurt?"

The roll call came back negative.

"What happened, Ivan?"

"We found the marker—just the other side of the trees. On our way back one of those things attacked. My rifle jammed. Celeste managed to get her spear into one, then the other two came. I almost led them away from the company, knowing we would die, but realized our best hope to warn you was to return. I hope I was not wrong in that decision. And," he added, holding Celeste close, "thank you for saving our lives."

I stepped close, speaking in a voice only he, Celeste, and I could hear. "When I suggested you grow up, son, I did not mean to grow up to be a martyred hero. *Always* run home!"

Moving back, I asked Celeste. "Good to eat?" I pointed at the three predators no longer menacing the fauna of Caspak. She shook her head. "Good, somehow I don't fancy sabertooth steaks. MacDonald, scout—trail should be easy to read. Nagamichi—advance. Von Borst, rearguard. Flankers out. Let's get the hell out of here before the scavengers arrive."

We had reached the trees and were well into the next clearing when the roaring and screeching of Caprona's scavengers rose in hideous chorus behind our trail. That sound lent wings to our feet as we knew by now,

having observed these creatures for the last few weeks, they were not above hunting on their own. An hour later we began to ascend an escarpment rising some 100 to 150 feet. The slope was very steep, yet passable. Hiro Nagamichi waited for us at the top, gesturing silence as each of the company ascended the rim.

I was third to last, Heinlein and von Borst behind me. Nagamichi made his report. "Village thesoso, fast walk short time. Many warriors. Marker thesoso." The Japanese pointed west of the village. "No cover. Open land. Wait night best."

"Mr. Clemens, get an inventory of ammunition, please."

The tall man snaked away on his belly. We all keenly felt exposed on this treeless grass-edged lip of rock.

"John Henry—pass out whatever you have that does not need a fire."

Clemens returned with his report. It was not encouraging. There was nothing to do about that. I issued orders: "Nagamichi, Rokoff, MacDonald—work out fifty to a hundred yards. Stay in sight of each other. If you see anyone approaching, yell out."

I laid a hand on the girl's arm as she started to follow Ivan. "Celeste, child, you stay with me. I might need your help."

The advance spotters away, I turned to the remainder of the company. "Heinlein, von Borst, flank our position. John Henry, you watch the back trail. Celeste and I will help." I looked up at the midday sun. "Looks to be a long afternoon."

Hidden in the grass and the slope of the land, we soon saw the agents of Hiro Nagamichi's concern. Natives crossed the area with regular frequency, though always moving to the north where a distant stand of forest lay. These were tall and strong looking men of a higher type than we had seen before. They were well armed with primitive, though efficient-looking weapons,

including a stone-tipped spear. That direction again reminded me of conversations with Dr. Heinlein—we had all noted that everything in Caspak seemed to move north. Why?

Would the sun never set? In darkness we might pass their village without danger. It was impossible in daylight.

Though there were fewer bugs in this part of Caspak compared to the areas south, they were as fiercely biting and annoying. About an hour before dusk a cloud of voracious insects descended upon the grasses. A half hour later I knew the mettle of my company—not one rose to fight off the maddening insects sucking our blood and raising tremendous welts on our bodies. Then, as the sun embraced the distant western rim of Caspak, the vicious creatures amazingly settled into the grass and ignored us.

Just an hour more! I began to entertain a hope we might yet pass the village unseen. Forty-five minutes...

*"Aieeee!"*

The voice was high pitched. Though the light was uncertain, I saw Ivan rise to a kneeling position. A native girl raced away toward the village, screaming at the top of her lungs. Twice did Ivan aim his rifle and twice did he stop himself. Turning, young Rokoff shouted. "I'll not kill a woman when all of Caspak heard her scream!"

"You did well, son! Come running!" I gripped the Nipon's shoulder. "Nagamichi—is there a better place?"

"Thereso!" The Nipon sprang erect. We followed at a gallop. Three hundred yards south was a cluster of rocks at the escarpment rim large enough to house the company, yet small enough to defend. I deployed the company as, in the near distance, we heard a rising shout from a hundred or more throats.

"Make every shot count!" I cried. "God love you all, I have never been among finer people than you!"

A slim bronzed arm encircled my waist. I turned to see Celeste's face shining in the darkness. She kissed my

cheek. "If no Ivan, you. I go fight with my man." The naked girl turned and raced to Rokoff's side.

