

The

MMP

Tom Gnagey

David and Kit have to out-think a long-dead Pirate King and fend off a modern day version in their quest for hidden treasure to aid the street kids of Brazil.

THE
MAP

An Action/Adventure Novel

**The middle book in
The David Lawrence Trilogy**

By

Tom Gnagey

Family of Man Press

© 2006, 2017 (revised)



Chapter One

The early evening thunderstorm raging outside pounded against the roof of David Lawrence's loft above the Blue and White Grocery store in downtown North Manford, Indiana. The lightning flashes burst through the floor to ceiling windows front and back brightening the corners and laying down shadows where none should be. The on-again, off-again, assault from hail, beat against the several skylights along both sides of the roughhewn, steeply pointed, ceiling. The wind drove the rain to churn against the windows reminiscent of the new carwash at the edge of the village.

The propane lanterns were at the ready. The lighter sat atop a stack of rainy evening books on the coffee table which separated the old couch from the unmatched 'set' of recliners – all unceremoniously crowding the edge of a large, blue, oval, braided rug. Two bowls for ice cream sat on the kitchen counter beside the refrigerator and were flanked by spoons on one side and a box of saltines on the other. As usual, the chocolate syrup bottle sat empty in the refrigerator door.

Thunderstorm. Lanterns. Lighter. Books. Ice cream. Crackers. There was only one thing missing.

"Hey, Uncle David," came the call from the briefly opened and closed again door at the bottom of the stairway. "A thunderstorm."

"I noticed."

Kit mounted the stairs quickly and stopped at the landing, shaking off the water like some adorable stray puppy that had just found refuge from the downpour.

Kit grinned.

"Like the old days, huh, Unc?"

"Not quite."

"Not quite? What do you mean?"

"No blankie!"

Grin met grin. It was in reference to Kit's predictable childhood dashes across several back yards from his house to the loft whenever the lightening started flashing and the thunder began booming. Having lost his father as a toddler, Kit had granted many of the usual privileges of parenthood to his uncle – including thunderstorm sleepovers, with blankie, the holding close, and the required words of reassurance.

"No *blankie* but I did remember the chocolate syrup."

He pulled it out of his hip pocket and sat it on the dining room table which sat between the sitting area at the front and the bedroom and kitchen areas toward the rear.

“Let me shed these soaked duds, then we feast. What books you have out?”

“A little of this. A little of that. Thought maybe we could just talk since you’ll be leaving for Harvard in four weeks. It will be a long dry spell until Christmas break.”

“Talk’s good. Let me hang this stuff up in the bathroom. Meet you at the fridge.”

He kept talking; that had been his style since the moment he discovered he could speak. For the several months following that he did his best to convert the adults around him to his idiosyncratic version of language but eventually succumbed to Midwestern English. At times the grown-ups wondered if that had been a good thing!

“I’ve been thinking about several things,” Kit called into the kitchen.

“Things that involve me, I assume.”

“Yes. Just not sure how to finance it all.”

“Ah. The lad includes me when financing is involved. I feel so wanted or would that be needed – about to be used, perhaps?”

“You going to hear me out or not?”

“Have I ever not heard you out, Son?”

“Not that I can recall. How much ice cream is there?”

“A brand new gallon as of this noon. *The Blue and White’s* best!”

“I’ll take a Kit-sized serving then. Maybe more later. Got crackers? Ice cream during thunderstorms just wouldn’t seem right without crackers.”

“Got crackers. Cheese to go with them later on if you get hungry for something more substantial.”

Kit appeared and the portioning began.

“Believe it or not, I can remember back to when a pint would sustain us through two of these storms,” David said.

“Really? I guess the Kit-sized portion has up-sized with age.”

Kit opened the refrigerator door and picked up the syrup bottle shaking it.

“Empty, like always. Why do you put it back after it’s all used up?”

“So I will see it sitting there and be reminded that I need to get more. If I threw it out, I’d never be reminded.”

“How’s that system working for you?”

David smiled realizing he had been had.

Kit shook his head and moved to the sitting area with his portion of the goodies. He stretched out on the couch, his back against the far arm.

A clap of thunder made him wince. He pulled his head in like a turtle and surveyed the loft by shifting his eyes.

“You do realize I come over here during these things to take care of you, don’t you?” he said as his uncle joined him.

“You made that clear from your very first visit.”

"Really?"

"Yes. You appeared sopping wet at the top of the stairs and announced, 'Mama said it would be okay if I came over and took care of *you* tonight'."

"I was adorable, wasn't I?"

"Adorable, wet, shivering, and scared out of your gourd!"

"This place with you here has always been like a haven to me. Once up those stairs any unpleasantness ceased to exist. I'll really miss that when I'm away at Harvard this year. But, to those several things I mentioned."

"Those several things that require my inclusion because of the financial considerations."

"You're getting the wrong idea. When we happened onto that chest of ill-gotten booty in the Brazilian cave earlier this summer you said that I could probably claim it if I chose to."

"And your comment had to do with all the homeless kids in Brazil that would help care for. And, you are about to ask, 'Think we could somehow arrange to go back and pick that up?'"

Kit smiled.

"Think we *could* somehow arrange to go back and pick that up?"

"Am I good or what?"

"Probably not a giant leap for a philosophy professor with nineteen years of formal education under his belt, you know."

"Do you have a plan?" David asked then immediately began amending it. "What am I saying? Of course you have a plan. What is it?"

"Well, considering Ari gave the plane we used in June to Connie, and since he insisted you keep and use one of the credit cards on an unlimited basis, and since we have a week or so here with nothing to do, and my Megan and her mother are gone to visit her grandparents in California . . ."

". . . why don't we just hop down there, and pick up the goodies, you ask."

"I figured maybe we could celebrate the find with a day strolling the nude beach – maybe even look up Maria and her sister and let them be our required female companions again."

"Does Megan know about Maria and the beach?"

"I'm crazy in love with Megan – not just *plain* crazy. Maybe someday. I have nothing to be ashamed of, so there's nothing to apologize for. I think I just ended both phrases in that sentence with prepositions. Miss Finn would be so proud!"

"Two things," David said. "I need to see if I can find that credit card – no idea what I did with it – *and* we will need to make arrangements with the Brazilian government to remove the treasure from the country."

"Actually, not number two," Kit said. "We wouldn't be removing it. We'd be cashing it in for money to be deposited into the *Fund for South American Orphans*. Remember the Father Angelino that Maria and her sister spoke of –

the one with the small orphanage associated with his church?"

"Yes. And you have been in contact with him?"

"First day back from our big adventure – while I sat around letting my billion little cuts heal. He e-mailed this morning and the fund is all set up – equivalent to a nonprofit organization here in the States. He is the Administrator. You, me, Maria, and Juanita make up the Board of Directors along with a social worker from his parish who he convinced to sit on it as well – have to have a majority of Brazilians on such a thing. A lawyer from his church has done the legal work."

"You've been a busy little beaver, haven't you?"

"Yes. This is something I really want to do. I can't stand knowing all those poor kids are living on the streets and in some instances being hunted down and slaughtered like so many wild animals by 'extermination squads' from the *infested* neighborhoods as they have come to be called."

"Does Father Angelino have a plan that can succeed?"

"We've emailed I suppose a hundred times. Together we've devised a four part model program. Immediate sheltered care to get them off the streets and out of harms way, adoption and foster care initiatives for those that are placeable, and vocational education and job placement for the older kids."

"He is anticipating a substantial contribution from you?"

"Us. From *us*."

"Thank you for not leaving me out."

"Was that sarcasm?"

"I'm not sure."

David's response had been serious as had been Kit's question. David continued.

"The entire problem is preventable, you understand," he said.

"It is but it isn't," Kit said. "Simple birth control practices would prevent the horror in the first place, but that is a total impossibility given the Catholic Church's power over the people and the governments in South America.

"I just don't understand how they can continue to believe that people are going to stop having sex except for the specific purpose of conceiving a child – that one or two child limit each couple should abide by if over population is to be prevented. That being something that will never happen except in the church's fantasies, kids continue to be born to parents who can't afford to raise them and who, often, really don't want them in the first place. They are referred to as *Acidente desagradável* – rough translation from Portuguese is *Unpleasant Accident*. Since it is generally considered less of a sin among the people there to abandon a child to the streets than to use contraceptives, thousands of children are added to the homeless situation every month across South America."

"Not even a chest full of treasure can begin to handle that massive problem, you understand, Kit."

"I do. But what we want to do is to set up a model program, work out the kinks, and then convince others to pick it up and implant the program in other places."

"Admirable, I must say. I admired your concern and compassion from the outset. I admire your initiative even more."

"Thank you. So, you'll help?"

"Of course, I'll help. You didn't have to ask."

"I know but I enjoy nourishing your contention that man has free will."

"For the record, my contention is that man CAN have free will even though he often, if not typically, chooses not to invoke it."

"Instead of being your own thoughtful person, just follow the herd, please the herd leader, adorn oneself to be attractive to the members of the opposite sex in the herd – those kinds of things you mean."

David nodded. It was a rehashing of concepts they had covered many times before.

"Okay, then," Kit said as if beginning to officially set the stage. "It's again the four amigos off to save the world – or some small part of it this time."

"I gather that I am the last to be brought onboard."

"Connie and Alex, you mean? Yes, I recruited them first knowing you'd volunteer. Knowing that, I've sort of used your name to help set things up."

"Sort of?"

"Sort of!"

"So the plan as I think I've been hearing it is for us to swoop down to Brazil in Connie's big white Goose, enter the underwater cave, remove the booty, and deliver it to Father Angelino."

"See. A piece of cake! We'll get there tomorrow by this time – that will be Monday, August first. We'll spend Tuesday removing the treasure – Alex is already working on just how to do that. Get it into Father Angelino's hands early Wednesday morning and be back here by this time Wednesday evening – Thursday if we do the beach thing. Definitely Thursday!"

"You do realize that never in the entire history of your easy, three step plans, has any one of them turned out to be as simple as you anticipated."

"I do. That's why in the back of my head I'm giving us until Friday night to arrive back here."

"Friday night of what month?" David chuckled.

"What could possibly go wrong?"

Kit was serious in his question. (He was 18!)

"Famous last words if I ever heard them!"

Kit was ready to move on.

"I've been researching pirates and treasures and such down in that area of the world. Father Angelino has been a big help. Seems it's been a long term interest of his. He said when he turned ten he realized he had to make a

decision between becoming a pirate or a priest. Being a clergyman who is always fundraising, he now believes he became both."

"That's a very clever line."

"I told him that in an email. I received one back immediately. It read simply, 'Bless you, my son. Send contributions to' I laughed 'til I cried."

"Do you think you have a line – the story – on the treasure in the cave?"

"Maybe. Probably. Not sure."

"Thank you for that precise response."

Kit ignored him and proceeded.

"There's a large body of lore about the exploits of a French Pirate by the name of Louie LaPique. He grew up in the area of Haiti and pillaged throughout the Caribbean during the late seventeen hundreds. The northeastern coast of Brazil was his favorite vacation spot between pirating sprees. He became very protective of the people who lived there and in no time worked himself up to the status of folk hero legend among them.

"He reportedly had nine sons – all illegitimate and all with Brazilian women. The count varies but it's generally accepted there were at least six different women involved. Being the forward looking father that he was, he supposedly stashed nine chests filled with treasure – one for each son. There was to be some sort of contest among them, first each son finding the treasure assigned to him and then the joint pursuit of some super treasure. There are no details about what that was to be. There are also no details as to whether or not any or all of those chests were found. Father Angelino thinks the one we found may be part of LaPique's fortune."

"I *have* to say this, you know," David said.

"I know. I've been waiting. Go ahead."

"It's almost embarrassing."

"As it should be."

"Here goes."

"I'm ready."

"That story really *piqued* my attention."

"Feel better now?"

"Much. Thank you."

"Perhaps we should start a support group for irrepressible punsters."

"I thought we *were* that support group."

"Oh. Yeah! Hadn't thought of it that way."

"I suppose it's actually less a support effort and more a movement to inflict puns, unmercifully, far and wide."

"Either way it's been great – and will continue to be."

"What's known of the specifics of those contests between the sons?"

David asked directing their attention back to the topic.

"The story is that each son was given a map which presented a few

notable landmarks. In order to find the various locations the sons had to become very familiar with the country side – the eastern side of the continent, perhaps. It is thought that may have been LaPique’s way of keeping them from pursuing the hard life at sea. The . . . what? *Pictographs* I guess you’d call the representations . . . were in many ways so nondescript that they would not make sense until somebody actually came upon them out in the world. It was without a doubt a time consuming, difficult, undertaking.”

“When they each found their own treasure they would also find a map of a second treasure – one of the other brother’s treasures. If they went ahead and found it first it was theirs. In other words, at each site there was a map leading to another site. It was presented as an incentive to get them each working on their own treasure hunt immediately. That was the competitive element – a trait LaPique clearly valued.

“But then, he also added a cooperative element. It seems that the copies of the individual maps, which each son would find along with his treasure, had been drawn on the back of a larger map – each 1/9th of it cut into pieces. The large map led to some kind of super treasure but to obtain it the sons had to share their section of the map and go after it together.”

“Let’s see if I got this,” David said. “The original map sections directed each son to his personal treasure. At each site there was *another* map of another brother’s site. All of those maps had been drawn on the reverse side of the ‘big treasure’ map and cut into ninths.”

“Right.”

“An interesting set of concepts – competition, followed by cooperation, followed by the age old dilemma of greed vs integrity.”

“Not sure I follow that last part.”

“Question,” David began. “Once the big treasure was found would they all agree to just take their 1/9th or would one or several attempt to take more.”

“Ah! I see. The old man set up a moral dilemma for them. That *is* interesting – considering LaPique’s own track record in the areas of morals and ethics. Maybe he just wanted to force one of them to emerge as the strong, new, family leader.”

“Interesting possibilities. You say there is no lore about how it all turned out?”

“That’s right. Father A has spent a good deal of time researching it. Apparently in the end, LaPique was on the verge of being captured by the authorities when he just disappeared. Somewhere in eastern Brazil. Like he crawled into a hole and pulled it in after him. Never seen again.”

“Does Father A have a theory related to the treasures?”

“He does. LaPique – reportedly a handsome man himself – seems to have been attracted to very young, very beautiful, but intellectually slow women. So, Father A believes the lot of the sons was probably subnormal mentally, and

therefore probably unable to decipher the map clues.”

“So the treasures were never discovered?”

“That’s his theory.”

“Fascinating. But for a lack of genetic information on LaPique’s part, the history of Brazil could be significantly different – all those offspring – all that money – all that power and good looks and the prestigious name. Add in the missing element – intelligence – and who knows what might have been.”

“I certainly hadn’t taken it that far. I’d say, *fascinating!*”

“He had one other odd proclivity,” Kit said. “His women all had to be left handed like he was.”

“Each to his own, I guess. Are Connie and Alex in town yet?” David asked.

“They’re waiting out the storm in Indianapolis. We’ll meet them at the airport in Wabash in the morning – five a.m.”

“You realize you may be the only eighteen year old male in the history of eighteen year old males to actually make an appointment for five a.m.”

Kit grinned and moved on.

“I’m all packed. Left my stuff at home – considering the storm.”

“You staying the night here then?”

“Thought so, unless Molly’s coming over.”

“She’s at a women’s empowerment conference in Chicago.”

“She seems fully empowered to me.”

“She’s leading a seminar.”

“That makes more sense.”

“How far?” David asked.

“To Chicago?”

“To Brazil, clown?”

“Four thousand miles. We’ll be flying into *Joao Pessoa*, like before. Ten hours. Refuel in Miami. We will lose an hour, arriving late afternoon. local time.”

“Hotel?”

“Reserved it on my credit card but need to transfer that to Ari’s upon arrival.”

“That seems like a good way to use his card. I believe he would approve of this mission.”

“Brings up an interesting contrast,” Kit said.

“What’s that?” David asked.

“Ari’s illegitimate ten year old son living in luxury with his loving and well educated mother in Greece, contrasted with the homeless orphans we’re thinking about in Brazil. It’s enough to make me convert to socialism. There *has* to be some way of leveling resources between the have’s and the have nots.”

“It’s an age old problem and even Lenin’s grand plan that worked so well on paper failed miserably in the real world.”

"Why? Man's selfish greed?"

"Man's inappropriate take on valuing," David answered. "Until people value people and this planet more than they value money, stuff, personal comfort, and power, the gap you're referring to will just continue to widen."

"I know you give away a sizeable portion of your income every month, Uncle David, and I won't pry into how much, but most people would think you were crazy if they knew you only kept maybe twenty or thirty percent and gave the rest away to folks who you believe need it more than you do."

"Different values. My bottom line is people. Theirs is not – not to the same extent, at least. I feel it is a grand privilege to use my resources to help others. I have to admit that most folks seem to believe they should use their resources to help mostly just themselves. I believe my approach has a very good chance of saving the planet and the human race and allowing folks to live in safety, happiness, and good health. I believe *their* way will surely destroy all those things."

"If I said, what I'm about to say, where my friends could hear me, they'd be convinced I was insane. But, Uncle David, I can hardly wait until I'm in a financial position to use a huge percentage of my earnings to improve life on this planet."

"That's wonderful. If insane means way beyond the usual or norm, then I suppose that makes the two of us certifiable."

"My crackers just ran out of ice cream. You need a refill, too?"

"I'm fine. I eat half a pint and gain a pound. You eat half a gallon and remain fit and trim."

"I'm still a growing boy, Unc."

"So am I. *That's* what I'm complaining about."

Kit left for the kitchen, chuckling. He was a fine specimen in body, mind, and heart. David was very proud of the boy – young man – man – whatever. At eighteen it's hard to know how to refer to a youngster. Perhaps that's because from hour to hour and day to day they exhibit such variation as they work toward eventual, stable, maturity. Regardless of that, David was convinced that in Kit's case the clear and rapid trend was in the best of all possible directions.

The flash of all flashes, quickly followed by the boom of all booms, shook the old building, producing the flickering of all flickers and eventually draining all light from the loft. David moved to light the closest lantern. He walked with it to the kitchen so Kit could see to refill his dish.

"Glad you understand the priorities here," Uncle David.

"Actually, I was just checking to see if you were under the bed yet."

"I did go there a few times didn't I? Just me, blankie, and a herd of dust bunnies."

"I always wondered why that particular place provided a sense of security for you."

"With the bedspread draped to the floor there was no lightning to see, the

thunder was muffled, and the generally calm demeanor of the dust bunnies immediately alleviated much of my own anxiety."

"Glad to at last get that cleared up. Maybe I *will* have just a tad more ice cream – since you went to the considerable trouble of opening the container and all."

"With or without?"

"With or without what?"

"Protests."

"Protests?"

"Yeah. I put scoop after scoop of the ice cream into your bowl and you either protest each one or not. So? With or without?"

"We have established that routine, have we?"

"Since I was a tot. In the beginning I thought the phrase, 'No, please stop,' was an idiom meaning, 'Please pile it on'."

They shared another smile.

"The question remains," Kit said, feigning impatience by holding out the scoop and tapping his foot.

"Two scoops at the no protest level. Anything beyond that will be cause for vociferous, non-idiomatic, protestations."

"Interesting how you put that in my court. You are very good. Why did you wait fifteen years to devise that plan?"

"Because you waited fifteen years to express your problem about it."

"Glad to at last get that cleared up," Kit said grinning, mimicking his Uncle's previous comment.

The ice cream bucket was returned to the freezer and they returned to the sitting area.

"I'll tell you the cheapest way, for sure," Kit said all quite esoterically.

It launched a series of clarification based questions from David.

"Cheapest way to fill a dish, stop my dessert-based protests, leave or remove dust bunnies depending on one's assessment of their value?"

"The unwanted orphans."

"And what would that be?"

"Castrate every male after they have fathered two children. Line 'em up, drop their pants, snip snip, and the problem's solved. I don't think the church would even protest that – so long as the pants weren't dropped in public."

"You will volunteer for that procedure after *you're* second child, will you?"

"No. You're comparing apples and oranges."

"And I was so sure you were going to say grapes and nuts."

Kit shook his head.

"Now who's acting eighteen?"

"Guilty. You were saying?"

"After two children, appropriately separated in time, and each one lovingly

anticipated, my wife and I will take the necessary measures not to conceive more children and yet continue to express our love for one another in the most intimate of all ways. For me, with my beliefs, it is quite a simple, thoughtful, process. For the unfortunate couples in South America there is nothing simple about it. It's heart wrenching, whatever they choose to do. Trying to live up to their beliefs must cause incalculable mental suffering every single day of their lives. Regardless of its rhetoric, it seems to me that the Church has taken the position that the sexual union of a man and wife is all quite separate from love. It is solely a biological requirement to procreate. That taken care of they are supposed to go back to kissing, I suppose."

"Your take on it makes sense to me, Kit, although you do understand that the Church views it in a very different manner. It *is* hard to understand how a religion, supposedly based on love, can continue to ignore reality and enforce customs which lead to such a horrendous situation. Do you have any data on what percent of the street kids are illegitimate?"

"That's really hard to figure. Father A believes it is only about fifteen to twenty percent, and many of those come from the teenage street kids themselves. The population in general seems to be abiding by the church's marital requirement for sexual activity."

"All the more sad, I'd say. Get married so sex is legitimate and then have children you can't love and don't want because you aren't allowed to take steps to prevent conception."

"It's a case of mindless obedience to tradition," Kit said.

"The traditions of the church, you mean?"

Kit nodded.

"The Catholic Church does so many wonderful things for the people on this Earth it's just hard to conceive of them continuing down a path that can only lead to increased suffering and pernicious living conditions for the innocents of the world.

"It's not the street kids' fault they are street kids and have to steal to survive, and yet they are being viewed and treated as if it is all of their evil doing. You'd think the organization that caused it would take responsibility and provide for them."

"I'm sure the church would say *it* is not responsible for the trespasses or sins of its members," David said.

"I suppose. A dead end I guess."