At that moment, my friend, I felt mile high and mile wide. Dear girl!

*Bring on the horde!*

And then the barbarians were upon us.

## CHAPTER 7

*"Give 'em hell!"*

A clatter of spears showered our position—nasty things which reminded me of the primitive weapons used by the savage hordes in China and the more savage Indians of the American Southwest. No modern man can believe a human launched missile made of wood tipped by a fire-hardened point or flint and leather was a dangerous weapon, but I assure you these projectiles are every bit as dangerous as a modern bullet.

"Gather 'em up!" Clemens shouted. "We may need to use them!"

"Nothing from my side!" von Borst cried. "Where are they?"

"SHUT UP!" I roared. Softer—a whisper that cut through the war cries and chants in the long shadows—, "Don't reveal your positions. Clemens, you're the marksman. Do you have targets?"

The navigator was perched on one of the taller rocks. "Yes, sir!"

"Kill the chief."

"Which one is that?"

"Christ, how should I know? Look for the one in front, or back. The one who has the most feathers or whatever. Kill that son-of-a—"

Clemen's rifle banged. Almost immediately there was a change in the massed voice surrounding us.

"They are pulling back, Mr. Burroughs!"

"Hold your positions!"

We could not stay here out numbered ten or more to one. We had less than 50 rounds between us. "John Henry!" I sensed the massive cook crawling toward me.

I put a hand behind his strong neck and drew our heads together. "*Find a way down!*"

"Why me, sir? Nagamichi or—"

"Damn it, man, you have a better chance in darkness than the rest of us. Do I have to spell it out?"

John Henry gripped my arm. "You're a good man, Mr. Burroughs. You're not like those others back home. And I ain't so stupid proud to not recognize a good idea!" Like a darker shadow among dark shadows John Henry, the Waziri warrior, hurried away.

Clemens' harsh whisper came down from the rocks. "Looks like they have regrouped. They— Duck!"

Another hail of spears peppered our position. Someone cried out. "Who's hit?" I demanded.

Von Borst replied. "Me, sir. Not bad. Sorry."

"Heinlein, see to him. Clemens what do you see?"

The moonlight was not yet as strong as it would be near midnight—if we lasted that long. The navigator reported: "Looks like they have a new chief."

"Need I say it?"

*BANG!*

Again we heard that change in voices.

"I don't think that will work again, Mr. Burroughs. They did not retreat this time."

"How many?"

"More than a hundred—I can't say for sure."

"Pick your targets, Mr. Clemens. Empty your rifle. Keep them guessing as long as you can. Ivan, how many rounds?"

"Nine!"

"If they haven't charged by the time Clemens' rifle is empty, pass your weapon to him. Grab a spear."

Heinlein called out. "Just a nick through the shoulder. He's all right."

"Are you fit, von Borst?"

"Bring the bastards on, sir," the German-American growled. "They made me *mad!*"

I grinned. "Heinlein, give von Borst your pistol. Withdraw to the center and get a spear."

During this time Clemens's rifle periodically spoke. Each time there was a cry from the natives. "I'm out!" then "Thanks!" *BANG!* "Three in one?" Clemens remarked incredulously.

"Express rifle," Ivan reminded him.

"Then I'll line them up," was the navigator's grim reply.

Eight more times the rifle spoke. "That's all," Clemens said. "We hurt them, Mr. Burroughs, but there's a god awful bunch left."

I rose and passed him my pistol. "You're probably a better shot. Here's the rest of my cartridges." There were not many. "Keep a sharp eye, Mr. Clemens." Before I returned to my position I laid a hand upon his boot and spoke sincerely. "I am honored to have known you."

"You, too, sir." Clemens quietly replied.

John Henry came to me. "It's all cliff, sir. No way down. Nothing but that lake below."

I saw the knife in his hand and it was discolored. The Negro said, "I got me two before we go. Yes, sir."

"We aren't dead yet, John Henry, and if I have something to say about it, you'll marry that girl. You hear me?"

"Yes, Mr. Burroughs. You're a dreamer, but I hear you."

"Get up front with Ivan and Celeste."

Heinlein and Clemens raised a shout at the same time. "Here they come!"

The spear was too long for bayonet use, but I made do. The melee was determined on both sides. I thrust and cracked skulls and stomped on those who fell. A razor-edged stone knife nicked my ribs. Ivan and Celeste were on either side. More than once they saved me when the bloody spear in my hands got caught in a savage's ribs. The roar of the attackers was almost a weapon in itself. The roar rose to a point that I thought I saw bright lights.

It must be the end for me because my arms were so heavy and my heart threatened to burst from my chest. I could not clearly see to do battle.

Someone grabbed me, holding my arms down. I kicked and squirmed. "Mr. Burroughs! Mr. Burroughs!"

The arms were those of Ivan Rokoff. I took three deep breaths to get my bearings. "Are you mad?"

"Look!" Rokoff cried.

*WHAM!* A brilliant burst hit the escarpment's top level. The concussion nearly threw us off our feet.

"Three incher!" Clemens shouted. "That's at least a three inch gun!" The navigator dropped down and began to dance. "Naval ordinance! By damn, by gum!"

The next shell actually knocked all of us to the ground. Clemens scrambled to his feet and shook his fist toward the lake. "Are you bastards trying to kill us?"

An instant later the harsh white flood of an electric searchlight illuminated our position from the lake bed. "Submarine!" someone shouted.

Heinlein yelled, "It's the U-33!"

Shells continued to range the plain atop the escarpment. The natives were in full flight. Ivan kissed Celeste.

And I, damn it, fainted!

•••

I awoke to daylight. Strapped into a litter carried by two sailors in uniforms unfamiliar, I looked up to the one near my head. He smiled. "*Gut!* You wake. *Mein Name ist Plessner. Englisch nicht gut.*"

"German? *Deutscher?*"

"*Ja!* Some fight! Eh, Hindle?"

The man at my feet replied. "*Gut* fight!"

My God, I was in the hands of the Huns! "Von Schoenvort led the attack?"

"Dietz kill him. Bradley in charge. Olsen lead landing party. For *Großvater* you kill many. Must be German heritage."

I looked up toward the canopy of trees from a position unfamiliar—being that of flat on my back. My leg ached horribly. "My friends—what of my friends?"

Clemens appeared then at the side of my litter. He lay a hand upon my breast. "We're all here, sir. Every man jack. Thanks to you."

I gripped his hand. "Don't soft soap me, Clemens. We have been through too much to credit me with leadership, divine intervention, or German naval artillery." At that moment I noticed his arm was in a sling. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"According to Dr. Heinlein I have a sprained shoulder. Tried to throw a brute and hurt myself. Fortunately for me the bugger obligingly dashed his brains on a rock when he fell or the rematch might have gone differently."

Ivan and Celeste came out of nowhere. The girl gripped my hand with tears in her eyes. Ivan placed a hand on my shoulder. "We thought you were dead," he said. "Thank God it was only a wound to your leg."

Heinlein appeared, looking on. "You took a nasty cut, Burroughs. A few weeks bed rest and you'll be fine."

The old doctor really did look old, but he was smiling. I pouted. "But will I be able to dance?"

Heinlein chuckled. "Don't pull that gag on me. Calf muscle mainly, no ligaments cut. You'll recover with no impairment—if you do what I say."

"Yes, sir," I replied, shaking his hand. "And you?"

"Worn to a frazzle. I have ordered bed rest for me, too, as soon as it is reasonable for me to do so. Take care."

We reached the shore and Plessner and Hindle waded into thigh deep water to raise my litter to the deck of the U-33. Other hands hoisted me aboard, most of them unfamiliar. Two faces, long bronzed by the sun of Caprona, looked upon me. I was struck by the similarity of one face in particular to another face I had recently seen in a family library in Santa Monica, California. "Bowen Tyler?" I asked.

"Guilty. Glad to meet you, sir, for it was your fishing trip to Greenland that made all this possible. Lys, come meet our guardian angel."

I had read her name and description in Bowen's manuscript in a bottle, but the reality of her was quite different. She had an ordinary face with ordinary brown hair and an ordinary figure, but when she smiled she became a goddess in defense of whom all men and nations would go to war. The girl's kiss on my cheek was not difficult to endure. Tyler introduced Billings and two native girls named A-Jor and Co-Tan. Bradley, it seemed, was at the submarine's conning tower.

"Cast off!" the Englishman commanded. The mixed crew of Germans and English responded with alacrity.