What kind of numbers are we talking about?" David asked.

"Nobody knows. I've seen estimates as low as 100,000 and others in excess of 1,000,000 – across South America as a whole. Partly it depends on how the count is done. About two thirds of them die before they reach thirteen."

"I don't recall how you became interested in the plight of these kids, Kit?"

"Back when I was eleven. It was like a sub-theme in one of the Tommy

Powers Adventure books* I loved so. I always identified with Tommy – neither of us having our natural father and both of us wanting to build a better world. After reading about the kids in Brazil I looked into it to make sure it was really a problem. I was appalled at what I found. The actual situation was far worse than the book portrayed it. Surely you remember how I ranted and raved about it, don't you?"

"Suddenly it all rushes back into very clear focus. Yes. Rant, rave, swear, pace, throw things. As I recall you were all set with a sign to go picket the Catholic Church one Sunday morning until three adults sat you down and had a long heart to heart."

"You and mom and my step dad, you mean. I remember. I felt like I was going to blow apart if I didn't do *something*. That's when you helped me find the relief agency and I began sending them part of my allowance and earnings every month. I still do that, you know. It's so detached though, so sterilized – just sending money. I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and really get involved."

"I can tell."

"You approve?"

"It's not for me to approve or disapprove of your passions."

"Do you approve?"

David broke a quick smile choosing not to press his position.

"Most certainly. I must admit I've been sending some-thing every month as well and I, also, still feel all quite empty about it deep inside. I appreciate this opportunity to roll up my sleeves along side you – something I *have* to roll up at the moment and you don't, by the way."

Kit grinned.

"Do you suppose my predilection for nudity will cause problems in the dorm next year?"

"As I recollect nudity is never a problem in a men's dorm."

"This is so great, you know?"

"This. . .?"

"You, me, here, the storm, lanterns, talking, planning, expressing our concerns, growing closer."

David nodded; his eyes moistened in the shadows.

"So, when are you and Molly going to tie the knot?"

"What makes you think that's in the offing?"

"You look at her differently since we arrived back here after chasing down those toxic bombs. You're more relaxed and assured in your relationship. When you look into each other's faces you hold the glance longer – like you never want to release it."

"You've become quite the observer of relationships."

"Learned most of that from you. So give! When's the big day?"

"Your cockiness suggests complete confidence in your assumption."

"Yes it does. You've become quite the observer of . . . wait that's not going to work."

They laughed quietly together.

"December 20th, but that is NOT for general knowledge yet."

"Great! I'll be back here on Christmas Vacation then. Oh. You planned it that way, of course."

"So you'll do it then?"

"So I'll do what then?"

"Be my best man."

"Best man? Wow! Sure. Yes. Of course. But, I thought that was always reserved for the groom's best friend."

"It is."

Silence.

"That's probably the best realization I've ever had. Thank you, Uncle David. We *are* each other's best friends, aren't we? I suppose that will change once you're married and then later on when I'm married."

"To some degree, of course, but I personally believe that I have room inside my heart for *two* best friends."

"That's oxymoronish, you know."

"Has that ever *once* interfered with something we wanted?"

Kit grinned.

"I guess not."

Kit cocked his head, looked down at his chest, and mounted a frown and wrinkled brow.

"What?" David asked.

"Just conferring with my heart. We decided there is plenty of room for two best friends in there. It's all set, then."

"Glad to have that settled."

"I suppose it was never in doubt," Kit said.

"I suppose you're right – again – still – like usual!"

Kit walked to the front windows and surveyed the storm as it continued to escalate outside.

"It's a slow moving, long-termer, I'd say. Be lucky if it blows itself out by morning."

"I suppose I need to get packed," David said standing. "Have you thought about anything special we will need to install into the laptop?"

"I packed two CDs that I've loaded with everything there is to know about pirates in the area and Louie LaPique in particular. We still have the atlas in there and I figure I can find most everything else on the web. You kept the wireless internet, right?"

"I did."

"Did you know there are still pirates of a kind down in those waters?"

"I guess I've heard of them in passing. This leading to something special?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I found a reference to a recently surfaced pirate down there using the name LaPique – *Carlos LaPique*. Could be a descendant, I suppose, or just a name taken on for effect."

"We should be able to steer clear of him, I imagine. He working the Caribbean?"

"That, and the coast of northern South America. Not a friend of the populous like the original LaPique."

"Let's see. Summer here, still. Winter there, still. Right?" David asked opening his closet door.

"Winter officially but that close to the equator it will be hot any season of the year. I packed some jeans and a sweater in case."

"In case of . . .?"

"In case of you're right and my simple three step plan goes *kablooy!*"

"I like your confidence."

"Always be prepared."

"Or as the handyman said, 'Always be . . .'"

". . . *repaired*, perhaps?"

"Excellent, Grasshopper!"

"I do believe that pushed us one step closer to being 'certified', Uncle David."

"Good for us!"

"That whole exchange was inane, you understand."

"*Inane* reliably produces a joyful dance among my endorphins. I wish the same for you."

"Sometimes I'm not sure where esoteric leaves off and inane begins."

"Do you really care?"

"I suppose not."

"I'm going to corral my endorphins and pack. Come and help."

"I packed light, myself," Kit said. "I figure we can buy whatever we need beyond the essentials."

"Any ideas about how Alex proposes to remove the loot from the cave?"

"Not really. I drew him a map of the underwater entrance to the area and estimated the size and height of that crack in the ceiling that lets in the sunlight. I figured it was almost fifty feet above the surface of that stone shelf where the treasure chest sits against the back wall."

"Alex will work it out. I'm just going to take this big suitcase – what do you think?"

"I opted for my large duffle bag – call it the *Kablooy Factor*."

"In case we end up traipsing all over the continent, you mean?"

"Ka-bloo-y!"

Kit gestured explosively with his arms.

"Why am I getting the idea that you *really* don't think this is going to be as cut and dried as you led me to believe?"

It was met with a lip zipped repeat of the just concluded explosive gesticulation. Kit sighed and began delivering some of the thoughts he had been harboring.

"This is probably mostly just little boy fantasy surfacing in and around all of this," he began. "But, if the lore is correct, there *could* be eight more chests of treasure out there somewhere and just think what a kick start all of that would provide for the project."

"It's beginning to sound more and more like a *two* bag journey to me."

"I opted for double sox and no boxers to save room."

"Ah! The sacrifices we make," David joked.

"And don't forget it!"

"It's what, now? About nine?"

"Nine eleven, to be exact."

"We need to get to sleep. I need to call my Molly. You and Megan?"

"Spoke at length earlier. I'm going to shower. It will make things go faster in the morning."

"I'll wait, then. Set your phone alarm for four."

"We *can* use your car, right?" Kit said suddenly realizing he had not ascertained its current condition – hovering, as it did, between three cylinders of waning life and the junk yard.

"It should probably hold together until we get to the airport."

"You intended that to be reassuring? You really do need to think about trading up, Unc. That car's as old as I am."

"Still almost always gets me wherever I need to go. You ashamed to be seen in it?"

"Of course not. I am rapidly ridding myself of all vanity. Soon I will have no veins at all."

"Good night, Kit."

"Good night, Unc."

* Tommy Powers and the Sage of the Calibrators, by David Drake. Family of Man Press. eBook

CHAPTER TWO

The initial smiles and handshakes easily turned into full-out hugs.

"So good to see you two, again," David began. "I'll bet you hadn't envisioned your retirement being so short lived."

"The boy has a way about him," Connie said. "In one short conversation he convinced us that another, possibly harrowing, adventure with you two was in every way superior to sitting there on the Italian Riviera watching deeply tanned young things frolic nude in the sunshine along those golden beaches."

"Bored already, you say?"

"You can't *imagine* how bored," Alex said responding for the two of them.

"And here I thought it was all due to my compelling power of persuasion," Kit said grinning.

"Let's be on our way, then," David said. "About ten hours you think?"

Connie nodded.

"Once we're in the air we need to borrow Alex for a planning session back here in the cabin."

"Will work out fine," Connie said. "Our plan was for me to get us into and out of the Miami refueling stop and then for Al to jockey us down within sight of the Brazilian coast line."

The engines revved, the plane began to move, and they were soon in flight.

"What was with the one eye open, one eye closed thing on takeoff," David asked.

"I'm weaning myself from eyes closed to both eyes open on take offs and landings."

"Might want to also work on that death grip you put on the arm of the recliner."

Kit grinned.

"That's merely using the opportunity for some lower arm, dynamic tension, exercises."

"I see. And the taught neck, and strained cheeks, and gritted teeth are exercises as well?"

"I'm glad you understand."

Alex soon popped the cockpit door and entered the cabin. They gathered around the small table. He removed several folded sheets from his shirt pocket and flattened them against the table top. He explained.

"To begin with, my research suggests it's not a good idea to expose such old coins and jewelry to the ravages of salt water even for a short time. There are a number of ways we could utilize water tight containers and swim the treasure out through the underwater entrance. Gold being so heavy we could be talking about a hundred exhausting trips in and out. So, my initial proposal is to lift it out through that crack or slit in the wall near the ceiling of the cave."

David and Kit nodded, impressed by Alex's thoughtful research and waited for him to continue.

"Assuming Kit's renderings are fairly accurate, I have these suggestions."

He turned to Kit.

"As I understand it, you described the outside area around that slit in the rock face of the mountain as having no easy access to it, right?"

"Right. A sheer cliff-like area of solid rock. The slit is about two thirds of the way up. It appeared to cut through maybe three feet of rock on a slant that is slightly east to west from the outside. That's approximately one meter for you European types. Because of that angle it is virtually impossible to detect from the outside."

Alex acknowledged the attempted humor with a smile and nod.

"And the width of the opening is fairly constant bottom to top – six to eight inches at most, you think?"

"Right. Maybe just a tad wider. Was so high it was hard to judge precisely."

Kit looked at David for confirmation. He nodded, adding:

"You're the one with the photographic memory, Son. But that was my estimate as well."

"Here's my rough drawing of the inside and outside in the area near the slit. This third one represents the gadget I propose we build to secure a small platform on the outside at the opening. It has this metal arm that slips through the crack and this support that will swing down and lock in place against the rock on the inside of the slit. It extends four feet on the outside and will be fitted with a four by six foot wooden platform for us to work from. It will also be supported by two ropes from up on top.

"*This* is a drawing of the hoist arrangement – a take up wheel for the rope here and a crank to turn it. It will function like drawing a bucket of water out of an old fashioned dug well. On the loose end of the rope will be this narrow, meter long, heavy canvas bag reinforced with wires woven into it. One person will be outside on the platform. He will lower the bag into the cave and the two inside will fill it. It will be cranked up to the opening and dragged out onto the platform.

It will be detached from the lowering rope, attached to the lifting rope dangling down from the top of the cliff, and the person up there, with his own crank and take up wheel will lift it up to be dumped into a container in the waiting helicopter. We will repeat the process as often as it takes to transport everything to the surface."

"Seems like a flawless plan to me, Alex," David said. "Nice going."

"Any reason this can't be a nighttime operation?" Kit asked.

"I don't see why not," Alex said. "Probably an excellent idea, in fact. The cliff is in full view of the beach below, correct?"

"Yes, for several miles on south, in fact. At night there are still many hundreds of people on the beach but darkness will work to disguise our presence up there. One other thing to consider. How about a dark colored canvas draped around the outside of the platform to hide it. It will be hard to explain the operation if we are spotted."

"All appropriate suggestions, I'd say," Alex said nodding and sketching in the drape on the drawing.

David had one last thought.

"I'm suggesting that Connie should deposit the helicopter up there on top some hours before we begin so there will be no noise to draw the gaze of those below as we get the operation under way."

"Assignments?" Kit asked looking to David.

"Yes. How about this? Connie up on top of the cliff. Alex on the platform. You and I in the cave."

The others nodded.

"Our first order of business, before we get busy fashioning equipment, will be for Kit and me to enter the cave from the ocean and make sure things are still the way we left them. Assuming the treasure will be waiting for us, Alex, you and Connie will see to the building of the equipment, Connie will procure the helicopter, and . . ."

". . . and Maria and I will cavort together on the nude beach," Kit added, the imp in him twinkling through his expression.

"Probably not, actually," David said. "If I remember correctly, a substantial amount of the gold coin from the smaller chest, which had burst open on one corner, slipped off the rock shelf and into the water. I figure you will want us to dive and retrieve it. Every coin could be worth hundreds of dollars."

"Ah! Yes! Good thinking. We could be talking an additional fifty to a hundred thousand dollars, maybe. I imagine I can put off that romp for a day or so."

"I believe we have a plan, then," David said.

"I was able to get us the very same suites we had before," Kit said. "Not sure why I thought that was important now that I think back on it. Like visiting old friends, I suppose. When I called, the man at the reservation desk made a point

of cautioning me that the pool and common areas in the hotel were clothes optional in case that would be offensive to us. I assured him we'd find some way of coping with it."

The men just shook their heads. Kit was fully satisfied with that. Alex returned to the cockpit.

"I need to email Father A that we're on our way and give him our hotel information. I'm eager to meet him in person. He seems a strange combination, philosophically."

"How's that?"

"Quite conservative, religiously. Very liberal and open, socially. He was taking care of the street kids long before the Church even condoned it. He seems to have no problems about the nude beaches and spas and such, though I assume he doesn't frequent them himself. It presents a humorous image, however."

"And that would be?"

"A priest on a nude beach wearing nothing but his clerical collar."

"I've known several in California and France who even shed the collar."

"Really. I doubt if Father A is *that* liberal. It's really an image I don't find interesting enough to linger over anyway."

"How old a man are we speaking of?"

"No idea. Socially he sounds to be in his late thirties. Religiously more like his late eighties."

"You've discussed religion with him?"

"Not intentionally but you know those clerics – they just can't keep it out of a conversation."

"So he doesn't know that you are not a *god guy*?"

"Not unless he's telepathic."

"Will that matter to him if he finds out?"

"My impression is that he will accept me for who I am, although I assume in private he will pray for my quick conversion."

"I like the man even before I've met him. How did the Father A thing get started?"

"It's how he signs his emails, so it was how I addressed mine to him."

"And he addresses you as . . .?"

"The *Kitman*, of course. It's the automatic signature on my email."

"Does he know your age?"

"He knows I'm headed off to Harvard in September. I can't recall the age thing coming up specifically."

"Do you have a meeting set with him?"

"Not yet. I told him I'd contact him once we ascertained the financial support was in sight."

"He knows it's the *treasure*, right?"

"Oh yes. We just don't refer to it that way in emails in case his or mine is being monitored. Both of our governments have begun reducing their citizen's freedoms by invading our privacy in clandestine ways, so we aren't taking any chances. Boy I hate that!!"

"We are told it is for our own protection against those who would harm us," David said realizing it would be fully unsatisfactory.

"Free societies willingly run that risk from article one. We know that being free allows bad guys to operate. We know it means that unpleasant – horrific, even – things may occur but we believe those risks are worth it so we and our descendants can have and enjoy our freedoms and our right to privacy."

"You're not getting any arguments from me."

"I just don't understand how officials, elected to protect our freedoms can so nonchalantly toss them into the garbage. My new vote will certainly send my message about it. I've written my Congressmen pretty regularly. I hope you have as well."

"I have, although probably not as regularly or as vehemently as you, it would appear."

"I hate to think that my children may not be able to grow up enjoying all the privileges of citizenship that I knew in this once great country – at least when I was a kid."

"That would certainly be sad if it were to happen."

"Your tone suggests some sense of optimism, Uncle David. Where's *that* coming from?"

"Ultimately the character of our government lies in the hands of its citizens – if they choose to participate in the democratic process. I have faith in our system and in our electorate to eventually restore our free way of life. We're going through a period of trial and error right now as those in power try to find a balance between freedoms and safety. The possible level of devastation today is just plain different – by a thousand fold – from anything we've ever had to deal with before.

"Back when the worst that happened was the occasional robbery or even murder, we could live with that in order to maintain our over-all freedoms. Now, when one dirty bomb could wipe out a city, or a vial of toxin in the water supply could kill millions, we have to rethink what freedoms we may have to give up in order to prevent such devastation."

"You sound like the Washington establishment."

"I certainly hope not! I am trying to provide some sense of the reality of our world today. Let me try it another way. The question for any free society has always been what level of safety, comfort, and privileges do we want or require and what price in terms of personal freedoms and investment – monetary and otherwise – are we willing to pay to maintain it. When potential devastation was low, few privileges had to be forgone. Now that the potential devastation is

extremely high, we have to take another look if we want our society to survive at some similar level of comfort. We have a three level governmental system that has navigated us through rough waters in the past."

"So, what you're saying is that so long as all three levels of government remain truly separate and intact, our rights should ultimately be safe – be impinged upon no more than our leaders collectively believe is absolutely necessary."

"I guess that's pretty much what I'm saying."

"The integrity of the officials is all important, then."

"It certainly is."

"How can we believe in their integrity when it seems that every day we hear of them being bought by special interest groups or acting in shamefully selfish ways?"

"I don't know the answer to that. It appears that the last several generations of parents have done a very poor job of raising children who cherish positive social values and believe in serving the collective good rather than merely one's own selfish needs."

"You've written about that all your life, haven't you?"

"I have. I suppose that is *my* passion like caring for the *acidente desagradáveis* of Brazil is *yours*."

"Do you find it exhausting always trying to be one of the good guys?"

"A question I've never verbalized in quite that way. So, first of all, thank you for that."

"My pleasure."

"The concept of passion, I believe, presupposes a willingness – eagerness – to work hard, and hard work presupposes occasional exhaustion."

"Not an answer old man – and that's *esteemed* old man, of course."

"Okay. How's this. There are times that trying to be a good guy really sucks!!!!!"

"Yes. That is a far more satisfactory response."

"And was it helpful?"

"Most certainly. It's a question I've wanted to bounce off you for a long, long, time."

"I can't imagine what could have stopped you. We've always been so open with each other."

"You never give any indication that anything about this 'good guy' stuff ruffles your feathers in any way. You just smile, roll up your sleeves, and get to work. I thought my reaction was inappropriate."

"Most good things – most worthy goals – have down sides. I recognize them but don't dwell on them. On those days I get hit by a dozen of them one after another it *is* a wearing experience."

"You ever feel like giving up?"

"There have been times when the thought has crossed my mind but I immediately reconfigure it. When things are looking that bad I know it's time to scrap the plan and build a new one. I never tire or give up on the *goal*. I have on occasion, as intelligent men do, given up on the method, or the phrase, or the organization, or the leadership."

"Thank you. Being a good guy is not *all* in the day to day deeds but it's also in the positive nature of ones long term goals. That's what you're implying, right?"

"I guess it is. It's nice to be nice. It's better to have some ultimate goal toward which your nice is aimed."

"Miss Finn would not accept that last paragraph in an essay you know."

"I know, but she would accept its essence. She's truly one of the good guys in our world."

"She is that."

* * *

The hotel suite looked just as they had left it. Kit had made reservations for a week, hoping to be able to use much of that time pool side and down on the beach.

While Kit entranced the girls at the pool with his many charms, David arranged for diving gear and a van rental. Connie reserved a small, two passenger helicopter. Alex located a shop in which he could rent space, and found sources for the material they would need.

"Connie," David began his call, "I have decided that it will be much less hassle if we approach the cave opening by boat rather than across the nude beach. Kit may lapse into a deep depression over my decision but we'll make time for him there later. My point is that I want you to line up a suitable craft for us. Doesn't need to be fancy, just large enough for you, Kit and me and the diving gear."

"I'm on it. For in the morning?"

"Sun up. Yes. How about dinner together at seven, down stairs?"

"Sounds great. Al and I'll be coming hungry so don't forget that credit card. Kit be with us?"

"Provided I can entice him back into some clothes."

They shared a chuckle and hung up.

* * *

It took longer to get organized that morning than David had anticipated. Kit drove and by six they were parked near the dock three hundred yards to the north of the low mountain bluff that separated that beach from the *Rompland* of Kit's dreams – the bluff that was home to the treasure cave. David figured the only real difference in the two beeches was perhaps two ounces of cloth fashioned into the most popular beach wear of the day – string bikinis – girls and guys. Interesting to him was how those garments seemed to emphasize and

sensualize gender differences that just blended blandly into the background on the nude beach.

The dock was at the far northern end of the bikini beach. Connie was waiting with a small, older model inboard, perhaps sixteen feet long with the traditional U shaped seating area at the rear and lots of open space behind the wheel. They had soon transferred the diving gear and lunch cooler into the boat.

"Let's take a heading out to sea and then circle back south to the area above the cave opening," David suggested.

"Why the precaution, Unc? How could anybody possibly know what we're up to?"

"I don't know the answer to either of those questions. Does that satisfy you?"

"Of course it doesn't. But, since on more than one occasion, you've made good decisions in your life, I'll go with it."

"An interesting craft," David commented.

"Navy surplus. Originally a small, high speed, low profile personnel carrier for the Navy Seals or whatever the Brazilian equivalent is called. Carried nine men and equipment. Has a hugely oversized motor in it. Couldn't possibly run it full out if it weren't loaded. Would flip like a hand bill in a wind storm."

"That's reassuring," Kit said. "Let's just assume we have all kinds of time this morning and I say that, knowing that in part at least, you are putting me on just because you enjoy seeing me squirm."

"You mean *I'm* the cause of that squirming. I just figured you had a severe case of jock itch."

"Nudists don't get jock itch."

"I suppose not. I'd never considered that particular perk, I guess."

Ten minutes later they were easing in toward the rock face of the mountain where it rose out of the water above the cave entrance.

"Let's park this thing here," David said. "It may take Kit and me a while to locate the opening. It is naturally disguised behind a large wall of rock. Once we find it we'll come up and let you know before we enter."

Clothes off.

Tanks, masks, and fins on.

Miners lights in place.

Over the side.

They were immediately submerged. Kit found the opening some twenty meters to the south. Connie moved the boat to that location and weighed anchor to await their return. He wet a fish line as cover just in case there were overly inquisitive passersby.