The U-33 made headway down the Inland Sea, riding the surface at 13 knots about a mile off shore. John Henry, MacDonald, von Borst, Running Elk and Leinster (who had found Tyler and Billings near a Galu city, which I will describe when we meet in Galveston) came to see me as we steamed south toward the subterranean exit a hundred miles away. I bade them to leave me on deck that I might see from the water the land we had so strenuously traversed. At that moment I had no desire to be carried below.

Plesser fetched a hot lunch for me during the day and remained at my side most of the time. He seemed a good man, regardless of the wartime conditions.

That evening, just before we were to dive—after navigating the winding main river—Clemens sat with me. "Mr. Leinster is a grand officer."

"Agreed wholeheartedly," I replied.

"Bar one," Clemens solemnly added, shaking my hand. "You kept us together, Mr. Burroughs. We may not have found Tyler and Billings or Bradley, but we did our part and you led us well. Rumor has it that you and Heinlein will return to Caprona. If you have need of a navigator, I offer my service."

I had words to say but they would not come. I firmly gripped the tall man's hand. "Next year," I said.

"Next year," Clemens replied. He looked up as footsteps rang on the deck. "They are coming to take you below. Mr. Tyler is taking us through the underground river."

•••

I have written over long, old friend, and left out many details which are of interest. *You* and *I* know that I was no hero, regardless of what others may say in the future. Doing the best I could, I led my company into a venue we could not have survived without the help of Providence and the good Mr. Leinster and John Running Elk and the assistance of the U-33 crew. In reality I failed miserably. If not for the will of the Almighty and coincidence, my bones and the bones of my little company would now be bleaching under the Caprona sun.

Micky MacDonald brought our treasure aboard. The little Irishman properly divvied the portions, and the one for his own use should eventually see his dreams come true. John Henry had that ring for his lady love, and a little more. Von Borst (how he managed it in that final battle!) had the lovely Ming vase for his mother—and a small bag of gems to boot.

Clemens, who had mapped a whole new world the like of which has never been seen, claimed two small diamonds. "I have debts to retire." (I later learned those debts were the support of his mother and two sisters.)

John Running Elk had a patch of fur from his "lion thing" kill that meant more to him than the riches we found in Pierre Le Monde's cave. "An earth spirit of great power," he said to me after we boarded the *Toreador*. But he was not so spiritually motivated that at that table of riches he did not also take a portion; a jeweled knife and a gold chain.

Hiro Nagamichi took nothing from the treasure save a single ruby of extraordinary brilliance. "A memory of the volcano. Wealth I do not require."

Leinster playfully chided the dark-haired Niponese. "Damn it, Hiro, you should get something out of all this hardship!"

"I met Mr. Burroughs," was his reply. "This is enough."

Leinster scowled. "You fellows of the East always confuse me. That one," the officer said, digging through the pile of golden necklaces, "is my mother's."

"No girlfriend?" Clemens asked.

"I have a girl in every port," Leinster hotly replied, blushing.

I laughed. The others smiled. "Sure you do. Honor thy mother, as should any good son, but by golly give that special girl something to get her attention. I can read it in your expression plain as a Tarzan novel: you have a girl waiting for you."

"Mr. Burroughs, you're a bastard. Loveable, but a bastard nonetheless."

Leinster left the ward room without further comment, but he left with a plain gold band of dainty proportions in his pocket.

The Irishman, dispensing the treasure of Pierre Le Monde after the adventure was over, focused upon Clemens. "What do ye want? For yerself."

Clemens, too tall by a foot or more inside the yacht's ward room, looked over the glittering array of treasure MacDonald had brought out. The navigator selected a single ring—a stunning ring with a massive diamond centered and six rubies surrounding. Looking at the Irishman the navigator said with grim eye and promised threat. "Say one thing and I will cut your throat. Five years we have waited. She's a good girl who deserves more than I can offer."

Micky MacDonald rose to his full height, being short enough to do so in the confines of the ward room of the *Toreador*. "I always knew you shy o' this an' that, Mr. Clemens. Though ye not be Irish or Catholic, ye be a

good man. Take that from me pile of greed an' wed that lass. An' don't ye be inviting me to the wedding!"

'That' was a jeweled necklace worth at least \$50,000.

Clemens, bent low beneath the upper deck, towered over MacDonald. "You dumb Irish son-of-a—be my best man and I'll forgive your insults. Otherwise I'll have to kill you here and now."

MacDonald firmed his chin and defiantly said: "Name the time and place. If it suits me, I'll be there." He paused, hand on his knife. We watched, the atmosphere tense. MacDonald suddenly growled: "It suits me, you ugly mug."