David led the way through the long narrow entry tunnel. Kit was close at his heels. As the cave widened into a large oval room he moved up to his uncle's right. They continued on to the second narrow passage way. It was where

David had been barricaded inside when the large round stone ball had fallen to the floor closing the passage opening.

David stopped and pointed. That huge boulder had worked its way back against the opening. They could not get past it.

As one they turned around and left the cave. Outside, Kit motioned David not to surface. He swam to where Connie's fishing line hung in the water. Giving it a quick and energetic tug, the line, reel, and pole were all in the water.

Kit discovered that laughing while hooked up to an air tank was not a positive experience. He sputtered to the surface waving the pole above his head.

"Gotcha! Gotcha! Gotcha!" he sang doing a little hip swiveling, body twirling, dance in the water.

"That mean you don't want to share in the four, two pounders I caught while you two were playing around down there?"

"Really. Four in that short time?"

The man broke into a smile.

"Gotcha! Gotcha! Gotcha!"

Connie stood and did his own version of Kit's little turn around, hip-flaunting, dance.

"Will I never get him, Uncle David? I plan so well and yet he always turns it on me."

"Perhaps more than five seconds of high powered planning may be required," David said pulling himself aboard after Kit. He began the report to Connie.

"A huge boulder blocking a tunnel down there. It fell the first time we were here. Kit managed to move it with pry bars enough so we could squeeze by. Since then, it's rolled back into place."

"Pry bars are probably the way to go. Let's go find some and I'll join you down there. Kit, why don't you let Alex know about the delay."

The call was made. They returned to the dock and Connie went in search of the equipment. Kit had a sandwich; David an apple.

Ten minutes later Connie returned with three heavy weight iron poles and a third set of diving gear.

"*Those* should do the trick," Kit said helping lift them aboard. "They must be four times the thickness of the ones I used."

"I must say I admire the way you can always find just what we seem to need," David said.

"Ever since I was a kid I've displayed a very high scrounge factor. I once outfitted our little league soccer team from shirts to cleats in under one hour – free. Forgot the balls however. Took years to live down that nickname."

"And that was . . . ?" Kit asked.

"No Balls."

Kit thought it was hilarious.

"See. If you'd have been a nudist it could never have stuck."

Back at the cave the boat was secured in place and the three were soon examining the bothersome boulder. Kit demonstrated how he had done it before – two bars forced in under the boulder some eighteen inches apart with the upper ends resting on his shoulders as he squatted back to the big stone. Then he would raise himself up into a standing position and the stone would move several inches back from the opening.

Using a slightly modified version of that move, in which each of them lifted a separate bar, the boulder was eventually rolled some three feet into the large, underwater, room beyond.

Connie wedged a number of smaller rocks around its base to keep it from moving in any direction. That received a thumbs up from Kit.

They swam on through the huge room toward the lighted surface at the far end – lit by the light entering the top of the cave from the slit near its ceiling.

The submerged, rock, ceiling overhead suddenly blossomed into the five story high, air-filled, dome that formed the treasure cave. Kit swam toward where he remembered the treasure had been. It was still there, just as bright and shiny and valuable looking as it had before.

They removed their masks and pulled themselves up to sit on the rock ledge at the rear of the cave. Ten yards to their left were the several skeletons they had found on the first trip. Kit shivered at the sight and looked away. David ignored it and spoke to Connie.

"When you're rested you can go back to the boat and let Alex know it's a go on constructing the platform. Spend the rest of the morning helping him. Sooner finished, the better. Firm up the Helicopter and go ahead and pay for a few days. Kit and I will remain here and begin collecting the items that have fallen into the water. Drop back for us around noon. We'll meet you outside – hungry."

Kit donned his mask and slipped into the water; soon submerged, he dived to check out the bottom. A few minutes later he was back.

"Must be ten meters deep. Hard on the ears down there. Lots and lots of stuff. There's a third, small chest that must have slid over the side. It's intact but way too heavy to lift up to the surface. We'll need to empty it a little at a time. What we going to carry it in?"

Connie smiled.

"You'd have pockets to use, of course, if you weren't a nudist. Or you'd have a handkerchief to tie the find in, if you weren't a nudist."

"Okay. I get your point. But still, *what?*"

"These large, heavy duty, zip-closed plastic bags, might work," David said pulling several from his belt pack.

"Or these pull closed canvas bags I brought," Connie said.

"I guess I didn't plan ahead as well as you older, wiser, worldlier guys."

"I do believe he's getting it," Connie said as an aside to David. He left. David spoke to Kit.

"To begin with, let's push the coins and jewels back from the edge of the ledge so we won't have to retrieve any more of them from down below. Then, I'll arrange a circle of rocks up here to corral what we find and keep them from slipping back."

Kit began diving and David walked the ledge gathering stones. Before long they were both making regular circuits down and back up.

"Here, Unc. Take these beads and stuff them in your ears. I tried it and it really relieves the pressure."

"Good idea. Just hope we can get them out. It may be like the time you slipped lima beans up your nose and as they got wet they swelled in place."

"I remember. That was scary. Thought I'd have to go through life unable to blow my nose. I figured one good sneeze would probably shoot my brains out through my ears."

"I guess we can face that later."

They worked right up until noon.

"I'm exhausted," Kit said. "How are you holding up?"

"Quite well."

"How? I'm really beat?"

"You swim hard both directions. I only swim down. I let myself more or less float to the surface."

"Sneaky."

"Thank you."

"How nearly finished do you think we are?" David asked.

"At least a third, wouldn't you say?"

David did the nod and shrug thing indicating he wasn't really sure but he'd go along with Kit's assessment."

"We need to head back to the boat," Kit said. "Our mother hen out there will be worried. I'm starved by the way. What's the plan?"

"Eat on the boat out of the goodie box. You did leave some in it, right?"

"Oh, yes. Not fried chicken and corn on the cob but it'll do."

Connie was there waiting.

"How's it going?"

"About a third finished. The kid here is exhausted. You'll have to speak up. We put beads in our ears to regulate the pressure."

"Now children, what have I told you about such things? I picked up some pressure plugs for you. Also, two little buckets and some half inch rope. I figured it will be far easier and faster if one of you just stays on the bottom filling the pails and the other one pulls them up and dumps them. You can keep two containers going all the time that way."

"Where was that idea five hours ago?" Kit said removing his tanks and laying back feigning exhaustion.

"The idea was in my head. The rope was on shore. Of course you could have unraveled your shorts and made some twine. Oh, no. That's right; you're a nudist."

"Where are you two in platform making?" David asked as they ate.

"We have the material at the shop and Al's hard at it. He loves to tinker and make things and I have to admit this is really ingenious. He won't stop until it's done. I'd say we'll be good to go by tomorrow morning. Of course he won't have slept for twenty four hours."

"Let's head toward tomorrow night then."

They ate and rested and by one o'clock were back at work. Connie left to continue assisting Alex. He would pick them up at six.

The bucket and rope method moved things along considerably faster, used far less air from the tanks, and pleased David no end because Kit preferred to be underwater.

When he surfaced for the final time it was going on five thirty.

"Dare you to find a single coin or stray bauble down there, Uncle David."

"Looks like we increased the take by at least thirty percent, Kit. *We done good*, I'd say."

Still in the water, Kit was holding himself in place with his folded arms up on the edge of the rock shelf. He raised high to survey the chests and piles of gold and jewelry.

"I wonder what it's worth?" Kit asked.

"Just thinking of the gold coins by themselves I'd estimate, what, maybe a thousand of them at around six hundred dollars an ounce. It's mind boggling, I'd say."

"This is so great! Even after the government takes its cut in taxes there will be a huge sum left. I need to call Father A as soon as we get out of this hole in the ground. We got some time 'til we meet Connie. Want to swim a while?"

"Somehow I had the idea that's what we'd been doing."

"I mean swim-swim versus work-swim."

"You swim-swim. I think I'll save my energy for later."

"Ah! You got a tryst lined up I don't know about?"

"*Tryst*? Has that word actually been used during the past fifty years."

"You'd rather I'd say an *illicit-non-or-extra-marital, heterosexual, encounter*."

"I'd rather you'd leave my sensual behavior alone."

"So, you admit you have sensual behavior."

"Go! Swim! Hold your breath and turn blue!"

Kit grinned and shook off his tanks. He swam playfully for the next fifteen minutes.

By eight, they had returned to the hotel, showered, contacted Father A, and finished dinner at the hotel dining room. They sat to wind down before going to bed.

"How are you expecting the kids to react?" David said posing a question he felt Kit needed to explore.

"Sounds like a 'Master to Grasshopper' question crafted to produce new perspectives for the fledgling."

"This was so much easier to do when you were younger," David said smiling.

"You're saying your subtleness has not kept pace with the quickness of my perception?"

"Something like that although I might have said your quickness has outdistanced even my superb mastery of the art of subtleness."

"Your original question is an interesting one that I have to admit I haven't given much thought to. My first reaction is that they will be grateful. That may well *not* be their first reaction. They'll probably be downright leery of our intentions – never having experienced altruism – probably not able to conceive that such a class of behaviors even exists.

"Once past leery they may move right to greedy, taking the things they need – hoarding them, in fact, for the slim times they expect will soon return.

"I wonder if thankfulness is a part of their – what – personality, being, orientation, response pattern? Seldom – probably never – having had anything given to them before, they may need to construct a whole new kind of response. It may be like acculturating feral children.

"Thinking about it, *trust* may be the main issue for them – establishing a feeling of trust toward the providers."

David nodded and spoke.

"I think you have hit a key issue. Depending on their ages and how long they have been abandoned, some may never be able to really establish trust in relationships.

"Psychologists have found that trust flows from the initial condition of safety and the immediate resolution of discomfort experienced by the baby during its first year or so of life. Situations that allow wet, messy, cold, hot, hunger, and hurt, build the basis for mistrust of the universe. Dry, clean, just right temperature, full tummies, and tenderness build the basis for trust."

"Hard to believe most of these kids ever received a sufficient dose of the good sides of those coins," Kit said.

"Do you know at what age they're typically abandoned?" David asked.

"Varies widely. Ten years ago it was primarily four and up. Recently there are more and more infants involved. If it weren't for the street kids themselves who take in the babies, they'd just perish there on the street. Passersby just ignore them. Police have been known to set them aside out of view and wait for

them to die. It is a bizarre and inexplicable side to the generally wonderful, generous, caring people of South America."

"It may partially be a choice forced by financial circumstances. The parents can't afford to care for the children. How could the neighbors who are in similarly limited, financial situations possibly consider taking in another mouth to feed? It would deprive their own hungry children even further."

"I suppose when poverty and hopelessness is the only way of life you know, the sight of abandoned children becomes a legitimate – commonplace – part of that existence," Kit said trying to bring it all home on a practical, day to day, level.

David nodded and frowned.

"Are you saying the street kids are mostly from the poorest families?"

"Father A says no. He says at least half are from the middle class. When they abandon a child, they often don't do it in a middle class neighborhood. Usually in an upper class area, hoping, I suppose, the child will be taken in and cared for. Typically they aren't. They are taken in by the kids themselves who tend to congregate in the upper class areas where the pickin's from the trash and garbage is best. It is there the 'hit squads' go hunting them at night."

"What a horrific situation," David said shaking his head. "It makes me sick – really – my stomach is churning."

"We have lots of bad stuff happening for kids in our country, too," Kit said. "I suppose that will need to be our next main mission."

"I thought college was your next main mission?"

"My heart and I decided we had room for *two* main missions."

He grinned his broad, endearing, grin.

"I love you, Kit."

"I love you, Uncle David."

"I'm bushed. Going to turn in, Son."

"I think I'll take a turn around the pool. Ogling and being ogled always helps mitigate depression for me and this chat has not really been all that uplifting. See you in the morning."

He slipped into his flip flops, hung a towel from his neck, and strode off in search of therapy.

CHAPTER THREE

By seven a.m. David had swum his hundred laps and returned to the suite to affectionately dangle his wet hair up, down, and around his sleeping nephew's face.

Kit opened one eye.

"Not really the kind of a wet dream I enjoy awaking to, Uncle David."

"Already seven. I assumed you showered after pool time last night."

"Yes."

"Let's get dressed and find some breakfast, then. We meet Father Angelico at nine. Do you know where his church is?"

"Three blocks west and four south from the hotel. Or is that the nude spa? I suppose we may be able to tell the difference once we arrive. If not, I'll convert immediately!"

As it turned out it was the church. Father A met them on the front steps and introduced himself as, Father A, providing the answer to David's first question.

"I suppose it can be just 'A' if the *Father* part is uncomfortable," the priest said.

"May I ask why that question?" David asked.

"Once I began corresponding with the Kitman I began reading his uncle's treatises on this and that. We seem to be far apart religiously but closely attuned socially."

"I have the solution," Kit said, grinning.

David interrupted turning to the priest.

"Take note of that expression. It is always the precursor to something twisted."

Father A nodded, offering his own pleasant smile. Kit continued.

"We could just shorten it to 'Fa' – F for father and A for Angelico."

"I'll answer to most any, non-demonic, epithet."

"Okay. It's set then. *Father A* it will be," Kit said smiling.

It was cause for the sharing of a brief chuckle amid the shaking of heads and rolling of eyes.

They were escorted around the side of the church to an outdoor sitting area to the rear. It was canopied by three tall, ancient trees and delimited by a

variety of sweet smelling, flowering bushes around its periphery.

"My preferred office," Father A said.

Kit commandeered the conversation.

"We located the treasure. More than we ever envisioned. We will remove it overnight and have it in your hands by daybreak. This is the place to bring it, right?"

"As good as many and better than most, I suppose. I'll have our lawyer and a representative of the tax division here to authenticate its arrival and process it. They will assess it and the tax man will take the government's share – twenty percent.

"I have in my congregation a man who trades in such things. His suggestion was to pay the finder's tax first by dividing it up front. Then he will offer it for sale. We should make a good deal more than gold value considering the artifact aspect. Any profit over the original assessment will then remain tax free since the Church's income is not taxed in Brazil."

"What an astute move," David said. "I hope not too many folks know about the treasure."

"At this point just you two, the artifact man, our lawyer, and me, and we, of course, have no idea where it is. Is it dazzling?"

"The dazzlingist!" Kit said matching the enthusiasm from the man's question.

"And he invents words on the spot as well?" Father A asked turning to David.

"Oh yes. I have to assume that after experiencing four years of Kit, Harvard will find itself obliged to publish an extended version the English dictionary."

"Did you find the map amid the treasure?" Father A asked. "The one directing you to another site?"

David and Kit looked at each other. David spoke.

"No. We didn't. Kit filled me in on the lore about it but I guess we were so busy getting everything ready to be removed that we failed to think about the map."

"I suppose it's just that I wanted it to be LaPique's, you know. He's become like a good friend – albeit a strange bedfellow for a priest – these past thirty years since I discovered him back when I was a gullible, eager to believe, nine year old."

"It could be inside one of the two chests that still sit there on the rock ledge," Kit said. "We didn't really touch either one."

The Priest's eyes visibly brightened at the prospect.

"Perhaps. I will eagerly await your report. Risking that you may take me for an oriental monk, I must admit I sometimes feel as though I was somehow mixed up in pirate things in a former life."

"Perhaps it should be *Father Buddha*, then," Kit teased.
He nodded, enjoying the by-play. David stood. The others followed.
They shook hands.

"Until five or so in the morning, then," David said.

"Make it 5:30. I'll do one of my most expeditious five a.m. masses. Parishioners love them – in and out, zip, zip – and so far God hasn't indicated his disapproval to me. Of course there was that time when the statue of Joseph fell from its perch as I hurried things along so we could get the Neighborhood Festival Day underway."

He smiled and laughed out loud.

"Sometimes I just kill me, you know?"

It re-established the chuckles from Kit and David. They immediately liked the man. David had one final question.

"I have to ask about your perfect English and mid-western United States accent."

"It reflects more years than I want to recall attending seminary at Loyola in the Chicago area. Also, my mother was from Indianapolis."

"Almost our sister city," Kit said. "Just three hours south of us. Much faster than that if we forgo my Uncle's car and travel by dog sled – in summer – without runners – or dogs."

It provided a long laugh among them. Then Kit had his own final question.

"Maria and Juanita?"

"Oh, yes. Maria gave me this card with their address and phone numbers. Said to call as soon as you could. They want to take you out for dinner some night. I'd suggest you call the second number. The first one is clearly designed to make men pant, bulge where men bulge, and run with dispatch in the girls' direction waving large amounts cash."

"You are very different from what I envisioned a Catholic Priest would be," Kit said. "I must say I'm surprised."

"So am, Kit. So am I."

* * *

Connie had the helicopter in place on top of the little mountain by three p.m. In it were the supplies they would need as well as the portable platform he and Alex had fashioned. He remained to watch over things and install the winch at the edge of the cliff.

Alex slept back at the hotel, having been up all night as per Connie's prediction. Maria and Kit visited the beach. David strolled the streets taking in the local culture and architecture.

At six they dined with Juanita and Maria, renewing their acquaintance and talking about the plans for the kids. David was impressed with how far things had proceeded in such a short time as well as what good business sense the women possessed.

They were enthusiastic and planned to spend considerable time working in the program. Their outlook on life and occupation was unique. They truly enjoyed their work – not so much the sexual part as the supportive and friendship side of it. They worked hard to provide the pleasurable aspects the men desired but went much further – talking, listening, even counseling. They saw their clients as needy human beings and saw their role as providing compassion and understanding above and beyond the physical activities.

They were both deeply religious and viewed the commandment about not coveting your neighbor's wife as having no bearing on their occupation whatsoever.

It was a nice evening together. At seven thirty the men said their thanks and excused themselves. By eight Alex had climbed up the backside of the bluff and located Connie. Kit and David went directly to the dock and picked up the boat. Kit handled it like a pro and they were soon anchored in the shadows twenty yards south of the cave – so positioned that inquisitive passers by could not find them if they dove there.

It took several trips to transport things from the boat. By the time they arrived to stay there on the rock shelf, it was going on nine. They had brought four large, propane lanterns secured in plastic bags. Once they had been lit the area was bright and, except for the chalky remains of the dead guys in the corner, it might even have been considered cheery. The ceiling sparkled back at them from thousands of small crystalline faces. The surface of the water remained mirror calm.

They could see that Alex's invention was already secured through the bottom of the slit up above. Kit discovered the communicator on a line, which Alex had dropped down through the hole so they could speak quietly and static free. Their previous attempts to use cell phones from in there had been rife with static and dead periods.

"You there, Big Al?" Kit said testing the arrangement.

"Here. I'll need another fifteen minutes to have things secured and ready to use. I'll call you."

He lowered the long narrow canvas bag so they could begin loading it.

"I suggest a pool," Kit said to his uncle.

"I thought we had one right out there," David said putting the boy on.

"Let's each guess how many loads of stuff there will be. The one who comes closest wins."

"Wins what?"

"Just wins. You're sounding more materialistic than I'm used to."

"Sorry."

"So?"

"Okay, you're on. I'll guess twenty five."

"Very close to mine at twenty six," Kit said.

"You use an interesting strategy. Twenty five or under I win. If, on the other hand, there are twenty six or any number more, on to infinity, you win."

"Your guesses are always too conservative so, setting my guess one above yours, I'm bound to win."

"We'll see. Let's get to work."

"Start from this side and work our way toward the wall opposite the slit?" Kit asked really suggesting.

"Seems the prudent approach, I guess. Set that ancient 4 X 4 along the outer edge to keep any straying pieces from tumbling into the water."

"You hold the bag and I'll fill," Kit said. "We can trade off jobs bagful by bagful."

David nodded and picked it up opening the mouth. Alex had designed them with a wider, funnel like, opening.

"That guy thinks of everything," Kit says.

They began work.

"I'd suggest you use the gloves," David said. "You'll be scraping the backs of your hands and fingers against the rock surface."

Kit nodded and donned the leather gloves.

It took nearly fifteen minutes to fill it and drag it back down the ledge to a spot under the opening. Anything less than the thick canvas would not have stood up to the weight and rigors involved in the process.

By the time it was in position, Alex had dropped the lift rope. Kit attached the bag to the big hook and motioned for David to check. He nodded his approval. The handle on the bag was made of three quarter inch rope which had been sewn in place across the bottom of the bag and up both sides. On top it was tied into a substantial knot to receive the hook.

"Must weigh what?" David asked.

"A hundred pounds, maybe more," Kit said.

"Alex has arranged all of this very well; he's created a very efficient operation."

The communicator crackled to life.

"Ready up here whenever you are."

"Lift away. If it's too heavy we can adjust it."

The bag slowly snaked its way up from where it was laying, twirling and swaying gently from side to side as it left the ground and steadily progressed toward the slit above.

Soon after it had disappeared, the second bag was lowered while the first was being drawn to the top of the cliff by Connie. Kit removed it and the process was begun all over.

"Looks like it will take about twenty minutes to fill and raise each one," David said. "If there will be somewhere around two dozen bags we're talking eight hours."

Kit nodded as they traded jobs and began bag number two.

By midnight they had all the loose items handled and began on the larger of the two remaining chests. When Kit had opened its lid on the first visit one corner had split open under the weight and much of its contents had slipped over the edge and into the water. David repositioned the 4 X 4 to catch anything that might stray in that direction as he began removing the contents.

By two o'clock the first chest was empty. They prepared the other one, still unopened, by wrapping it several times around in rope, horizontally, just under the lip of the lid. Kit figured that should keep it from giving way at a corner the way the first one had. The lid was opened. It worked. Where the big chest contained close to half-and-half set jewelry and gold pieces, the second one was all gold coins.

Several hours passed.

Kit was removing the last layer of gold.

"David! Look here! A map, I'm guessing. Drawn on some kind of hide."

He handed it up to his uncle.

"Certainly looks that way to me. It will make Father Buddha's day, I'll tell you."

"More like his *decade* or three!" Kit added.

"Smaller than I envisioned," David said. "Maybe three by four inches. It does have markings on both sides. This side looks like it may be part of something larger; the markings run off the edge. The other could well be a self-contained map."

Let's get this finished up," Kit said. "I'm eager to tell Father A."

"What about the chests themselves and the kegs and lengths of wood at the far end of the ledge?" David said. "They, too, are parts of this history."

"They are. I vote we come back for them. Perhaps there is a local museum. Father A will know."

"You guys fall in down there?"

It was Alex on the communicator.

"Got distracted. We're on our way with the final bag now. Only about half full."

"Okay then that will make a total of 25 1/2 bags. Who wins the pool?"

"It appears we have a tie. I had twenty six and Uncle David had twenty five."

"It could only happen between you two, you know."

Although David could have made the point that everything between twenty five and twenty six lay in the province of *his* guess of twenty five, he let it go. Kit would have surely done the same from his direction.

David took the communicator.

"How long for you to dismantle your gadgets and have everything back aboard the helicopter?"

"Give us an hour for that."

"This process took us considerably longer than I expected," David said. "It's almost 4:30 now. We'll be waiting for you at the helipad near the dock at 5:30. We'll transfer everything to the land vehicle. Then you two can take care of the helicopter while Kit and I meet Father A at his church. We'll let him know we're running a bit behind."

"Okay. Pull away," Kit announced.

The final half bag was soon out of sight.

"Let's leave one lantern in here for when we come back for the artifacts," Kit suggested. "What about the skeletons?"

"Perhaps Father A will have a suggestion. I'd vote for leaving them here undisturbed."

"Kit nodded. Maybe we just don't bring up anything about them, then."

"We'll give it some more thought, later."

They were soon back in the boat, heading toward the dock.

"It suddenly occurs to me that we have a mystery here," Kit said.

"How they got the heavy chests in there in the first place you mean – back before diving gear and air tanks?"

Yes. That. It occurred to you as well, I see."

David nodded.

"I have a theory. How about you?"

"Mine didn't hold water, so to speak. I was thinking they could have fastened hollow reeds together end to end and had somebody swim into the cave breathing through them. Problem is the air passage through the reeds would have been so long and narrow the swimmer's lung power would have been hard put to suck in enough fresh air. The tube would have had to have been well over a hundred yards long."

"Actually that theory holds some promise, Kit."

"How do you suppose they found the cave in the first place?" Kit asked then offered a possibility. "It had to have started by looking down through the crack in the mountain side, I suspect – maybe while searching for a hiding place."

"I agree. They must have spotted the opening and repelled down from the cliff to investigate. They saw the cave and the water in it and figured there was probably an underwater entrance. Still, somehow, they got three men and three heavy chests inside the cave. It's most unlikely anybody could hold their breath long enough to just swim that distance let alone allowing for a return trip in case they didn't make it to fresh air."

"What is your theory," Kit asked.

"Earlier in the day, while you were busy under water filling bags, I examined the artifacts at the north end of the ledge. There are three large kegs – one had fallen apart which allowed me a peek inside. Each had been modified in strange ways. I determined that when on their sides the lower portion was

about twenty percent filled with sand. Just above that was a small hole fitted with a hollow wooden peg an inch in diameter and a foot long."

"And all of that refers to your theory in what way?" Kit asked wanting a quick cut to the meat of the idea.

"Patience, Grasshopper. I am guessing that the kegs could be primitive air tanks. Not under pressure, of course, but they would have contained perhaps six lungs full of fresh air. With the hollow peg or tube in his mouth a man could have floated the keg ahead of him – easily submerged yet buoyant with the right combination of sand and air. Between breath holding and periodic deep breaths from the keg a man could have easily made it to the cave *and back* had he not found the air filled opening. The keg would refill itself once in the air of the cave."

"Only problem with that is that sucking the air out would pull a vacuum into the keg, Unc. That would tend to keep the fresh air stuck inside the tank."

"Not if the man breathed in from the keg and then back out *into* the keg. While stabilizing the pressure it would have also worked to lower the concentration of oxygen and up the carbon dioxide with each successive breath."

"In other words," Kit said thinking it through out loud, "Each breath would become less effective but up to a point would still contain enough oxygen to sustain life."

"That's part of my theory."

"Why *three* men? And how could as few as three of them managed to transport the heavy chests that far?"

"I have two possible takes on that. The least likely I believe is that once the men were inside the cave, those on the outside lowered things through the slit in the wall – disassembled chests to be put back together in here, as well as the treasure using a method the reverse of the one worked out by Alex.

"More likely I think, considering there were *three* men inside, was that they swam in using the kegs. They each had one end of a long rope fastened to their waist. Once inside with the chests tied to the other end the men dragged them inside, one at a time. It would have taken the strength of three to pull a chest that far. Long sturdy planks, the remains of which are still in there, were used as a ramp to slide the chests up onto the ledge."

"Sherlock Lawrence, I do declare!" Kit said. "But why the skeletons?"
"Couldn't they have simply left the way they entered once the treasure was safely in place?"

"Not dead, they couldn't."

"Dead? How? What makes you think dead?"

"I examined their skulls. Two have small, clean holes in the rear. One had a large splintered opening in his forehead."

"I don't get it."

"Think it through. How would clean, small, bullet holes most likely be made in a skull?"

"Probably from having the end of the barrel placed right against the head."

"That's right. Now, how about a large, splintered, hole in a skull?"

"Probably from some distance away and perhaps a larger caliber bullet?"

"That's how I figure it. Now think motivation."

"Let's see. Three dead pirates sealed in a cave with a sizeable treasure. If they and LaPique were the only three who knew the location, and if they were dead, only LaPique would have known the location."

"Go on."

"I got no 'on' to go to. Did LaPique go in with them, kill them and then leave? If so, why two clean shots and one skull buster? How would he have kept the guns dry?"

"Here is at least one possible explanation. It is perhaps a better one than that considering the unlikelihood that LaPique would have exposed himself to the unnecessary danger of that underwater journey.

"Let's assume one of the three who swam in had privately been set up to be an accomplice of LaPique. Several of the old single shot pistols were lowered into the cave from the open slit just ahead of time to keep them dry. After the three men had successfully moved the treasure to its final resting place, that accomplice was to kill the other two – thus the clean, execution type shots through the back of the skulls.

"Then, I can imagine the scene. The remaining pirate in the cave looked up toward the slit in the wall to call out to his boss that the deeds had been done and he was ready to leave. LaPique, looking down through the slit from the outside, had a long-gun pointed at the man and shot him in the forehead thereby leaving no witnesses to the treasure's whereabouts."

"Why not just shoot all three from up there?"

"Too much time would have been needed either to reload or position new guns. And the angle of that slit only allows a narrow view down into a small section of the cave. Once out of view, the men could have just hidden or exited the cave the way they had entered. Remember that originally we found the third man's remains directly in line of sight from the angle of the opening."

"You think like a criminal, Uncle David. I've witnessed it before."

"Thank you. And you think like a super horny teenage male."

"But that's what I'm supposed to be – survival of the species and all. *You* on the other hand . . ."

"Point well taken. Don't knock down the dock as you approach it, here," David said pointing.

"Saying my approach is too fast?"

"Your approach, your start, your cruising speed are always too fast regardless of the vehicle."

"Thank you! You have confirmed my age-appropriate normality."

Kit understood the message of caution his uncle was implying. David

understood it had been received even if skillfully minimized for the purpose of face saving.

Kit called Father A about the delay.

"I'll just pull out one of my rousing, '*Sin no More*' sermons to fill the time," the priest joked."

"Give 'em hell, Father," Kit said without thinking."

"Actually, son, my job is to give them Heaven."

"Sorry. Pardon me. I didn't mean it in a disparaging way. I often speak before I appropriately weigh all possible consequences."

"Not a problem. I rather like the phrase that came out of it – *My job is to give them Heaven*. I'm sure there is a new sermon wrapped up in there somewhere – perhaps a book, even."

"About seven, then?"

"Fine – heavenly, in fact."

"He chuckled himself off the phone."

"Do you suppose he can possibly be representative of Catholic Priests in general?" Kit asked all quite seriously, in his continuing quest for an answer to the Father A puzzle."

"Your sample of his person is still quite shallow and one sided. Ask yourself that question again after you two have spent a few hours discussing the appropriate ultimate basis of religion."

They returned the diving equipment and within the half hour had transferred the treasure from the helicopter to the van."

"I'm ashamed to be seen driving a six cylinder, gas guzzling, van you know, Uncle David."

"First, remember that here in Brazil vehicles run on almost pure ethanol. Second, think of this as the necessary substitution for an even less efficient truck. Still, it behooves you to drive sensibly."

"You just aren't going to let that topic go, are you?"

"I love you. Don't want anything to happen to you. I'm just challenging you to engage your brain rather than your desire for an adrenalin rush."

Kit nodded and grew silent as they wound their way to the rear of the long driveway beside the church. It was straight up seven. Kit was famished. David was unpleasantly hungry. Perhaps there was a difference.

After the goods were safely inside Father A's study, Kit and David's first priority would be food. The Tax Man thought it might take until late afternoon before they could finish assaying the value.

Kit and David returned to the hotel, cleaned up, and had breakfast.

Back in the room Kit held up the little map they had found.

"Interesting, I suppose, if one were inclined to think of it as a treasure map and had any intention of trying to follow its clues."

"An interesting way to begin building your case for further exploration."

"Me. Be sneaky like that? Uncle David, I'm offended at the mere suggestion."

"No you aren't. You don't allow yourself to react by taking offense, remember?"

"Oh. Yeah. Perhaps you were right then."

"I suppose since it is in our possession we could at least give it a once over," David said.

"You're as hooked on this as I am, Uncle David. Admit it!"

"Well."

"I'll take that as a yes. So let's roll up our sleeves and get after it. And, *I know*. The old joke about me having no sleeves.

David remained silent.

Kit didn't. He held up the small piece of time faded animal skin.

"Well, I assume it is safe to assume the N represents North – Norte – on the map."

"Let's proceed that way," David said.

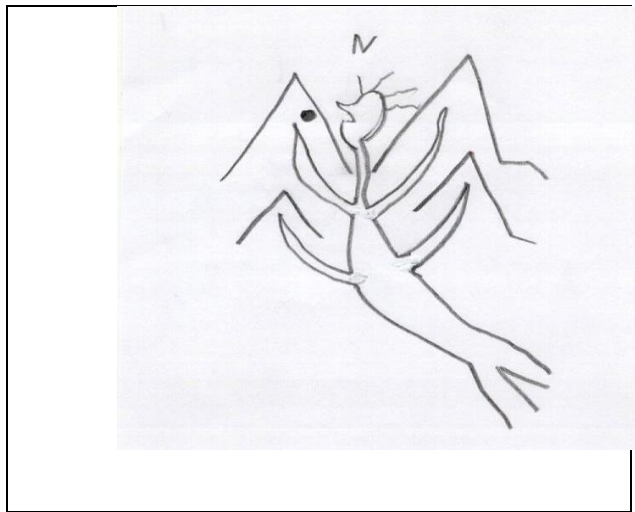
"My first impression is '*Mantis Man*' flying high above the mountain peaks, his hair blowing in the breeze."

"Mantis Man?"

"Not a real character. But see the elongated head at the top and the two sets of arms or legs protruding from the upper half of the ballooned thorax and then the two human leg-like parts dangling off the bottom."

"Let's see," David said hand to his chin as if in deep thought. "The seventeen seventies. Pirates. Treasure *and* the Mantis Man."

"Okay so it's absurd. It was just a first impression. I



Map of the "Mantis Site"

might have been right about the mountains at least."

"Let's go with that. *Crude* mountains. Another take on the Mantis thing?"

"A dragon fly?"

"Move on from your insect fetish to geographic features."

"Rivers?"

David nodded.

"That's my take," he said. "The fat part is the mainstream with the four smaller ones flowing down the mountains from the right and left."

"What about the head up between the upper peaks?"

"A lake, perhaps just beyond the mountain pass. It would give us two taller mountains to the north and two lower ones to the south, both separated by a river or stream that flows into or from a head shaped lake."

"And here to the south the river appears to be fed by two other, maybe smaller, streams," Kit added.

"Or, if it's flowing south it splits into two streams there."

"Given the generally southward flow of the four tributaries down the mountain sides, that actually seems more reasonable," Kit agreed. "If so, there must be some configuration of land there at the point of the split. Otherwise it would just go on flowing as a single stream southeast."

"Interesting idea. For some reason that was not included on the map. Reassessing the head as a lake, the hair may well be small streams feeding it. If the general flow is south, there has to be some way of feeding the lake from beyond the mountains."

"Could be one or more springs, I suppose," Kit said adding another possibility.

David nodded.

"Perhaps both."

Kit nodded again.

"So, that black dot up on the western mountain to the rear – north. Suppose that marks the location of the treasure?"

"If this *is* a treasure map, I see nothing else that might be construed as being such a mark."

"Where do we begin?" Kit asked reaching for the laptop which he assumed would play a role in the next steps.

"It seems that we have three sets of features; the two sets of double peaks, the configuration of the rivers and streams, and the uniquely shaped lake."

"That's probably the starting point, huh? A lake with that head-like shape."

David nodded.

"In Brazil?"

"That's where I'd begin but now that you mention it, that poses an interesting quandary. We don't know for sure what his stomping ground was."

"I got a map here of the lakes in Brazil. There are probably maps available for each country and even the continent as a whole."

"Let's look at what you have for Brazil."

"About a billion lakes. Most really small on this map. It's a zoomable map. I suppose just begin in one corner and work across and down."

"Unless a little lake just to the north of four mountains jumps up from somewhere."

"Nada."

"Maybe the shape recognition software would give some possibles," David said.

"Interesting. Can't scan the map here. Could if we were back on the plane. Let me do a sketch. . . . There. Now see if this gadget recognizes it."

Kit began to chuckle.

"What?"

"Got 141 takes on it. The first is Ichabod Crane. I forgot to collapse the search to lakes in Brazil."

"Two possibles but neither more than faintly resemble it."

"Lots of time has passed, Kit. Things change."

"Hadn't considered that. Let me go back to the map and find it using the coordinates given here. Then we can look at the mountains and such. Surely mountains haven't changed all that much."

Silence.

"How about a little body of water known as *A Cara*? *Cara* is Spanish for face so I imagine it may be the same in Portuguese."

"Where is it?"

"Look here on the map. This is the *Sao Francisco* River. Tracing it backwards from its mouth, it curves west from the ocean then takes a sharp turn south through valleys between some fairly high mountains. The lake – *A Cara* – and the several mountain streams feeding it is about four hundred miles due west of the coastal city of *Salvadore*, which is about four hundred miles south of where we are. The general configuration seems right but the shape of the lake is somewhat different. The area south of the nose – what looks like the mouth on the treasure map – is not indicated. Maybe it was low lying land and for some reason became flooded down through the years."

"Are there any towns nearby?"

"None indicated. Seems difficult to find a really good full service map. They each specialize in something – water bodies, terrain, land use, forests, cities, political divisions – probably because Brazil is such a large country."

"Get us as tight a zoom as you can on that piece of river that's on the treasure map."

"Okay. Zoom in. In. In some more. There. As close as this one will take us. Looks to be an area of about fifteen miles square. The portion of it that we

see on our little map is perhaps a third of that area – maybe five to seven miles tip to tip along the diagonal of the river up to the lake."

"It sure looks identical. The four mountains, the river, the four mountain streams, and the branching to the southeast. Does that mountain with the dot on it have a name?"

"Let's see. *Machado da montanha*. Any idea of the translation?"

"I assume *montanha* is mountain. Try the AltaVista translator."

"Good idea. We should just keep that site running in the background. It translates as *axe of the mountain*."

"*Pickaxe* in English I assume," David said.

"Pick. Pique. Any connection?"

"Quite a stretch I'd say. As far as we know there is no English involved here.

"That's a really long way from where we are, Uncle David. Back in those days it was a *huge* distance."

"You're saying distance has changed down through the years."

"You know what I mean. Traveling five hundred miles in the late seventeen hundreds was a far more difficult and time consuming undertaking than it is today."

"I understand. From all the material that you've collected on LaPique do you get a sense of his preferred spot when he came to Brazil?"

"Right here, actually. He apparently named the beach that I like so well, *Plage Nue* – French for the Nude Beach. Not because of any naked cavorting but because it stretches on for so many miles with no boulders, no trees, no growth of any kind. Ironic don't you think?"

"If the old boy had nine illegitimate sons I wouldn't entirely rule out the possibility of at least a little naked cavorting out there."

Kit smiled.

"I haven't read all of what I've collected about him. Let's pull it up."

Half an hour later they had read dozens of small pieces related to LaPique.

"So," Kit began giving his impression, "It seems he had a predilection for riding the rivers here in Brazil. Flat bottom boats with tall sails like on his ocean going vessels. Several allusions to trips up and down the *Sao Francisco*. Still, it is a long trip for a son to take looking for treasure."

"What if," David began, "One of his women, the mother of at least one son, lived somewhere along that river, say near the area depicted on that little treasure map?"

"Ah! I see where you're going. If he had a son down there then that map begins to make sense. It shows formations with which the boy should have been familiar and would not have required a long journey."

"Is there specific information about the sons and where they lived?"

"If there is I haven't run across it. Maybe Father A knows, although most of this info we have here came from him or his references."

"Let's talk with Connie and Alex."

"Let me call them. I'm the certified charmer, remember?"

"Connie old man, old friend, old accommodating and most supportive pal of mine," Kit began as Connie answered his phone.

"How many pints do you need?"

"What?"

"Blood. Pints of blood. I figure a lead in like that can only suggest some life threatening medical problem."

"Ha! Ha!"

It had been delivered with mock sarcasm. Kit continued.

"You remember the general story about how LaPique supposedly left maps at each treasure site – each one indicating another treasure?"

"I do but I'm suddenly wondering if I really want to."

Kit ignored what he assumed was Connie's bogus reluctance.

"Well, we found one in the cave and I can just see all that extra money being put to such good use for these poor unfortunate, sick, and homeless orphans, can't you?"

Kit thought his last second addition of, 'can't you', had been a stroke of genius.

"Okay. I'll save my blood for when I'll probably be glad I have it. What's the deal?"

"I'll let you speak with our esteemed leader, Dr. David Lawrence, BS. MS, PHD."

"You left out UCMK."

"What?"

"Uncle of Con Man Kit."

"How could I have overlooked that? Actually that's UTACMK, however."

"You will explain even if I ask you not to, right?"

"Uncle of *The Adorable* Con Man Kit."

Kit giggled the phone into his uncle's hand.

"Connie. The adorable one's uncle here. We thought if you two were up for it, we'd take a little copter ride down the *Sao Francisco* River and visit a head-shaped lake. Seems there is good reason to suspect more treasure for the kids there."

"We came along for the duration. Anything it takes for the kids."

"Okay then. Find a sturdy helicopter and stock it for a short camping trip – tents, mountain climbing equipment, a raft – you two know the drill far better than I. Hope it only takes a day or so but better plan on a week."

"And once we have found this one, how many more may there be?"

"It will be two down and seven or eight to go – provided there actually are

other maps to be found."

"We'll put the things together. When do you want to leave?"

"We all need a good sleep. It's going on ten. Eight hours in the sack will take us to about six p.m. Eat and get loaded – the copter not us, personally – would make it seven. Can you fly that thing accurately in the dark?"

"This is the day and age of night vision goggles and global positioning devices. I can fly into the blackness of hell and not bat an eye."

"But *there* you'd likely have a few flames to guide you."

"You're as bad as your nephew. I'm beginning to see how the damage may have been inflicted on him."

"See you soon after seven then. Where?"

"Back at the airport. We'll need something more substantial than the little Hummingbird we've been using."

Kit had been listening and made no attempt to contain his joy after David hung up.

"This is so fantastic! I'll never get to sleep thinking about it. Didn't come properly prepared for such a side trip, though. I'll need clothes."

"You *always* need clothes, son. I'm surprised you didn't decide to attend *Nude U* next year."

"There *is* such a university?"

"There is now!"

"Now? Where?"

"Sneakily seeped into the deepest recesses of your libidinous mind."

"I see. Thank you, I suppose. I think that now I can sleep on that fantasy - as *em bare ass ing* a concept as it would be for some folks."

"I should a nude you'd have the last word."

"Sleep well, bizarre Uncle."

"Sleep well, weird Nephew."

"Uncle David?"

"Yes."

"As a pair, would that make us *weir zarre* or *biz eird*?"

"It will make us swiftly cozied into strait jackets if any body's listening, and exhausted if you don't shut up and allow us to succumb to the arms of Morpheus."

"I'm not familiar with the reference, Unc, so I'm going to envision Morpheus as a beautiful young woman clad only in a narrow swatch of the sheerest, white, gauze, swirling in a gentle breeze, her sole desire being to give me a night of unimaginable pleasure."

David didn't comment on the gross misinterpretation, but was pretty sure he, too, could drift off harboring that clearly honed image.

CHAPTER FOUR

In a rare event worthy of its place on the calendar, Kit was up first – smiling – packed – *dressed*, even!

"Time to roll out, Unc. Got things to do and places to go. Still have to get clothes for exploring the wilderness. I already spoke with Big Al and he told me what to get. There's a shop just down the street. I left half my duffle bag empty to fit the new stuff in."

"Good morning, this evening," David managed still tired and requiring extra stretching to come alive.

"Did you hear me about the clothes?"

"Yes. You're going to buy some, stuff them into the duffle bag, and cause them to become irreparably wrinkled."

"Funny. I'll go get mine now while you pack and get ready. Then I'll help you pick out yours."

"You've become my fashion police?"

"No. I'll work out the kinks of store navigation so you can get in and out in a hurry. Al suggests leather boots with steel toes and a notched heel and fatigues with lots of zipper pockets."

"I can certainly identify with the *fatigue* part of all that. Aren't you worn out after yesterday?"

"I'm the resilient, *young*, Lawrence, remember? I slept like a rock. See you in ten minutes. Store is south, five doors."