Clemens replied, taking the necklace: "Stay away from my sister Madeline. She's not for the likes of a rascal like you."

The handshake that followed between these two men indicated that Madeline Clemens would surely be introduced as her brother's best suggestion. Long may their mutual despise flourish. Better friends I have not seen in all my years.

Later that night, as the *Toreador* sailed north with the U-33 in company, Hiro Nagamichi came to my bed side. "You lead well, Shogun Burroughs." He pressed a folded piece of paper into my hands. "Good serving you. If need will serve again."

Much later, in the dim light of the boat's corridor lamps, I looked at the precise brush strokes of the Japanese word symbols on the paper Hiro Nagamichi gave me. My rough translation was sufficient, but as soon as I can I will have experts translate the missive. The Nipon's demeanor and presentation have told me all that I need know. This honor is an embarrassment, my friend, as are all the others I have related.

What did I do? For the most part I acted without a clue. And in the long run I led the company into a do-or-die situation. I am not deserving.

Forgive the blue mood—I have consumed a light Scotch while enjoying the late afternoon sun on the *Toreador's* aft deck. Today is a joyous occasion. Bowen Tyler has married Lys La Rue, Tom Billings has married A-Jor, Bradley married Co-Tan, and my dear boy Ivan married Celeste—on his nineteenth birthday.

Celeste does not understand the ceremonial trappings, but that is of little aside since her heart is deeply entwined with Rokoff's, regardless of ceremony or convention. I suspect that Ivan's villainous father would not have approved of his son's happiness.

Heinlein took my missive away an hour ago. "Join the festivities," he had said. I did, but I also later bade Clemens to find this over long letter so that I might finish it before we reach Pago Pago. They are dancing on the fantail to the music of a hand-cranked phonograph; Bowen and Lys, Tom and A-Jor, John and Co-Tan, and Ivan and Celeste. Only Hiro Nagamichi and John Running Elk have declined to dance with the ladies, but they are smiling as they watch.

My friend, *none* of those characters know how to dance! Would that I had two good legs. I'd show those young fellows how it should be done!

Rook to Queen Four. Checkmate in two.

See you in Galveston.

Ed

## EPILOGUE

April 29, 1922  
On board the *Sprite*  
South Pacific

My Dear——

The great war held up our expedition to Caprona for five years. Dr. Heinlein and I worked out all the details, assembled resources and crew, but we could not launch the expedition until after hostilities ceased. Ivan—you met him and Celeste last year—acted as my agent to handle the heavy chores in San Diego with Clemens as the *Sprite's* First Officer—after I purchased the coastal freighter and spent a small fortune and four months outfitting it for extended oceanic travel. Leinster signed on as Captain early in 1921 and his help was immense.

John Running Elk extended his regrets, he could not attend the expedition as he was deeply involved with an Indian Coalition petitioning Congress for recognition of Native American rights. I fully supported his efforts but reminded him that it might be years before any results were obtained. Hiro Nagamichi, however, was not only available he was exceedingly eager to join the expedition. Hermann von Borst, Clemen's brother-in-law Micky MacDonald, and John Henry also signed on.

Sadly, Dr. Heinlein passed away in January 1921. That was a difficult time for me—the return to Caprona was based entirely upon Heinlein's scientific studies of the rejuvenating qualities of certain Caspakian plants.

Ivan's telegraph from California convinced me to go ahead.

*CELESTE KNOWS THE PLANTS. DOCTORS  
WILL KNOW THE RESULTS. YOUR DECISION.*

Forewarned by the dangers our previous expedition endured, Clemens hired a fighting guard from men who had recent experience in the great war. Fifteen men were selected from American, British and German forces. The most deadly and steady men who applied were under the command of Lieutenant Benjamin Travis, late of the Army and Vorlagensargeant Erik Bentz late of the Kasier's infantry. Rokoff and Clemens advised the officer and sergeant of the perils of Caspak and held training in the California highland areas. That cost me \$3,000 in ammunition, billets, and transportation. When I came to the west coast in February I was given a demonstration of the guard unit—and I was damn impressed!

Ivan and I had a long discussion March 11<sup>th</sup> at my San Deigo office. "She cannot go," he said, almost as soon as he entered. "I will not allow it."

"Have you *asked* her?"