After shopping and a four star dinner at *Pedro's Good Food* – Pedro explained the English name added foreign intrigue to the place – they drove to the airport. Kit surveyed the tarmac through his binoculars and soon located their Goose and the new helicopter sitting beside it.

"What's with the barrels?" Kit asked referring to those attached to the front and back on the landing skis.

"Extra fuel" Connie explained. "None to be had where we're going. Figured you'd rather fly out than tie this thing down to flat boat and paddle out."

"You got that right. What's our course?"

"I'm suggesting a straight line from here to there. Following the river will

add at least a third to the fuel we'll need."

"Fly the old hypotenuse, you say," Kit said kidding.

"One good *hypot* beats a right angle any day of the week."

David turned to Alex.

"You know these two?"

"No, Sir. I've never seen them before. You?"

"Never. Might be fun, though. Clearly near the edge – the use of the obtuse hypotenuse allusion."

"Check your puns at the door, gentleman," Connie said, "And climb aboard."

"No *pun* fun, Unc?"

"No pun, son."

"Not *one* pun?"

"Nor pun *run*."

"Pun *done*?"

"None!"

"Stunned!"

"I suppose I'd rather put up with up the occasional pun, than the continuously absurd run of rhymes," Connie said, grinning, then continued:

"Buckle in and away we go."

"Gently swaying, to and fro."

"I can just turn this thing off, you know."

"The rhyme was okay there, big guy, but you need to work on the meter," Kit said.

"Ever ridden upside down in one of these things?" Connie asked.

Kit zipped his lips and checked his seat belt.

The view was spectacular. The lush green lowlands gave way to the green foot hills and then the browns and grays of the irregularly abutted mountains. Connie held to a course that mimicked the terrain, at times providing the feel of a carnival ride. The air became cold as they rose with the mountains then warmed considerably as they descended into the valleys. It was his intention to keep them comfortable.

They cruised at close to one hundred miles an hour. It would go faster but the increased fuel consumption was unreasonable. The trip would take between four and five hours. It grew dark. The full moon cast long, crisp, shadows as it played hide and seek with the mountain peaks.

* * *

"We are crossing the *Sao Francisco* below and will follow that tributary straight ahead," Connie announced via the headsets. "It leads back upstream to the point you determined was of interest. I'm going to keep the river to our left, considering the black dot is on the far mountain to that side."

"Really. You see the black dot through those goggles?" Kit quipped.

"Could be a *red splat* if you don't behave yourself."

"Looks right to me," David said.

He pointed to where the main river split at the bottom of the treasure map.

"We wondered why it split and why that wasn't represented on the map. It was. What we took for an inverted V representing the division was actually the mark for another small mountain. No wonder it's divided."

Kit nodded keeping his eyes peeled for something that would indicate the location of the spot on the map. There was nothing obvious. The area was streaked with deeply shadowed, dark crevices that ran the mountain top to bottom.

"Where do you want us to set down?" Connie asked.

"Best campsite close to the dot."

"I'm not really comfortable basing this mission on the position of an imaginary black dot," Kit said, semiseriously.

"Like I said," Connie came back, "We can go for the red . . ."

"I'll acquiesce to the use of the dot."

Alex pointed to a generally flat area to the west of the main river. Connie soon had them on the ground. The base of the mountain was to their back – the northwest. The Stream that ran from the mountain passed them and entered the river just to the south. The valley floor was lush with narrow leaved grasses in unending hues of greens, russets, and gold tinged whites.

It was going on one a.m. by the time the two tents were raised and sleeping bags unrolled.

"Come help me with the raft," Connie said to Kit.

"Going sailing tonight?"

"No. Watch and learn."

They carried the compact bundle of yellow and black rubber to the edge of the little stream. Alex placed it on the stream bed covered by eighteen inches of water.

"You're spooking me, big guy," Kit said.

"Just pull the cord and inflate it. Then, come and stand on the bottom to keep it underwater."

"You brought an inflatable submarine? – A yellow submarine!"

Kit pulled the cord and jumped on board as it struggled to life, ballooning through a fickle repertoire of protracted, contorted, erratic, starts and stops.

"You realize it's now full of water," Kit said once it had assumed its proper shape and size. "I thought the idea was to keep the water *out* of a boat."

"Help me pull it up on shore."

"No explanation? Just, 'pull it up onto shore' loaded with water, which is ice cold in case you hadn't noticed through your madness."

"Grasshopper must put one and one together and see if he can figure out my madness."

"One and one just won't cut it. It would take at least one *Freud* and one *Jung* to begin fathoming your warped psyche."

Back at the tents Kit still had things to say.

"The man has just flooded our boat. He referred to me as an insect. He forced me to freeze my feet in water that is for all intents and purposes one iota this side of solid ice. Have I no rights or say so in anything anymore?"

"But he did select a wonderful campsite," David said. "Can't we give him a pass this time?"

"I suppose. When do we take off for the mountain?"

David looked at Alex.

"We have day and night mixed up on our sleep schedule. I'd feel better waiting until dawn."

"I for one can manage a cat nap," David said. "I've not quite recovered from the labor of yesterday and the day before."

"Connie and I have also skimped a bit since we arrived. I imagine we can manage a few winks, too."

"I can continue looking over the material about LaPique that I've collected on the CDs here," Kit said.

"Also, see if there happen to be any better maps of this area – that mountain in particular," David said. "It has a name: *Machado da montanha*. Somebody out there in cyberspace must know about it."

"Okay. Yes. That first, then. You old guys rest up. I'll rouse you with the sun."

As it turned out the *sun* roused Alex who then roused Kit who had lapsed into dreamland sometime earlier.

By five they were fed. Kit knelt by the stream to wash up. Alex let him begin, and waited for him to start complaining about the freezing temperature.

"You might want to use the water in the raft," he suggested after allowing a few minutes of pain and protestation.

Kit looked back at him puzzled. He moved to the raft. His face brightened.

"I now see the method your late night madness. I apologize for having doubted you. This water is twenty degrees warmer."

"By midafternoon it'll be warm enough for a hot bath," Alex said.

"You amaze me," Kit said all quite seriously.

"I know. I often amaze myself."

"I've been looking at the area up there where the cave is supposed to be," Connie said. "If there is an opening it must be set way back inside the narrow V made where the two sections of the mountain begin diverging. Then, see that outcropping above the area. What I'm saying is I don't believe we can get the copter close enough to drop anybody off. It looks to me like a stroll up the mountain is our only way to access it. I'm open for suggestions, however."

"I've been wondering about that myself," David said. "Do you want to take it up and look it over?"

"I'm with Connie on this," Alex said. "No way short of Tarzan swinging from a vine suspended below it could anybody get in there."

"Okay, then. It's climbing time," Kit said. "That doesn't look like it will be a picnic either."

They made ready. Alex led the way.

The base of the mountain formed a gentle, grassy slope up some three hundred feet. It then steepened and soon left the soil behind in favor of more or less solid rock with boulders perched precariously on irregularly shaped outcroppings. Alex cautioned the others not to lean against them for fear they would tip and go careening down the mountain side. It was another vote against using the helicopter. The wind it would create could well do the same and they'd have a massive problem on their hands.

At nine, Alex called a halt.

"Let's make a tentative decision about where we're heading. Who has the map?"

"It's here," Kit said removing it from the zippered pocket on the left side of his jacket. "Looks to me like it's right about where that deepest arched shadow is up there."

The others gathered around to look.

"I agree with Kit, Alex said. The rest of you?"

They nodded.

"What route would you have us climb to get there?" Alex asked clearly posing the question to Kit.

He studied the terrain taking it as a challenge.

"Straight on up from here to that narrow ledge sunken into the mountain just bellow that extensive outcropping east and west. Then cross it to the right, over to the shadowy area. It looks to lead right to where the cave has to be."

"Excellent choice. You want to lead?"

"Really?. You think I'll know what to do?"

"I'll be right behind. It's hook together time."

Alex removed the coil of rope he was carrying across his chest. He had Kit secure one end around his waist and then at fifteen foot intervals he made large, noose-like slip knots – one for him and one for David. Connie tied the other end around his waist.

"If anybody slips the rest of us must lean into the mountain side. It will provide leverage and support until we can work out a plan to right things."

"Maybe you should take the lead," Kit said having second thoughts.

"Nope! You're our guy. Go!"

It was another hour's climb up to the ledge. Once there, they found it varied in width from several yards to little over a foot. There had been very little

conversation. Then Alex voiced a caution.

"When it narrows and you have to begin side stepping, always face into the mountain. The body is better suited to adjust its balance that way."

By eleven the sun had cleared the shadowed area.

"A cave!" Kit said pointing. "Not much footing between here and there. The ledge looks like it's been intentionally chipped away. No more than six inches the last fifteen feet or so. Suggestions, please!"

"Time to pound a few security measures into the face of this old mountain," Alex answered.

"Anchors and carabiners, you mean? I learned to use them at survival camp a few summers ago."

Alex put the first one in place beside him. Kit watched attentively, refreshing his memory. Alex hooked in the rope, then handed the hammer and parts to Kit.

"Move along another three meters and put in another one," Alex said.

Kit nodded and moved on carefully, facing the mountain and taking shorter and shorter side steps. He installed the anchor, attached the carabiner, and clipped the rope inside.

"Oh, oh!" Kit said.

"What?" Alex asked.

"Well, I'm not really experienced in this kind of thing, but I'd swear there are a series of six holes between here and the cave that look a whole lot like anchor holes to me. I'm betting somebody's already been here."

"One way to find out," David said.

"Onward and upward, you mean?"

"Your choice."

"Okay. Another hand full of anchors, Alex."

"I wouldn't use the old holes, tempting as they are. They appear to be really old and eroded. Might crumble. Find some new horizontal cracks as starter openings if you can."

Kit went about his business according to the suggestions. As the ledge narrowed to almost nothing, he was inserting the anchors every three feet and supporting most of his weight with the rope.

He advanced to within six feet of the cave. He reached as far to his right as he could, making ready to pound in another anchor. The ledge below his feet gave way sending the remaining narrow slab of rock tumbling toward the valley floor. Kit hung there, suspended from a single anchor.

"It appears you installed that one well," Alex said calmly, playing down the problem.

"If it's all the same, I'll take suggestions over compliments right now," Kit said.

"Suggestion one," Alex said. "Don't look down."

Kit immediately looked down.

"I can see why," he said immediately looking back at Alex. Number two, please."

"Can you reach that old hole just to your right?"

Kit surveyed the distance.

"See if you guys can pull me up about a foot."

"Catch this, first. It's an expandable anchor. Slip it into the hole and then pound it on in. Ribs will expand to keep it securely in place."

.....

"Done," Kit called back. "Attach the rope now?"

"Yes."

"Okay . . . There . . . seems secure."

"Gradually transfer your weight to it. If it holds put in one more in that next hole to your right. From there you can reach the lip of the cave with your feet."

"*When* would have been a better choice of word – *When* not *if* it holds."

"You're initiating a discussion of lexiconic precision as you dangle three hundred meters in the air?"

"I don't want to leave any loose ends in case . . ."

"Case meaning the inflectional form of a noun, pronoun, et cetera?"

"No time for jokes, Big A."

"Let me at that next hole."

"I believe that was our focus a half dozen exchanges ago."

.....

"Secure. Weight transferred. Foot on solid rock. This will be a tricky balancing act to get from here to there. Be prepared to give me some slack when I call for it."

Alex slipped out of the rope and removed the slip knot adding three feet to the length. He clipped the rope to his belt.

"We're ready back here," he called.

"Not sure I am up here but here goes. Slack time."

"Nice work, boy!" Alex said. "Now one more anchor on the far wall of the entrance up about six feet. Secure your end of the rope to it with a square knot. We'll do the same here. It will make a taut support line for us to follow."

"Your welcome!" Kit said as he placed the anchor and began pounding. "It's going in at pretty severe downward angle. That should provide even more strength, right?"

"Right, if it doesn't splinter the rock and come loose."

"Seems very solid to me."

"Okay, then, here I come."

He turned around addressing David and Connie.

"I'm going to suggest that the two of you remain out here until Kit and I reconnoiter a bit in the cave. If there's nothing there you won't need to cross

over here on thin air.”

They understood. Connie demonstrated how to cinch up the ropes for a more secure hold. David followed his lead.

The cave opening was small, perhaps six feet tall and as wide at the base. Inside it quickly became larger – a room some fifteen feet wide and ten feet tall. The wall's surface was irregular and oddly dry. It extended back thirty feet and then turned to the west – their left.

“I’ll go first and take a look see,” Alex said. “I agree with your impression out there, by the way. That ledge had intentionally been chipped away. Whether by LaPique or someone who came after him I can’t say, of course.”

“So, you think he may have booby trapped this place?”

“Can’t be too cautious. We know very little about how he operated. Hard to believe he’d just leave a treasure without taking some precautions.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. You really think he’d endanger his own son?”

“A man’s man would take proper precautions. I’m sure LaPique envisioned his sons to be all man like he was.”

“I assume they were a big disappointment to him if he ever really got to know them. Not a big family man the way I read him.”

“Let’s move to the back. Break out the flashlights.”

Kit had a thought as he followed close behind the big man.

“Those old anchor holes could have been made and used by LaPique and his men while they were chopping away that section of the ledge.”

“Interesting. Certainly a possibility. I just imagine he may have weakened what remained – so it would fall away like it did when it was faced with a man’s weight.”

They stopped at the bend and searched the area to their left with their lights. A large chest sat atop a low, stone, base, at the opposite end of a long, narrow, room.

“Stay here. I’ll take a few steps inside,” Alex said motioning Kit to stay put.

He stopped several yards into the room. He examined the floor ahead and the ceiling above. He took two more steps and repeated the process. From there he had a better look at the chest and its surroundings. Behind it were three, tar coated, timbers that appeared to be wedged between the floor and ceiling. Their bases were hidden from view by the chest.

Alex motioned Kit to enter and come to where he was standing.

“What two things would seem to be unnecessary over there?” Alex asked.

“The upright logs for one thing. I suppose the chest really wouldn’t need to be sitting on that rock structure, as dry as it is in here.”

“Very good. Why do you suppose it is so dry? That’s not typical of caves,” Alex pointed out.

It was an information seeking question and not a test.

They both looked around, sweeping their lights across the area.

"I see three major fault openings in the ceiling," Kit said. "They may be natural vents. There is a continuous draft from the opening into this room. Also it is not as cool back in here as I would expect such a deep cave to be. The heated breeze has warmed it up."

"Yes. Good observations. I can feel the air moving up into this first crevice. Let's see about the next."

They moved ahead another two yards.

"Nothing here," Kit said

"This last one is also blocked. Nothing moving in or out of it," Alex said.

He began to move forward.

"Wait, Al!" Kit said reaching out and grabbing his jacket.

"What?"

"Something odd about that section of ceiling that runs from that clogged crevice back to just above that center timber behind the chest."

"I see. The rest of the ceiling has a clearly solid, smooth, rippled, surface. That strip looks like a vein of smaller rocks held in place with mortar. Three meters long and thirty centimeters wide (a foot). What do you make of it?"

"Not sure but it may explain all these chard-like chips of rock on the floor over against the wall to the right."

"Ah! Excellent. As if they might have been chiseled out of the ceiling to make an inverted trough for some reason. That's a sizeable pile."

"It's as if there may be a hidden channel or pipe or something up there in the ceiling."

"Why?" Alex asked.

"I think it may be time to bring in the brain trust from out on the ledge," Kit suggested.

"I think you're right. You go get them. I'll continue to speculate until you come back."

Five minutes later the four of them were examining the situation.

Alex had moved to the chest but cautioned the others to stand back.

"The base is interestingly constructed," he said. "There are four large slabs of rock around the outside, each forming one side. There is another one cut to just fit inside the opening they make. I detect no mortar or packing of any kind. In fact there is a good centimeter of open space all around the top piece."

"A centimeter – about a third of an inch," Kit said translating the measurement aloud for himself.

"I'm going to move far enough to the rear to examine the back of the stone base," Alex said.

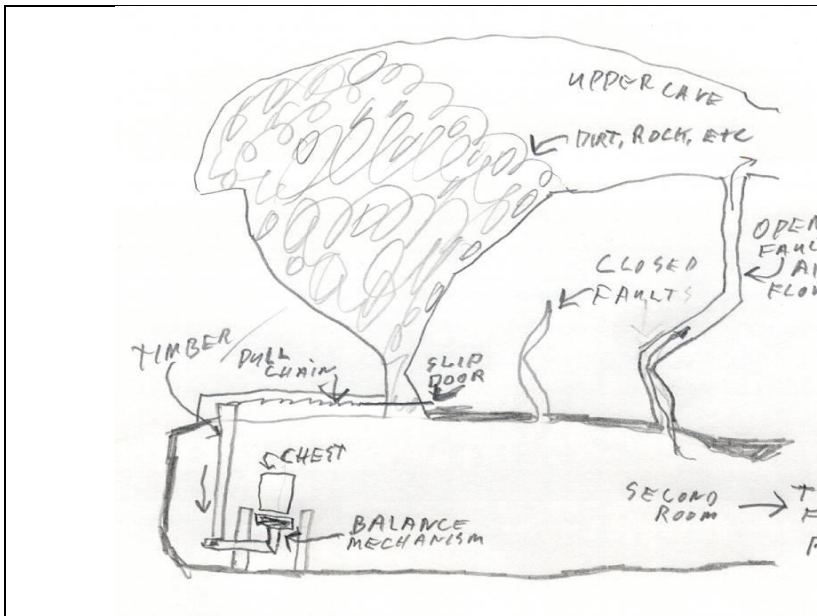
"I have a theory," David said at last.

The others all turned and looked at him, waiting.

"A weight triggered trap straight out of the pharos' tombs. That top slab on the rock base is sitting on a spring or series of springs or some such

arrangement. Not sure how it may be configured. When the weight on top – the chest – is removed, that top stone slab moves up triggering something that has to do with one or more of those tar covered timbers and that poorly disguised channel across the ceiling. My best idea is that one of the timbers rises or settles forcing out of place whatever is blocking the rear crevice in the ceiling. It is probably filled with sand or small stones – enough to fill this place so quickly the treasure hunter would not stand a chance.”

“I think you have something, David,” Alex said from behind the chest. “The center timber is ingeniously hinged at a ninety degree angle – slot and tongue style – to a similarly sized section of log protruding from the back of the base. When the slab rises, the vertical timber lowers. It undoubtedly pulls something – chain,



David’s side view of the second cave room and booby trap

perhaps – through the channel in the ceiling. The chain is probably connected to a slide – like a long narrow door covering the crevice opening. When it is pulled open whatever is up above is released. The top of the crevice must open somewhere directly above this

cave.”

“Inside another cave up there, I imagine,” Kit said. “If it opened into the outside it would fill with rain water, adding lots of weight and in the least dripping though to keep this lower cave wet.”

“I think you just proficiencied out of *Cave Booby Trapping 101*,” Alex said. “I’ll call Harvard in the morning and arrange a schedule change for September.”

Kit grinned.

“So how do we proceed?” David asked.

“Weight exchange might work.”

“Explain,” Kit asked.

“As we take each small parcel of the treasure out of the chest, we replace it with an equally heavy item such as those stone chips over there.”

“How much weight do you think will make the difference?” Kit asked. “It can’t be a highly sensitive operation, using timbers and slabs of stone.”

They looked at David who had become the resident expert on such devices.

“My guess is that it was designed to work when the entire chest was pulled off the base. But, let’s be far more conservative than that and proceed in five pound increments. First we need to see what’s inside so we can figure item weights.”

Alex examined all around the lid of the chest and where its lip overlapped the chest proper.

“No wires or triggering devices that I see. Just as a precaution, though, why don’t you guys step out into the entry hall, while I open it?”

“Was that really a question?” Kit asked.

“You know better than that. Leave! Now!”

They left. Kit watched, craning his neck around the corner. Alex cut the padlock with a super leveraged metal cutter from his utility belt. He removed it. Then he ran a knife blade up between the lip of the chest where it overlapped the chest proper. Years – centuries – of grime fell out as he slid it across the front and sides. That finished, he stood, grasped the lid with his fingertips along its lower edge and – to a chorus of creaks and screeches from its corroded hinges – raised it with surprisingly little effort.

“The ceiling didn’t fall in case you were wondering,” Kit said approaching Alex, assuming the condition he had just described provided permission to re-enter the area.

“Thank you. I’ve come to depend on you for such updates on the state of my wellbeing.”

“Looks to be all gold coins,” Alex said.

“We need a scales,” Kit said looking around. “Oh, there it is.”

The others were puzzled looking around and finding nothing.

“David, we’ll use your hard hat and mine. There is twine in my backpack. I need a stick-like something about a foot long.”

Connie released a clamp that held the head onto his small pick and handed Kit the handle.

“Excellent.”

With the hats hanging from the ends of the handle by foot long strands of twine and the handle balanced across the camera tripod, they had their scale.

“Now, Connie, a can of beans, please.”

“We are stopping to eat at this juncture?” Alex asked.

“Watch and learn big one. We place the sixteen ounce can of beans in David’s hat and then fill mine with coin until we strike a balance. Then we know what a pound of coins amounts to. We quintuple that to make five pounds. Next, using the coins as our base weight we begin making dozens of piles of stones,

each pile a balance to the coins in my hat. When we estimate that we have a chest full of little piles we begin removing enough of the coins to balance my hat. Then replace it with one pile of stones. Repeat until all the coins are out here and the stones are in there."

"An excellent plan," Connie said. "Just one important question. Do I get my beans back?"

It was worth a chuckle.

"Did we bring enough little canvas tote bags to carry all of this out of here?" Kit asked.

"I brought ten," Connie said.

"I brought six," David said.

"I brought eight," Alex said.

"And I brought twenty-four," Kit said, grinning sheepishly. "My basically optimistic take on life required it in case there were several chests, you understand."

"I think we came sufficiently prepared," David said smiling.

"Let's estimate total weight. We will have to carry it out of here somehow," Kit said. He then continued thinking out loud. "The chest is ten inches high, twelve inches wide and twenty four inches long. The gold pieces, though somewhat irregular in size, average almost a quarter of an inch thick and an inch and a half in diameter. In the ten inch height, a column of them would contain roughly forty. At an inch and a half each there could be eight columns across. That would be eight wide times forty high or three hundred and twenty per row. An inch and half into the twenty four inch length would allow for sixteen such rows. Sixteen times three hundred and twenty would be just over five thousand coins.

"Now, if they average two and a half ounces each – that's what the ones from the other cave averaged – it would come to twelve thousand five hundred ounces divided by sixteen gives us about seven hundred and eighty pounds. Reduce that by say fifteen percent because they aren't lined up neatly – just thrown in helter-skelter – and you have about six hundred and fifty pounds. Clearly they didn't carry it up here in that chest.

"Do you realize what that comes to in dollars, Guys?" "We're talking, say only ten thousand ounces at six hundred bucks an ounce *before* the artifact factor. That's six million dollars sitting there."

"It sounds like a lot, I know," David said but at a dollar a meal across the million street kids it will only feed the lot of them for a couple of days."

"That twenty dollar bill I put in the red kettle at Christmas time doesn't go very far, you're saying."

"That was not where my head went but I suppose extrapolated, what you say makes sense. It's that twenty multiplied by millions of such donations that makes it work."

"Back to our immediate reality, gentlemen," Alex said. "We will be carrying nearly seven hundred pounds out of here. Divide that into four back packs and we get four humongous back aches."

"Humongous!" Kit said. "Didn't know that was a part of older Greeks' vocabularies. And, it would be about one hundred and seventy five pounds per back."

"Ideas?" David said then added. "We could make three trips, I suppose – three trips three days."

"I suggest that we divide and conquer," Kit said.

"Enlighten us oh wise beyond his years, young Grasshopper," David said assuming a prayerful position.

"One: We get all the coins into tightly tied bags that are light enough to be easily handled. Two: We move the bags to the very front of the cave. Three: With one of us remaining here the others go back outside and spread out along the ledge at arm's length intervals – hands touching when arms are extended, to be more precise. Four: The one in here passes a bag to the first person outside on the ledge – well, hanging where it should be during the first twenty feet. He passes it on to the next and so on to where the last one in the row makes a pile of the bags along the ledge.

"Once all the bags are delivered over those twelve or fifteen feet, we all move on to the down side of the pile and do it all over again. When we get to the spot where we begin moving down the mountain we repeat it, handing the bags down the slope."

"We're still talking many, many, many hours, doing it that way," Connie said not intending to dismiss the plan. "If we just had that chest, we could load it part way once we begin the direct decent and let it slide the length of our ropes, empty it, and pull it up for the rest. That would increase the speed of the operation by about a thousand percent."

"But the chest needs to remain here, filled with counter weighing rocks," Kit said. "If it moves up or down more than an inch or so, Kaboom! The Ceiling opens up on us."

They became quiet in their own thoughts.

"Got it! David said. "We *can* use that chest!"

CHAPTER FIVE

"Do you think we could move that chest to the side an inch or so at a time?"

David's question had been directed at Alex.

"If we arrange a bit of leverage, we can, certainly," Alex said. "Where you going with that?"

"Instead of putting the replacement weights – the stones – *inside* the chest, what if we put them directly onto the slab itself? We maintain the same careful balance Kit worked out but we take the coins from the inside and replace the weight on the outside. We then slide the chest a bit at a time off the slab and onto the stone frame around it."

"Good going old professor guy," Kit said giving his uncle a far too forceful slap on the back.

"And here I thought the new plan would avoid the back aches."

"Sorry. Youthful exuberance."

"At the price of middle-aged wellbeing."

"I suggest we eat before we begin," Alex said – provided Connie will part with his precious beans."

"I for one will share my – let's see what I have in this back pack," Kit began – "my peaches and spam for a helping of baked beans."

"I'll throw in some English Muffins to make spam sandwiches in trade for some beans," David said.

"English muffins? You brought English Muffins to an all guy climb-a-thon?"

"Bread would squash in a back pack. Not so with these resilient, rubbery, little babies."

"You make them sound so attractive."

"I got apples and granola bars for dessert," Alex said.

"Okay, I'll share the baked beans but only two cans."

"How many did you bring?"

"Four. Would have brought more had I known they would be such good currency."

They found seats on the floor of the cave near the opening. The sun had crept back ten or so feet inside. It tempered the cool mountain air and made for a pleasant time."

"You know," Kit said eyes twinkling as he looked down over the ledge into the valley below, "If I relieved myself from up here I could honestly say that I'd peed and hit a tree from over three hundred yards."

"And your uncle would be so proud," David said chiding him.

"There's more," Kit said.

"Let's get it over with, then."

"At some point the stream would be continuing down there after it had stopped up here. It would be akin to the light we see at night from stars that no longer even exist."

"I think we'd all agree that is definitely the first analogy we have heard between an astronomical phenomenon and urination."

The others nodded their agreement.

"Thank you for letting me get that off my chest – or bladder as the case may be. I feel relieved."

It felt good to just sit and rest but twenty minutes later they began the delicate exchange procedure. Alex removed the coins and placed them in a hat in the balance scales. Kit managed the scales. Connie added the replacement stones and David, with Kit's help, removed the coins from the hat and sacked them.

It soon became a well-established and smooth operation. As the exposed end of the rock slab became full they would stop and together slide the chest another inch or so to the left. Alex had built up a pile of flat rocks the height of the base upon which to rest the far left end of the chest as it moved beyond the base support. Kit added stones to offset the weight of the chest itself. The pile of stones grew high since it took significantly more volume of rock to equal the weight of the gold.

The process took several hours. Alex kept watch on the hinged timber. They all directed frequent glances toward the odd configuration of stones across the ceiling.

"Here's a little something the boy might be interested in," Alex said reaching into the chest. "Probably means more work for the rest of us, however. Perhaps we need to take a vote on whether or not to show it to him."

"You found the map to another site! As the driving force behind this mission I hereby revoke the right of older guys to vote."

Alex handed him the small piece of hide and he examined it briefly.

"It will take more than we have here to make sense of it. Need the laptop at least. We'll wait 'til we get back to the hotel."

The bags had been piled by the opening of the cave. The chest was empty, only minimally supported by the rock slab on the base.

"You three to the front room, now," Alex announced.

"I'll slide the chest off the base and add the final few stones to maintain the weight. Don't want you in here in case there is some kind of slip up."

Reluctantly they moved around the corner. Again Kit managed to watch.

Alex piled stones along the front framing stone so they would be within easy reach. He slide the chest a tiny bit and then add a few stones to the pile on the main slab. That was repeated until the chest was clear. He hurried with it to the outer room. The ceiling held.

Applause broke out among the other three – a nervous reaction to the passing of the danger.

"So, away we go I guess," Kit said.

Alex had a different thought.

"I really think we should trip that trigger so some unsuspecting mountain climber doesn't come in here and get buried."

"It appears that in over two hundred years no climber has ventured here," Kit said. "The way the opening is set so far back in the V of the mountainside, nobody seems to have spotted it."

"More climbers every year in these parts," Connie said in support of Alex's contention.

"I suppose it would be great to see the *whatever* come down out of that crevice," Kit said. "But how?"

"How good are you at the stone pitch?" Alex asked.

"I don't know the reference."

"Throwing stones at targets – the poor kids' BB gun target range."

"Oh. I was once a fair shot."

"Here's the plan. From out here in the opening into the back room we throw rocks at the rocks we piled on the top of the slab. My theory is that when we have caused enough of them to roll off onto the floor, the slab in the base will rise and the trapdoor in the ceiling will be tripped according to David's theory."

"And the booby trap will be no more," Kit said. "Let's get at it. You old guys can play too if you want."

"We'll be the strong, deep, bench for this operation," David said. "If you two fail then the coach will undoubtedly run us in. Oh. There is no coach. Good luck then."

Connie and David sat down, backs against the wall where they could watch the main event. The other two giggled like nine year olds, pointing out to one other each fantastic shot they made.

It was not necessary to announce the end of the game. It came with a roar and an unanticipated billowing cloud of thickest dust imaginable. They moved to the front of the cave and held hankies over there noses and mouths.

Within minutes the natural ventilation system had cleared the air and they made their way back to view the area.

"Rocks, sand, soil," Kit said enumerating what he could see in the new pile.

"And last but not least, three skeletons near the top of the heap," Connie pointed out.

"LaPique was not one for leaving witnesses was he?" Kit said. "I suppose after his men had completed filling the hole from up above LaPique shot them and added them to the debris pile. The picture I'm getting of him is really not that of a nice man."

Kit's choice of words amused the others.

"He attempted a unique birth control method, didn't he?" Kit added.

The others were lost and made no attempt to hide it.

"Well, he clearly only wanted his brightest and most cautious sons to continue feeding the human gene pool. If we can expect traps like this at every sight, his dimwitted offspring would have been allowed no chance to procreate had they found the treasures."

"Interestingly," David began, "It may have been *because* of that dimwittedness – the reason they could *not* find these places in the first place and risk being killed – that, in fact, allowed them to continue to distribute their genes far and wide – assuming they inherited their father's intense interest in playful escapades with the opposite sex."

"As much as I'd enjoy speculating about LaPique's romantic adventures, we need to get to work," Alex said.

"Right," Kit agreed. "Who is going to be where?"

"You have the shortest wing span so you remain in the cave and hand out the sacks," Alex said to Kit. "Of the rest of us, David you're the lightest so how about you hang next to the cave. Then Connie on the ledge and I'll bring up the rear or would that be the front, further on?"

"Sounds good. I'm ready," Kit said. "Why the rest of you dallying around in here?"

Alex tied a short length of rope to the handle on one side of the chest. He would dangle it below him as he moved across the ledge. It took ten minutes for them to get into position. As small as the sacks were, they were surprisingly heavy – fourteen or so pounds apiece. There were fifty bags. It took twenty minutes to transfer them the twenty feet to where Alex stood.

They then shifted positions moving on across the ledge and leaving the cave behind. Kit joined the bag brigade at the rear. The footing became less precarious as the ledge widened. Those things worked to speed up the process, cutting the time in half. Two hours later they had transferred the bags the hundred yards across the ledge to the spot where they would begin the actual decent.

Alex tied three of their fifty foot ropes together. He attached one end to his waist and the other to the treasure chest. Connie moved down the mountain

side to become the catcher of the chest. It would be partially loaded up top to about one hundred pounds. The three on top would then ease it down the side of the mountain. Connie would unload it and the men would pull it back up the slope to be refilled.

It was past seven when they stacked the final bag back inside the chest aboard the helicopter. It was still ninety three degrees. Kit opted for an immediate dip in the stream.

"How does this water stay soooo frigid in weather like this?"

Not really expecting an answer, he waded out into deeper water adjusting to it inch by inch. Soon tiring of that approach he sat down covered to his shoulders yelping and complaining. That, too, soon gave way as he began adjusting to the cool and feeling the cleansing power of the swiftly running water.

The others opted for a mini clean up using the water in the raft. They teased Kit about how warm and wonderful that water was and offered a variety of contented sounds to emphasize the point.

"You guys sound like a bunch of walruses in heat."

"Not the first response I would have expected," David said, "Although upon reflection not all that odd considering the source."

"Source of the comment or source of the noises?" Kit asked.

"Your choice," David said.

"Can you get frost bite from ice water?"

"Let's do an experiment and see," Connie suggested.

"With me as the subject, I assume?"

"Yes. We thought you just volunteered."

"I might envision offering my toes for such a study but right now I'm more concerned about other vital parts."

"Do we stay the night here?" Alex asked directing the question to David.

"Ask the lad who's out there freezing his progeny. It's *his* adventure."

"You're acting as if I'm not right here taking it all in. It is a difficult choice. Stay here and sweat the night away swatting mosquitoes on lumpy sleeping bags, or return to a four star, hotel."

Alex turned to Connie.

"I didn't know these mosquitoes had lumpy sleeping bags did you?"

"Learn fascinating things every time I'm around that kid," Alex added.

"Let's eat and then move out," Kit said. "We can be back in the hotel by midnight if the sky jockey will push it a little."

"The sky jockey will need a couple of strong young arms to help refuel the bird. Let's get that handled first."

"If you will affirm that I am leaving this bathwater treat with the greatest reluctance in order to be of service in that endeavor."

"So affirmed."

Kit left the stream and headed for the raft. Making no attempt to extend

his playful, macho display, he knelt in it and splashed the warm water up on his chest and arms. He laid in it bringing life back to his legs and back.

"Okay, then. How do we go about refueling this thing?"

Connie responded methodically.

"The coiled hose there. Fasten one end to the hand pump, here. The other end goes into the onboard fuel tank – there. Then you insert the pump into the barrel opening and turn the handle until the front barrel is empty. That finished we repeat the procedure with the tank in back. We'll leave the empties here."

"That would be littering. Let's re-plug them and set them free to float the river. Maybe somebody will find them who can use them."

"Fine with me."

* * *

Bacon and eggs, fried potatoes, and mountain stream cooled orange juice became Alex's offering for the evening meal. He had built a small fire sprinkled with copper sulfate. It produced a blue-green color but more than the attractive dancing flames, every flying insect in the area dived bombed into it on its way to insect heaven.

"Most insects are attracted to blue light," he explained. "It's in part how the backyard bug zappers work."

"LaPique was a lot like that, wasn't he?" Kit asked hoping to get a meaningful conversation started.

What had seemed an obvious topic line to him fell on deaf minds around the circle. Kit tried to explain.

"Neither the zapper nor this fire, place value on life. LaPique seemed not to either."

An offering of nods suggested the others were catching up. Satisfied they were all on the same page, Kit continued.

"I have to wonder how a person comes to find life valueless."

David responded – well, the *philosopher* in David responded.

"If you had a 1904 penny worth a thousand dollars and a 1904 nickel worth five thousand dollars and you had to give up one of them in order to save the lives of your loved ones, would you give one up?"

"Of course. Probably the penny which you've configured as being worth less, yet still worth something."

David remained silent.

"Ah! This is one of those pass the kid the ball and see how he runs with it things you are so famous for in the classroom."

David frowned and pointed to his chest as if to ask, 'Me. Would I do such a thing?' "

Kit smiled. He loved such moral puzzles.

"You're saying that in order to preserve the treasures for his family – and

thereby take care of them forever – LaPique felt he had to make a choice between his family's welfare – their lives, in a sense – and the lives of a few comrades in arms who could steal that security. So, it might not be that he *didn't* value his colleague's lives but that he felt he had to make a choice. They became the penny and his family the nickel. You are, in essence, slapping my mental hand for assuming that just because he killed people he didn't value life. Not logic tight but thank you, I guess."

"Or?"

"Or . . . he really *didn't* value life, which takes us back to where we were."

"Really?"

"No. Of course not. Having that insight will always temper my view of a killer's motivation and hidden moral agenda. How about getting back to my original question. How do people come to not value other people's lives?"

The question was met with silence. No big surprise to Kit so he rambled on through a litany of possibilities.

"Perhaps they feel unloved themselves which could translate as unlovable. If one can't love himself then I suppose it may be difficult if not impossible to love others or see them as loveable. I wonder if love is an essential element in valuing life. Could be they mean the same thing – I love you / I want you to continue being. Interesting. I've often thought the opposite might also be true: I hate you / I want you to cease being. Love equals life, hate equals death.

"I've also wondered if people who become stuff and money seekers don't transfer love of self to love of stuff and money. Like saying 'I may not be worth anything as a person but look at all this valuable stuff I have been able to accumulate'. That has to lead to a state of disequilibrium in their value system. To fix it they acquire the need to accumulate even more stuff and money. That doesn't fill the void that comes without self-love so the process continues in an ever escalating, always fruitless, search for love in stuff."

"A fascinating concept to pursue," David said. "Undoubtedly holds a great deal of truth."

"I'm suddenly very interested in LaPique's history," Kit said. "From the information Father A provided I gather he was the son of a Frenchman who was a professor. The family sailed to Haiti – politics played some unspecified part in that – where his parents were killed in a political revolt in the mid-seventeen hundreds. He had a sister from whom he got separated. Mostly he made it on his own from the time he was thirteen. The history is blank until he comes on the scene fifteen years later as the fearsome Captain Louie LaPique, King of the Pirates, the Terror of the Caribbean."

"And," David added, "The *beloved* LaPique of the Brazilian coastal people."

"An odd counter personality," Kit said acknowledging with a nod the useful

insight. "An apparently merciless killer at sea and a generous, perhaps even philanthropic father figure here in Brazil. Like a godfather."

"Do you know if he seemed to be in any way selective of his targets – those flying under a certain flag for instance?"

"I got nothing about that at this point. There was one reference about how much he was hated by and feared by other pirates. It could mean he broke the code of the skull and crossbones and attacked other pirate ships. It could be why he would sail this far south when he took time off – to get way away from his adversaries. I'll have to see what I can find. It would also be interesting to see if there are any families by the name LaPique in the area. They might have some family history."

"How about a call to Father A and see what he knows about that?"

"Good idea, although you understand I had already thought it."

"No doubt."

They loaded the helicopter and five hours later were back at the hotel. Kit opted for a midnight hour poolside. With his interest piqued, David went directly to the phone book. There were only three LaPiques listed. He accessed the internet white pages and spread his search area to 200 miles. There were those three plus three others. Not many, he thought, considering the nine sons he had left behind. He became more intrigued than ever.

On a whim he searched for a 'Most Wanted in Brazil', website. After several 'Site not known' responses he hit pay dirt. The modern day pirate – *Carlos Marcus Pedro Diego LaPique*. Even more interesting. His crimes were piracy off the far northern coast. His M.O. was attacking small cruise or tour boats in the broadly defined area of the Lesser Antilles from Puerto Rico southeast to the northern coast of South America. Many of the attacks were against boats of Brazilian registry.

Apparently there were hundreds and hundreds of smaller boats that carried sightseers among the many islands in those waters. He had been known to attack as many as a dozen in one day. His specialty was taking only currency and jewelry. His boat flew the Jolly Roger.

"Glad he stays to the Caribbean," David said aloud as Kit reentered the suite.

"CMPDL."

"Huh?"

"Carlos Marcus Pedro Diego LaPique."

"You found a LaPique?"

"I found several, actually but Carlos is currently on Brazil's most wanted list – a modern day sea pirate. Does his thing mostly up in the Lesser Antilles."

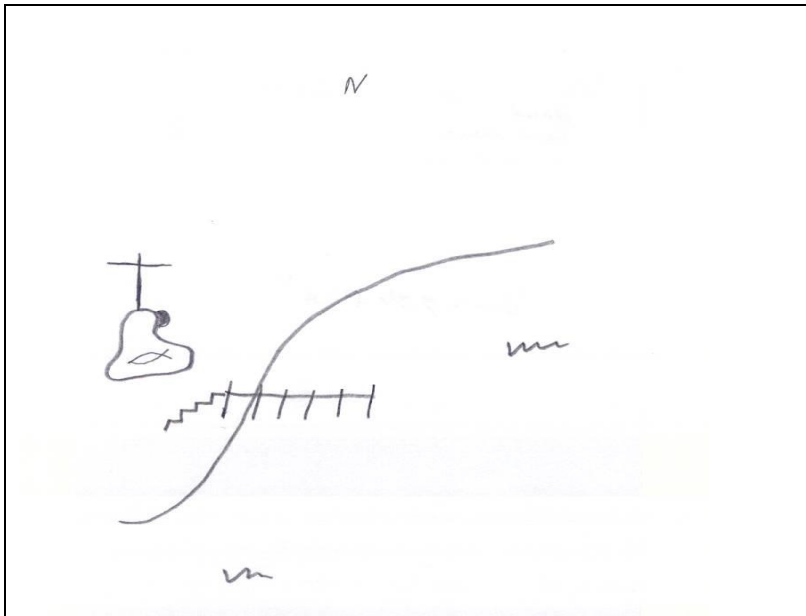
"I told you about him, didn't I?" Kit asked.

"A brief mention, I believe."

"Anything to confirm he's a descendant of Louie?"

"Nothing I've seen but then I've only just begun. We don't seem to be traveling in his circles so he's really only of passing interest, I suppose."

"But I'll bet there is a background sheet available on him somewhere. I'll



take some time and search later on. I hate to admit it but I'm bushed. A quick shower to get rid of this stinking, hazardous, chlorine and then to bed. What's the plan for tomorrow?"

"Thought *you* were leading this sojourn?"

The St. Peter Mound

"Oh. I keep forgetting. I guess we'll get onto that next map first thing in the morning. My mind is frazzled."

"Sounds like a good plan. I'll turn in as well. Eight?"

"Yeah. Eight will be fine."

* * *

After laps in the pool and breakfast, they got down to serious consideration of the new map.

"What pops out at you?" David began.

They were sitting beside each other on the couch.

"I see the curved line as a shore line with the little extended, ripply, ww's as representing water – probably the ocean but it could be a lake I guess. Although my first take was

a comb with a frizzy strand of hair hanging off one end, my more studied impression is that it represents a dock – raised way above the water for some reason with steps going down the west end."

"I see what you see so far. It leaves us the Buddha with the TV antenna sticking out of its head."

"As enticing as that image is I doubt if it's Buddha-ish. See the early Christian mark of the fish at the base of whatever it is?"

"I do now. That would turn my antenna into a cross, perhaps – *probably*, here in Catholic Brazil."

"It will likely be that configuration that will lead us to the spot," Kit said. "Speaking of *spots*, I don't see one like on the first map – the dot marking where the cave was up on the mountain."

"What about the darkened protuberance on the east side of that free form figure under the cross?"

"It's not round more half mood-shaped."

"Reconfigure it all so it *could* be a round dot."

"Ah ha! Part of it could be behind that free form with the fish on it."

"Suppose that could be a monument of some kind?" David asked.