I recall lighting a Havana and breathing blue clouds of aromatic smoke. "Celeste is, after all, our only expert. If you say no I will call off the expedition—with no regrets."

Ivan, five years older after our adventure aboard the old *Toreador*, had grown in maturity under my tutelage and guidance and that of others in my organization. He was no longer the uncertain youth, but a man with personal convictions. "I do not wish to place my wife in danger," he said. "Coffee?"

"Please." I sat quietly as Ivan poured from the ever full carafe.

"Celeste has described the plants to me. She has sketched them—did I send you a photo of her recent Caspak painting? No? In any event, sir, my wife will remain at home with the children."

"Ivan," I smiled gently, slightly amused, "I repeat, *have you asked Celeste?*"

Rokoff placed a steaming coffee on my desk then shrugged his wide shoulders out of the grey tweed jacket

and took a seat. His starched white shirt and Windsor-knotted silk tie barely contained his massive chest. He sipped the coffee then said,

"My mother will cheerfully watch Edgar and Emma—insists adamantly for the privilege if the truth be known. Celeste, dear girl, is determined to see Caspak once again." For a moment the big man was silent. Then he looked up, despairing. "Do I have no say in this at all?"

I spread my hands, fully sympathetic. "The question is do you wish to deny your wife? I cannot make that decision for you."

Ivan scowled. "Her expert knowledge *is* essential to the expedition's success."

With a laugh, I thumped my fist on the desk. "Growl and hesitate, dig in your heels, be protective—and well should you be—and let me know your decision. Ivan, I care not a fig for the money expended if you have reservations regarding your wife's safety—"

"It's not that," Ivan interjected. "Travis and company are top-notch. I—"

Ivan rose. He went to the window and gazed upon the dock area where a frenzy of workers swarmed over the *Sprite*. "They *are* good men," he said. "We're better equipped this time around, Ed." Rokoff turned to face me, his expression confused. "You have been the father I never had. Tell me what I should do."

I chewed on the cigar three times, then took it out of my mouth. "I am not your father, though thank you for the compliment. If I *were* your father I'd tell to you to think of your wife first and damn all else—and also direct you to determine your wife's feelings since you'll have to live with your choices and her feelings as regards those choices for the rest of your life."

Rokoff resumed his seat. He picked up the coffee cup and said, "Leinster thinks we can sail on the 20th. Celeste arrives on the 18th. You will take her to dinner that night

as I am scheduled to be in the field west of Temecula with Travis, Bentz, and our marines for a final exercise."

Ivan stood, donning his jacket. "Don't be late, Father Burroughs."

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We actually sailed on the 22nd. The *Sprite*, though broad of beam as befit a freighter, made good speed to the South Pacific. Clemens' initial course took advantage of all current and wind. Eighteen days later we arrived at Caprona. That is to say, we arrived at where Caprona *should have been*.

There was no island approximately 110 miles wide by 135 miles long. The *Sprite* crisscrossed that section of the Pacific four times. Clemens, an expert navigator, pulled out his hair. "It must be here!" he reported.

Two weeks we searched the area. Leinster and Clemens were at a loss to explain our finding. Hiro Nagamichi, however, gave the best answer a day before I ordered the ship's return to San Diego:

"The volcano. We saw it speak. Perhaps it spoke with finality. In my land the earth speaks and lands once made disappear. Caprona is no more."

I pondered Hiro Nagamichi's words that evening while taking counsel from Leinster, Clemens, Rokoff and von Borst. I was undecided until midnight, when John Henry brought a slice of apple pie, coffee and a touch of brandy to my cabin.

"Get some sleep, Mr. Burroughs. That devil island of monsters is gone. Ain't nothing you can do about it. God looked down and saw He'd been lax while Satan was at work and He fixed it. Caprona was not His world. It was not our world either and we knows that because we was there. But He meant that some of us would know and tell that story for His purposes."

After John Henry left my cabin I drank the coffee and brandy. I should have consumed the apple pie be-

cause John Henry is a magician chef, but my mood was bitter. At dawn a dismal grey sky filled with fog and mists shrouded the *Sprite*. I ordered the expedition terminated.

There are no regrets for expenditures or preparations. None. I once visited Caprona and endured its natural horror and beauty and do not feel cheated that our second attempt to revisit a land that time forgot failed. But I do wonder if ordinary planetary tectonics or God had a hand in the disappearance of Caspak—that question is one I fear will never be answered.

E. Burroughs