"A free form, fish laden, cross supporting monument, close to a dock that appears to be far higher than it needs to be. Let's see if we can find some reference to it."

"I've seen wharfs like that in Norway," David said. "They were in coves – fiords – that were nearly landlocked at their opening to the sea. As the tide came in it filled the cove with water but when it receded it left way more water inside the cove than could easily drain out that small opening. So, boats that came in on the high tide needed a high tide dock for a considerable length of time each day."

"I've read about those configurations. There are some in Nova Scotia as well and they have fixed them up as hydroelectric stations. There was also one on *Pico Island*, remember. Turbines are turned as the water is released through specially engineered openings."

"So, we may be looking for a cove with a narrow opening."

"Or a place frequented by a giant who tends to lose his grooming gear," Kit added with a grin.

"Shall we vote on which?"

"Probably not necessary. Let's see if I can find a website about religious monuments. Father A might be a better starting place," David suggested.

"Excellent. I'll get him on the phone if I can catch him between masses."

"Father A. Al and Connie deliver that chest yet?"

"Yes. VERY early this morning. Looks like you hit the jackpot again."

"And we're going for number three. Need your help. Do you know of a religious monument or some such thing that has a cross on top and a line rendering of the early Christian fish across the bottom. In outline from the front it resembles a Buddha. We have no details of that. It has to have been in existence back in LaPique's time here in Brazil."

David leaned close so he could hear the response.

"I do know of it. *Cruz dos peixes de St. Peter*. Translates as Cross of the Fish of St. Peter. It is down in the area south of *Curitiba* and *Paranagua* on the coast in southern Brazil. The story is that back in the very late seventeen hundreds an itinerant priest came upon the area and thought the etching on the

rock formation resembled the face of St. Peter. Don't ask me how he knew what St. Peter looked like. There was a cross on a low hill behind it which may have influenced his identification. He carved the fish at the base. The image of St. Peter has long ago eroded away. Periodically the local parishioners replace the cross as it deteriorates. It has no official standing in the Church but does draw thousands of visitors every year. They come by the boatloads, I'm told. I've never been there."

"That's a big help. Thanks. Later. Oh, one more thing that's been on my mind lately. If you said Mass before a huge group would you refer to that as *Massive*?"

"Very clever. Actually, in my parish, I'd refer to it as unlikely."

"Touché. Later."

"Gotta love him," Kit said putting down his phone. "We have a solid lead here. Let me get on the web. How did you function in the old days?"

"We used something called libraries. They were great places to pick up girls and good destinations to suggest when needing to deceive your parents about going someplace other than where you were actually headed."

"I now see how they got their name – *lie brary*."

"I found it. Not much information here above and beyond what Father A just passed along. There is a side-bar advertisement from a ship line out of *Barbados* that makes a run down there during the first week of every month. They'll likely be there right about now."

"So, we go, do we?" David asked.

"As soon as Connie can get the old Goose ready. I see we can fly into *Paranagua*. Looks to be about fifteen hundred miles – four hours maybe. I had forgotten how huge Brazil is. I'll get Connie on it."

He made the call and then relayed the conversation to his Uncle.

"Nine a.m. now. Two hours to make ready he says. We leave at eleven. Probably get in there by four. Alex is taking care of a vehicle rental. I'll make room reservations for a couple of nights."

"How far or how long to the monument from *Paranagua*?"

"I don't know. Let me read on here. There's a map. Only about six kilometers south along the coast. Probably fifteen minutes once we're out of the city traffic. The bay is called *Baía Obstruída*. I suppose that translates as obstructed or clogged bay."

"I'm sure you're correct. It adds credence to our theory about the high wharf or dock pictured on the map."

"Let me play with the map and see if I can't get a better idea of size and terrain and such. The best map doesn't have a miles per inch strip on it."

"Many map readers call that a Legend," David said kidding him.

"My point was going to be that I can get a distance reference between points on one that has that and then create it for the best map. In fact, I am so

good there it comes now. So, we can estimate pretty accurately how big things are in and around the bay."

"Excellent."

"For example the opening into it from the ocean looks to be no more than thirty or thirty five feet in width. That's a pretty narrow passage for a cruise ship. Inside, the bay it is two hundred meters wide – like two football fields end to end. In the other dimension from shore to opening it's about a hundred and fifty meters. Oval shaped. The topographical feature map makes it appear to be a basin with high sides all around – maybe fifty feet or so. I don't know what the rise and fall of the sea would be there in feet or meters or what have you. The opening – top to bottom – I see, is V shaped so I doubt if anything larger than a row boat could enter or exit during low tide."

"Is the monument identified on the map?"

"Yes it is. About fifty meters up a gentle slope from the shore line. Evidently that puts it above the high water line. It sits on a level area with a small hill directly behind it that rises out of that little plain all around it. The only little hill I see indicated in the area."

"Okay then," David said. "I guess we're about as prepared as we can be. Let's get packed. How are you on clothes for chilly weather?"

"I'm good. Maybe we should go on out to the airport and see if we can help. I miss that jumbo computer. I'd like to do some more research on the two LaPique's."

* * *

They touched down in *Paranagua* at three thirty and were checked into the hotel by four.

"So, do we go take a look this afternoon?" David asked.

"I figured we would. Got sun until seven. The rental should be waiting – I arranged for it during the flight."

"We probably don't need the other guys on this first outing do we?" David asked.

"No. But I better let them know what's up. Big Al's motherly instincts get all aflutter if he doesn't know where we are and why he isn't with us."

Paranagua is a major port city for the entire country. It sits three thousand feet below and some sixty five miles east of *Curitiba*, the main city in the area and capitol of the province. The mountains are steep and rise almost immediately to the west of the coast. Pine trees are everywhere and their sweet scent fills the air. It is a land of breezes and fickle weather. It may be frigid during a few weeks in the summer and hot during the winter.

It was sprinkling as they left the city – not an unusual event – and dependably cold. Up on the mountain, *Curitiba* is considered the over-all coldest city in Brazil.

The road, such as it was, hugged the coast. The high tide markers

appeared to be some six to eight feet above the low tide markers. It suggested that during high tide, which came twice a day and lasted for four hours, there was very little beach left. Low tide remained for eight hours. In any event one would not want to take an extended siesta on the beach during low tide.

Fifteen minutes from the city limits they arrived at the Bay. It looked just as described. The raised wharf was massive with slips for the larger tourist boats as well as dozens and dozens of smaller, private and smaller tour boats. It was obviously new since the days of Louie LaPique.

The monument was also in clear evidence with signs, and palm-out, freelancing, guides everywhere.

"Shall we engage a guide?" Kit asked.

"Sounds like a good starting place."

"Twenty American an hour – in advance. I speak excellent English. I know everything about this place. My name is Marc – m a r c."

"Well, Marc with a C, I'm David with a D and this is Kit with a T. We'll rent an hour's worth of your expertise."

The bill was received with a smile and slipped into the young man's well worn wallet with a gentleness that engaged David's notice.

"We want to know everything there is to know about the Shrine – and please footnote fact from lore," Kit began.

The story was little more than they already knew. He added a few minor miracle healing stories but carefully asterisked them as unsubstantiated.

He offered a brochure that included a drawing of the rock with the picture of St Peter as a local artistic monk envisioned it had appeared originally.

"It was drawn from the description of the portrait as passed down through the generations. We take great pride in the accuracy of our traditional, oral, lore so you can bet it has been preserved accurately. Until recently few of the folks around here could read or write. Now our province is known around the world as one of the most literate on Earth. Every single person here has the opportunity to be educated."

"Even the street kids, the *Acidente desagradáveis*."

"They are seldom spoken of. They are more of a problem inland in the western area of the province."

"A problem?" Kit asked hoping to get a legitimate local take on the situation.

"They roam in thieving bands and have been known to beat and kill their victims."

"And why do they live that way?"

"That is not a question we like to have asked."

"Well, I won't withdraw it but you can, of course, choose not to answer it."

Marc had no further comment on the subject.

David changed the topic.

"The stone – the monument – seems to be tilted slightly backward. Has the footing settled?"

"To my knowledge it has always sat in that orientation."

"Your English is virtually flawless and your vocabulary far beyond what I would have expected. Perhaps I should apologize for that biased preconception."

Marc smiled.

"I am in my fourth year at the university up at *Curitiba*. My major is modern languages. My minor, philosophy. I dabble in anthropology."

"Your twin, Uncle David."

Kit turned back to Marc.

"Those were my Uncle's undergraduate majors, minors, and interests – along with wild women. He is a professor of Philosophy in a College in the United States. I'm off to Harvard next year – that's a little college on the East coast."

"I know of Harvard. They named a kind of beets after it."

"Yes. I suppose that might be correct."

"What about the cross up there? Can we get closer to it?"

"Sure. Come. It is not the original although when it deteriorates its replacement is exactly the same in dimensions and is meticulously reset into the same, rock lined, hole."

They climbed to the top.

"The hill looks out of place. Nothing resembling it anywhere around here on this little level area."

"Others have noticed the same thing. There has been speculation it may be a burial hill for some tribal chieftain of old."

"With a cross on top?" Kit asked.

"One of the mysteries," Marc offered in lieu of an answer.

"Ever excavated?" David asked.

"Prohibited by law. All possible burial sites are off limits without an act of the legislature and then it must be for archeological reasons and not mere nosiness."

David led the way down the rear of the hill. It was perhaps twenty feet in diameter and the same or a little less in height. It made for steep slopes – the main reason few folks ventured up to the cross, David figured.

"That slab" of rock," Kit said pointing to a four by four foot, flat, white rock, set back into the hill at the center of its base. "Does it have a story?"

"A marker so the gods would know where the person was buried in case they ever wanted to make contact. It probably had some sort of inscription on it originally but like St Peter's face it has been eroded into nothing."

"I speak and read Portuguese very poorly," David said. "But did the sign out front stipulate visiting hours here?"

"Yes. Sun up to sun down. It has been the custom for as far back as the lore goes. No one knows why for sure. The local parish provides volunteer nighttime watchmen. They have no real power but explain the stipulation to would be visitors. I am on watch this evening. It provides peace and quiet for long study periods."

"Is it considered desecration of the site to be here during the dark hours?"

"Oh, no! Nothing like that. It's just custom. I often have girlfriends up here with me to keep me company."

"So if we were to come back and poke around it wouldn't be illegal or anything?"

"No. Come when I'm here and I'll help you poke."

"Tonight be okay?" Kit asked.

"Sure. No charges after dark and, unfortunately, no girls in my future tonight."

He smiled.

"I'm finishing a paper on the relationship between Socrates and Aristotle and how they influenced each other. I'd be pleased if you'd give it a read. Oh. That Portuguese thing. Maybe I could just bounce a premise or two off you."

"Sounds like fun in fact. What time would you suggest we come back?"

"Nine or after. The lingering tourists will be gone. The tourist boat, the *Antilles*, sails at eight. That will pretty well clean up the *estrangeiros* – non-locals."

"Nine then. Can you suggest a restaurant in the area?"

"If you like Chinese I'd suggest *Wan's* on south about twenty five kilometers. There's a little park about half way between here and there if you need a spot to wait."

"Sounds fine. Thank you. Can we bring you something back?"

"That is very kind of you. Sure. Anything hot and spicy."

"Like the girls you have up here sometimes?" Kit asked.

Marc blushed. That had not been Kit's intention.

"Later then," Kit said.

Marc walked with them back toward the car.

"One thing," he said. About the *Acidente desagradáveis*. They are our greatest disgrace – to us, not them, I mean. It is such a huge problem I am overwhelmed just contemplating it. I would do anything for them but to do it openly would black ball me forever here. It just isn't done. There is a church up in *Joao Pessoa* that has a program. If you are interested you might contact the priest."

"Been there. Done that, but thanks," Kit said.

As they drove away, Marc waved and followed them with his eyes.

"I think we may have lucked into a like-minded colleague in that young man," David said.

"If we find anything do you think we can trust him to keep quiet about it?"
Kit said.

"I'd bet on it. He has a good heart and a keen social conscious but in terms of the kids he has never been able to act on it. Given this kind of opportunity, I'm certain he'll be pleased to become one of the good guys."

CHAPTER SIX

David and Kit found the restaurant and enjoyed a leisurely meal. On the way back they stopped in the park taking in the sweet scent of the pines and the melodious, though unfamiliar, songs of the birds.

The conversation soon got back to Louie.

"He's hard to figure," Kit said.

David waited knowing some explanation of the cryptic beginning would be forthcoming.

"I can see how he would believe a competitive spirit was important and something he wanted to instill in his sons, so I can see how the competition for the individual treasures became a part of all this – the dual sets of maps. I mean, competition was his whole life. He waged his own sort of war against the ships of the affluent for dozens of years. War is, I suppose, the ultimate competition.

"But I'm hard put to see why he added the cooperative aspect where they had to share their individual maps to win the ultimate prize. How did cooperation come to be important enough to reign at the end of it all? How must he have characterized the two concepts?"

The questions had not really been intended to solicit answers or even ideas from his uncle – more just to set the parameters for his own mental rumination.

"Back in my younger days when my philosophic tirades were looked upon as cute rather than disturbing, I decided two things about all that. Competition should never hurt anyone and cooperation should always be helpful. With those characterizations I could live with both. I figured it was how *you* saw things.

"The notion emerged from my horrendous experience in youth baseball. I hope mine was unique but I doubt it. I must say it had all gotten off to a pretty good start. That first day the coach said – what I now understand is a feeble, trite, aphorism – 'There is no I in team'. It made immediate sense to me. I began to feel comfortable. This team thing was going to be a fine experience based on

altruism and cooperation. Then came tryouts – cut-throat tryouts – which quickly worked to weaken the overall concept.

"The entire configuration of the team thing was soon sent packing by the more all-encompassing philosophy of 'win at all costs'. The next time the coach dragged out the, 'No I in team thing', I countered with, 'And there seems to be no F U N in baseball'. Needless to say that didn't go over so well and I didn't return.

"It was by mutual agreement: Coach clearly didn't want a boy on his team that had come to have fun above everything else, and I wasn't inclined to be a part of an endeavor, the sole aim of which, seemed to be directed at crushing the opponent – characterized as an innately evil group who, we were being told, was 'Never to be feared but always to be hated'."

Kit handed off to David.

"I remember that summer – well, *that week* of that summer. As I recall, you even delivered a book to your coach, which you thought he should read."

"I'd forgotten about that. I did. That very evening when I marched over to his house to turn in my uniform I also presented him with a copy of one my favorite books, *Kidd's Grand Adventure**. In it, a similar situation had developed in a small town and the Grandfather invented a baseball game called *Scramble* in which having fun was the only goal. Which team won was of no importance because the membership of each team changed every inning – scrambled. I figured *that* enlightened offering would certainly set the coach's philosophy straight."

"And did it?"

"No. We never spoke of it, actually. Perhaps I should go talk it over with him and tie up the loose ends. I stand by my early feelings about competition and cooperation – the no hurt clause I've inserted into my characterizations. I'm not sure where that leaves *competition*, though. Can you have competition and not have pain inflicted on somebody?"

"After every ballgame the members of one entire team felt bad, sad, sometimes distraught, even. After a tournament beginning with ten teams, nine went home sad, feeling bad about themselves – less worthy than before, even. I can't see how intelligent adults can think such an activity can be in any way helpful. To help kids learn how to deal with defeat, maybe? That sends a humongous negative message about life – Be prepared, kids, because the life you have will be filled with disappointment after disappointment. We are preparing you here to adjust to a life of ubiquitous defeats and rampant humiliation.

"If there is to be competition it must be something separate from proving or disproving a kid's innate worth and the outcome certainly should not be made the basis for happiness or unhappiness. Enjoy the activity – the moment within the activity. That's how I'm living my life."

"Some say competition is the basis for most of man's progress down through the past four or five hundred years," David offered without comment.

"That may be true but was that *really* the *best* way to achieve those ends? People, who promote that idea, never seem to be willing to consider that the same ends could have been achieved through creative configurations of cooperation without all the heartache and life-crushing events, which that practice inflicts. But, you and I have spoken of it before.

"I have another observation, then I'll get off my high horse – an interesting expression to trace back to its roots, by the way. It seems to me that highly competitive people tend to exist at the highest end of selfishness. Highly cooperative people tend to be altruistic. Sometimes I wonder if one causes the other: Are altruistic people initially more cooperative? Are cooperative people intrinsically more altruistic? Does unbridled selfishness lead to competitiveness? Does competition breed selfishness?

"Lots of questions. Maybe during this coming year I can devour the research on the subject. Surely there is research relating to it, isn't there?"

"Some for sure. How much I'm not certain. Bits and pieces but maybe not the whole enchilada as you have laid it out. It is likely not that simplistic. I would suggest that you study a few philanthropists and a few godfathers and see what their life styles do to your configuration."

* * *

Alex and Connie were waiting in the parking lot when Kit and David pulled in. It was 9:05. Kit delivered the take-out to Marc as David filled their colleagues in about the local customs.

"So, it's bribing a Brazilian college student with a hand full of egg rolls in return for access to a sacred burial ground," Alex said.

"Something like that, I suppose."

David pulled out the map.

"The dot, which on the other map indicated the treasure cave, seems to be partially hidden behind the statue, here. I've been thinking that means it is indicating the hill behind it. Other interpretations?"

They shrugged.

"Let's go look things over," Kit suggested. "If the chest is buried under ten tons of earth it will just have to remain there. That really can't be the likely scenario considering LaPique's apparent purpose for hiding it was so his son could find it."

"Probably more booby traps?" Alex asked his tone assuming it to be the most likely case.

"Perhaps, unless this son was a favorite or something."

They met Kit at the monument.

"Hey, Guys. This is our new friend, Marc with a C."

"Cmark?" Connie said feigning surprise. "Different, at least."

"The lot of them are straight jacket material," Kit said as if explaining the absurdity to his new friend.

Marc smiled.

"I'll be up top convincing myself you aren't here, should you need me."

"I suppose we begin with the rock out front," Kit said.

They looked it over and touched it here and there. Kit pulled out the brochure that contained the drawing of the face that supposedly once graced it.

"*St. Peter*, you say?" Alex said looking surprised and reaching into the inner pocket in his jacket.

He removed a folded sheet of paper.

"I spent some time on the web myself, this afternoon. I found three artist renderings of our friend Louie. I arranged them into one file and printed them side by side. Take a look."

The others moved in close.

"It poses a major problem," Kit said. "All three of them look like this picture of St. Peter. Either St. Peter pillaged under the pseudonym, Louie LaPique, or it was actually LaPique's image that had been originally engraved onto this stone."

"And do you have a preference between those possibilities?" David asked playfully.

"Or," Connie said. "They say we all have a double somewhere out there. Perhaps LaPique just happened to be St. Pete's double."

"Since it is about a billion times more likely that in 1775 someone could have portrayed Louie's image with some degree of accuracy than St. Peter's, I'll go with Louie," Kit said.

"It is interesting," David noted, "how closely all four of the portraits resemble each other – the shoulder length black hair, the eyes set wide, the large, broad nose, the heavy eyebrows, and the well managed black beard reaching to the center of his chest."

"He certainly looks less *saintly* and more *pirately* to me," Kit said.

"I guess that pretty well clinches that we have found the spot," Alex said. "Back to that dot and the hill behind the monument."

They made their way up the front of the hill searching the grass. Kit lingered out front and sighted to the spot he figured the dot targeted. Alex knelt there and examined the ground.

"Nothing here. What happens if we extend that line *through* the hill to the rear of the mound?" he asked.

Kit walked to a spot a number of yards back from the east side of the hill. He drew an imaginary line through the hill and noted where it exited. Keeping his eye on that spot, he walked to the rear.

"It's the large white stone."

"If he had intended that as the spot, why not draw a side view and just

indicate it?" David asked.

"Perhaps there is something important about the path that line takes," Marc said from on top of the hill. "Sorry, I was listening and although I have no ideas what's going on, that possibility popped into my mind – *popped*, is that the correct usage?"

"Quite correct," Kit said.

He knelt in front of the stone and sighted backwards.

"The line travels directly under the base of the cross to the bump on top of the monument up front."

"So, it ties together the only three structures involved," David said thinking aloud.

"Do you suppose they interact in some way?" Kit asked.

"The stone slab in the rear seems to serve no purpose, unless it is as Marc suggested of some religious significance," David said.

He turned to Marc.

"Back to the odd placement of this mound. Do you know of any others like it?"

"No. In school we study the history of our ancestors. Nowhere are there such mounds on this side of the continent."

"Then, it seems safe to assume it is of LaPique's making," David said.

Kit nodded and moved back to the front.

"What's wrong with the monument, guys? I mean if you were going to plant a monument would you do it in any way differently?"

The others gathered. Marc slid down to join them.

"It's off balance," Connie said.

"It tips toward the back," Marc said.

"The leaning tower of St. Peter?" David added.

"So, how can we use that?" Kit asked. "Did you hear me? I'm sounding like my Uncle."

"Could be considerably worse than that, I'd say," Connie offered.

Kit smiled at David.

"Yes. It could. It was a frivolous comment."

"Risking sounding like David," Marc began with a smile, "What would be accomplished by leaning it backward like that?"

"Excellent!" David said moving to the monument and examining the base.

He pulled the soil away down several inches in one spot. "It sits on another stone slab buried down here. That slab is set level. It is the bottom of the monument that is slanted."

"That seems to be lock on the fact its tilt is intentional," Kit said.

"If it is set up to tip back, that could be to assure that it *doesn't* tip forward," Alex said.

"Shall we see if it will tip forward and what happens if it does?" David

asked.

The four of them looked at Marc.

"You are invisible to me. I'm up there on the top of the hill. May I help push?"

"Welcome to our merry little band," David said, offering his hand. "I'm Robin, that's Little John, that's Friar Tuck and then there's the kid there who we just can't seem to shake."

It was worth smiles and chuckles.

"I suppose you deserve to know what this is all about," David said, again addressing Marc. "It will seem strange . . ."

"Odd. . ."

"Bizarre . . ."

"Twilight Zone-ish . . ." each of the others added emphasizing the concept.

"Not sure I want to know, now," Marc said not entirely humorously.

"Kit has been concerned about the homeless, street children in South America for some years now. We stumbled upon a way to help finance a program for them. Kit has set it up with Father Angelico, the priest you mentioned up at *Joao Pessoa*. The weird part is that the finances come from treasure buried in various places by a pirate named LaPique in the late seventeenth hundreds. So far we have uncovered two of the sites. The map we have specifies this as another. It is why we are here – to help the street kids."

"I am happily onboard then. My heart is racing. Thank you for trusting me and all."

"Okay," Kit said. "Now. Let's see if this thing moves."

"I will suggest that two of us stand in front to catch it if it should fall," Alex said.

"Good! How about you and Connie," Kit said.

The other three positioned themselves at the rear of the stone and gently began to push. Nothing."

"Perhaps with a bit more vigor, men," David said. "We probably don't need to worry about breaking it."

They pushed harder. It tipped ever so slightly then settled back.

"I think we have something here," David said. "You two ready out front? Here we come. One, two, three, *shove!*"

The effort required could be called monumental!

It moved, laying out at a forty five degree angle to the front. It held itself in place.

"Thanks for all your help out front Big Guys," Kit said.

"Any time."

Before there could be more by-play the cross on the hill slid some four feet into the ground with a thump. Alex and Connie both pointed. The others turned around.

"OOPS!" Kit offered.

A small cloud of dust rose from the back of the mound. Kit and Marc ran to determine its source.

"The slab of stone is face down on the ground back here. And there is a hole into the side of the hill where it stood. Also, a wooden . . . what would you call it . . . a *plunger* perhaps, sticking out through the top of that opening – as if it is what forced the rock to tumble over. We need a flashlight. Apparently the moon beams don't turn corners here in Brazil."

"Strictly a Winter phenomenon," Marc joked clearly excited, then added, "This is really going to be hard for me to explain, you know."

"If nothing goes wrong, we'll put it back like it was," Kit said.

The others were immediately at the rear providing light.

"Stone steps?" Marc said as if asking the others to confirm what he thought he saw.

"Most likely booby trapped stone steps," Kit said not explaining. "Ideas, Guys?"

Kit stretched out on his stomach to get a longer angle view into the large hole.

"A small room seven feet high and six or seven feet wide. Runs almost the length of the hill. There is a *you-know-what* at the far end."

"A *you know what*?" Marc asked puzzled by the phrase.

"A chest, undoubtedly filled with gold coins or jewels or both."

"I have a booby trap theory," Alex said kneeling beside Kit. "Don't know how, but I'd bet it is somehow rigged to have the whole hill collapse into the room down there, burying the ill-cautious intruder."

"Reasonable," David said.

"Most likely associated with walking across the floor, then," Connie added.

The others nodded. Kit continued relaying his observations.

"The floor is closely laid flat rocks of irregular sizes. The steps are stone slabs. I can't see the ceiling from here. It's above the opening. The bottom of the cross did not come through the ceiling. It clearly played some part in moving the white slab back here. There is a single stone pillar in the center of the room – about ten inches square."

"We need lots more light here," Connie said. "Al, always prepared, had the foresight to bring some propane lanterns. Let me go get them."

"I'll help," Marc offered, clearly enjoying his newly found membership in the 'Save the Street Kids by Risking Life and Limb Club'.

"I believe I've figured out how the slab door opening mechanism works," David said taking out a small pad from his jacket pocket. He began to sketch as he talked. Kit and Alex watched over his shoulder.

"When the monument is tilted forward it pulls a chain which lies in some sort of channel – a rock protected pipe-like conduit – probably three sided, point

at the top for long term stability under the weight of the dirt. The other end is attached to a pin or piece of something that supports the very heavy cross across a deeper opening below it. When that is pulled away it allows the cross to fall. Its weight pushes something – probably a series of round rocks around a curved corner – that pushes the plunger to the rear and topples the rock slab back there."

"Cool. This LaPique was either super smart or employed an engineer," Kit said taking the sheet from David to examine it close up.

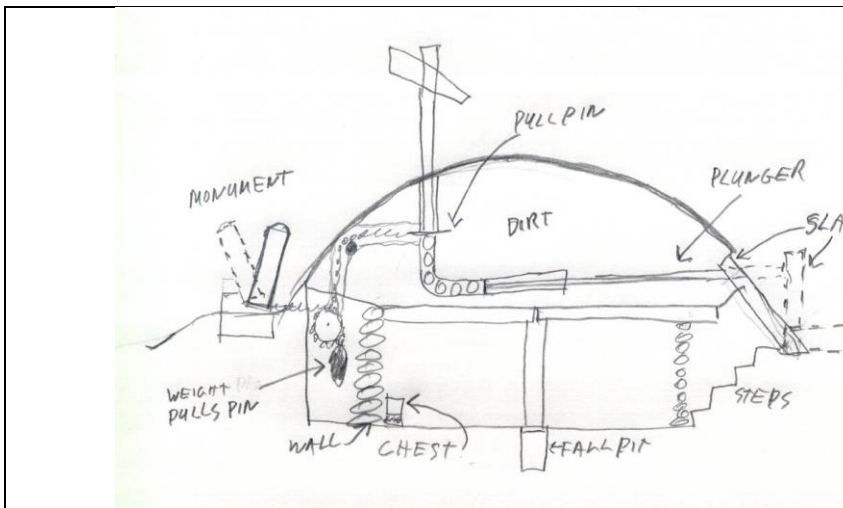
"One problem, Unc. When the top of the monument moves forward the chain pulls but then *slackens*."

"Good observation. I believe it pulled a pin that released a weight. Here, what if we add this kind of a gizmo just behind the wall we see at the front from back here?"

Kit handed him back the pad. Again David talked as he sketched.

"The chain pulls a pin which holds a sprocket wheel in place. When it is allowed to turn it drops a weight into a pit below. *That* weight is attached to the pin holding up the cross. It is actually the weight of that very heavy stone or whatever in the pit that slides the cross's support pin free."

"Okay," Kit said. "I'll buy that but why not just do some



David's sketch of the Monument and Treasure Cave

sort of rod straight from the monument to the slab in the rear – tilt the slab and push the monument."

"A matter of leverage I imaging. Tilting at the maximum, the monument could only move a rod a few inches. Not enough distance and it would take such strength to tilt the monument that it could not be guaranteed to work. It needs

lots of weight – like that over-sized cross – to handle the weight of the slab and the slab had to be extremely heavy to keep folks from just moving it for whatever reason."

"LaPique might have started the rumor about it being a sacred burial place just to keep folks from tampering with it," Kit added.

"Likely, in fact," David said. "We are rapidly forming the picture of a very bright LaPique."

"Supposedly, his father was professor. That would make him bright and bright people tend to marry other bright people. It would seem he would have had the smart genes."

The others returned with the lanterns. As Alex and Kit lit them, David explained his sketch to Connie and Marc. They were clearly impressed.

"How can you just figure things like that out of thin air? Marc asked. "*Out of thin air* was used correctly?"

"Yes."

"It is difficult to practice idioms on anybody but native speakers of a language. Thank you and go on."

"I've always been a tinkerer. The Spring I was ten I built a disappearing tree house. The floor was made of three, wide, side-by-side slabs cut from a huge tree trunk. The underside remained rounded with the bark still attached. The roof was of similar design but with the bark on top. The sides were made from gunnysack material. When I wanted it to disappear – I couldn't be in it of course – I'd release a counterweight – sacks of sand tied along a rope dangling down the back side of the tree from a pulley system.

"The fabric sides would drop onto the floor, the roof would drop down from its hinges curving to fit against that side of the trunk. The floor – hinged at the tree trunk, also – would be pulled up against it meeting the roof. The bark made it all look like the tree itself. Took ten seconds. I continued to amaze the old folks for the entire summer. At least they humored me relative to it!"

"And you became a philosopher and not an engineer?" Marc asked.

"Somewhere along the way I became distracted by the philosophic consequences and social impact of technology."

"Got things lit up," Kit announced. "Connie rigged a rear view mirror to the end of a pole so we can examine the ceiling. I'll bet Al's collapse theory is correct. There is a ten inch square rock beam running from the back to the front of the room up there. It is supported on that center pillar. In fact, it is actually two shorter beams that meet in the center of that pillar. Solid rock sheets form the ceiling, resting on the walls and then on that central beam. If the pillar drops so does the heavy rock ceiling along with all the dirt above."

David had an observation.

"What do you make of those four square stones that rise six or eight inches above the floor. See. About two feet apart. Each one six inches square.

Two here on this end at the bottom of the steps and two up there right in front of the chest, which seems to be sitting up a few inches off the floor."

"Look closer at them," Kit said. "Doesn't it appear there is like a channel across the top of each of those stones? It's as if a one inch square lip was left across the two sides parallel to the side walls with the flat hollow between them. Like a flat-bottomed U with very short sides."

"I see that now. What function could such a configuration serve?" David asked.

"To keep something that was sitting on it from falling off or being accidentally pushed off," Kit offered.

"But it could fall off the other two open sides," Marc said.

"Not if it were long and sat in that groove – like a four inch square timber running from the shaped stones back here to those up front," David said."

"I get it!" Kit said. "Beams to support a walkway just clearing the booby trapped floor."

"I think we may have it, Son."

Alex turned to Connie.

"I don't see any actual connection running from head to head but I do declare the way they merge their brainpower sometimes I think there has to be."

"An eerie, ethereal, connectedness, that bows to no physical laws," Kit offered in an otherworldly voice.

"That certainly deserves a two hundred page explanatory footnote sometime in the near future," Connie teased.

"Don't knock it just because you don't have it."

"Who says we don't have it," Alex said. "Connie, I'm thinking about the next suggestion just now forming in David's brain."

Connie went along placing his spread fingers against the sides of his head.

"Oh, yes. I hear it. 'You guys go find two ten foot long four by fours and some two foot wide, one inch thick, wooden planks to span them with'."

Al smiled, "Very accurate although I do believe David's brain said, '*with which* to span them'."

Chuckles ensued and smiles broke.

"I can take you to a place where the spare timbers and planking are kept to make repairs on the wharf," Marc said.

"You go and help, Kit," David said. "I want to spend a little more time examining these steps before we try them."

Ten minutes later they were back with beams and planking all needing to be cut. Alex, of course, had brought saws.

They spent the next hour sawing and hewing and preparing to put the walkway in place.

"It makes no sense that the steps would trigger booby traps," David said.

"They are solid rock and there is virtually nothing here that could be made to fall on the person descending them. LaPique was of a mind to leave no witnesses of any kind. He would allow the trespasser to move far inside. Enter here and you either survive by your wits or your remains remain here forever."

Positioning the far ends of the heavy timbers without having them touch the floor was the first concern. They fashioned an X from two timbers crossed in the frame of the entry way at the bottom of the stairs and lashed them together. A rope was secured to one end of a walkway timber. The rope was run over the top of the V which formed half way up the X in the door. As Connie and Marc pushed the walkway timber into the cave, the other three maintained a taut hold on the rope keeping the far end of the timber up off the floor. It was a start and stop process but generally went more smoothly than any of them had anticipated. It snuggled into the groove in the front support stone and was then lowered by hand into the one at the rear.

It was a repeat for the second one – equally easily accomplished. The planking had been cut to fit the span exactly. Alex, by virtue of the fact he was Alex, took the lead in laying the floor one piece at a time. They had decided not to nail or screw it down due to the short time it would be in use. Kit, on the bottom step, took the planks from Mark who stood on the top step. Kit provided them to Alex. In no time the walkway was laid and the ceiling remained where it belonged.

Alex took time to study the base of the central pillar. He then exited and reported.

"That pillar is slipped into a hole, contained inside a four piece, rock, collar. I imagine a device much like that David has described for dropping the cross, is in place to drop this support. It only has to fall a few feet to release the two ceiling beams."

"Let's get a look at that chest," Kit said.

Alex again led the way into possible danger. He examined the chest. He knelt to search beneath it as it sat raised up on two, long narrow pieces of rock. Finally he made his pronouncement.

"No triggering mechanisms here."

As Kit closed on him, Alex went about the process of cutting the lock and opening the lid of the chest.

"GOLD!" Kit called back to the others. "Coins and three inch cubes."

"Probably melted jewelry settings," David suggested.

"The chest is about the same size as the last one. It's also too heavy to just pick up and move out of here. We'll need the sacks again."

"Got lots in our rental," Connie said. "I'll be right back."

While they waited, the others gave the room a more thorough visual examination. Kit commented.

"Straight walls of stones laid flat – narrow side out. Some kind of crude,

though clearly moisture poof mortar holding them together."

"Generally excellent masonry work," David noted. "Made to last. LaPique hired the best, didn't he?"

"Seems so," Kit said except for the top eighteen inches across that three foot section near the ceiling in front. Maybe they got in a hurry."

"Or maybe some non-mason finished that small opening."

"Why?" Kit asked.

"Wrong question."

"Oh. Yeah. Never ask *why* when you can ask *how did it come to be*. That does reconfigure the question so a useful answer can be perused. More of LaPique's security system I'll bet. He probably forced his masons to crawl through the hole and he finished the work himself sealing them inside forever."

"You *will* let *me* out of here, right?" Alex asked with an uncharacteristically broad smile.

"I don't believe I'd try to contain you against your will, *anywhere, anytime*, big guy," Kit said.

"Shall we leave the walk way in place when we leave?" David asked.

"It might save some lives if anybody should just happen on it," Kit said.

"Have to take the long view here, guys," Alex said. "Eventually those timbers will deteriorate and might fall onto the trigger in the floor. We don't know where it is."

Kit nodded.

"It probably wouldn't hurt anybody if it happened but it would destroy the monument site as it's been all these years."

"Okay then," David said, "We'll take it out and see if we can't do something to keep that monument from tipping."

"Super glue," Kit suggested whimsically.

"Close. I always carry some industrial strength goo. If we etch both of the stone faces clean, this stuff will keep it in place for the archeologists of the year three thousand."

"Really?" Kit asked.

"Not really, Kit. It was an attempt to say it would last a long, long, long, time."

"You could have said that, of course."

"I felt my rendition had far more pizzazz."

"And it did. I'll have to admit – filled with pizzazz and void of honest meaning."

Connie returned with the sacks and the tedious process of removing the gold began. He had driven his rental close to the rear opening to facilitate the process.

Half way down into the gold, Alex, who was filling the bags, motioned Kit close.

"Something different here," he said as Kit looked inside.

"A large, flat, pouch made of tanned skinned and sealed with wax," Kit said picking it up. "Not the little map we were expecting. The map inside, maybe."

He took it outside to David.

"What do you think? Should we open it?"

"I'd vote yes."

Kit gently cut away the wax. The flap was free and he bent it back and looked inside.

"The new map and some papers."

"Test a corner to see if the paper is brittle," David suggested.

"Seems fine. I'm going to pull them out. A half dozen hand written sheets – probably in French, I'd say."

He handed them to David who nodded confirming it was French.

"Fancy script. It will take some time to make it out. We can do that later. Let's get the rest of the gold, and put this place back the way we found it."

At four thirty they were ready to leave. The cross had been reset, the rear stone slab replaced and the Monument glued in place.

Privately, with David, Kit held out a palm filled with coins and hitched his head toward Marc. They spoke in low tones.

"Seems to me it would be quite useful to have a young PhD down here who is sympathetic to the plight of the street kid's."

"And a handful of those little gold disks could go a long way toward financing a graduate degree. Is that your thinking?"

"Once again that ethereal connection seems to be working."

David nodded. Kit took Marc aside and transferred the coins into his cupped hands.

"There will be no words of thanks, Marc. Just your word that once you use these to further your education you'll do what you can to help the kids."

"You most certainly have it."

They traded phone numbers, mail, and email addresses. Marc was a friend with whom they would keep in contact.

They got in the vehicles and turned onto the road back to *Paranogua*. Kit stopped to take one more look out over the bay.

"What's that just entering the bay out there?" David asked.

He picked up the binoculars and looked.

"Would you believe a *pirate* ship?"

"Let me see."

"My gosh! Call the guys. That's certainly the silhouette of a Pirate Ship – Jolly Roger and all."

David placed the call. Connie backed up and stopped close in front of them. All four got out. David had the camera in hand and took pictures. Marc

came trotting up.

"What's up?"

Kit handed him the binoculars and pointed.

"*Deus no heaven!*" he said.

The ship made directly for the wharf. As it came closer its features became more visible. It was a uniquely modified yacht of major dimensions with masts added and billowing sails."

"An interesting mix of the old and the new," Alex said.

"I'm betting it is *Carlos etc etc etc LaPique* – the modern day pirate," David said. "This is much further south than my information suggests he usually travels. The boat certainly matches the description I was reading about."

"I doubt if you should remain here, Marc," Kit said. "Let us give you a ride somewhere."

"I have the old truck there. I will be fine. I'd like to see to what they are up."

Kit smiled.

"That's one case where the preposition at the *end* works better. It reminds me of once when Winston Churchill was poking fun at the English language academicians who had been taking him to task for his use of the common language. He reportedly replied, "They would have me say, 'that is something up with which I will not put'."

"I'm with Marc," David said. "Let's stash these vehicles and retreat to the woods so we can see what's up."

Lights off, they drove a half mile down the road and pulled off behind a thick stand of brush. A few minutes later they were back in the small wooded area close to the monument.

The boat tied up. The sails were dropped. Half a dozen men left the ship and moved to the shore. The tide had begun moving out. Suddenly, the roar of the water leaving the bay through the narrow entrance became noticeable.

"It becomes very loud during the last half of low tide," Marc explained noticing the other's interest.

The pirates also turned to discover the source of the sudden noise. They then proceeded up the beach toward the monument.

"Will that super-duper glue of yours be set yet?" Kit asked Alex.

"Instant set. Short of the tedious use of solvent, the monument is permanently affixed to the base rock."

The pirates approached the monument. The taller one of them always remained in front. LaPique, they assumed. They examined the stone in front and the stone at the rear. They climbed the hill and looked over the cross. LaPique pushed on the cross first one way then another. It didn't budge. He and another man attempted to twist it.

"Clearly they have more than a passing interest in that site," David said.

"They traveled some thirty-five hundred miles to get here."

"How could they have found out? And why – that is – *how* did they come to be here at the same time we are? *We* have the map."

"We have the map from the previous treasure chest," David said. "There would have been another map – the original – presented to the son back when the strange contest began."

"Oh, yeah! I forgot about them – all nine of them could still be out there someplace, I suppose."

"Most likely some places," David said. "At least I hope so. If this LaPique has managed to get his hands on some or all of them, we have formidable competition looming just ahead."

The pirates moved back to the monument in front, pushing and twisting and thumping. It stood its ground. Kit gave Alex a thumbs up. It was acknowledged with a quickly snapped, playful, salute.

"If you think we need to keep our eye on them," Alex said, "and I think we probably should, maybe some of us should go back to the hotel and rest. We can spell each other should it go on for some time."

"I'm here," Kit said.

"I'm gone," came David's response.

Alex looked at Connie.

"I feel *beater* than you look," he said.

"It's Connie and Kit here then," David said. "You drive, Alex?"

"Okay. We'll leave your vehicle here. You guys stay out of sight and be careful. No sneezing!"

The pirates continued to mill around for some time revisiting all the places they had already examined. The leader, who they began referring to as LaPique II, threw up his arms and screamed in French.

"He is cursing," Marc whispered translating what he could hear. "He seems angry though I suppose that comes through without translation."

"And he keeps referring to his palm," Kit said. "I have to think he is holding the original small map of this place."

The others nodded.

An hour passed before LaPique and his men went back to the ship. Another hour passed. A faint wash arced north and south just above the horizon portending the imminent breaking of Dawn. The ship backed from its slip and turned toward the outlet.

"It will never make it out during this period of the tides," Marc said. "It is like a waterfall out there. The level of the ocean is still six feet below the water line in here."

"And the width of the opening has narrowed. The boat would get stuck."

"What the . . .?" Connie said lowering his binoculars and blinking.

"I see it," Kit said.

“Me, too,” Marc agreed.
“The blame ship is disappearing from the bottom up,” Kit said verbalizing the sight.
“Is it sinking?” Marc asked.
“Is it flying?” Connie asked.
“Whatever it’s doing, *it did it!* The ship has vanished!”

*The Kidd's Grand Adventure, The Family of Man Press, eBook

CHAPTER SEVEN

They continued surveying the area of the ship's last whereabouts. The rising, early morning, sun cast sudden, long, deep, shadows across the bay. No sooner there than they began a cautious retreat feeling their way back toward the eastern rim. By eight o'clock the light of day began penetrating the outer ridge and little by little the ship came back into view – from the top down following the descent of the spreading daylight.

It sat close to the sheer rock wall of the outer bank, apparently moored there to the right of the outlet, awaiting the high tide, which would not arrive to make the entrance serviceable again until noon.

"The first tourist boat will enter at one o'clock," Marc said. "Do you think the pirate boat will attack it?"

"What pirate boat?" Kit said. "Take a close look. It is no longer configured with masts and sails. From here it looks like your run of the mill, multimillion dollar, yacht – not the one the authorities are looking for, I'll bet."

"What could have happened?" Marc asked puzzled.

"Not sure. I imagine it's a rip-off of Uncle David's tree house."

"What? Oh. I see. Hinged things that disappear in the night."

"Something like that," Kit said with a nod. "I think we need to keep an eye on them – well, two eyes should suffice. Let's see if Al is refreshed enough to take the first day shift. I got stuff I need to talk over with Uncle David. Connie you need to get some sleep and Marc you surely have a life to live elsewhere."

Alex arrived a half hour later. Kit had filled him in by phone while he was on the road. Alex could rough it with the best of them – as he had proved time and time again – but when it wasn't necessary he arranged his life differently. This time he brought a lawn chair – a padded lounger – and fully stocked cold chest.

Once he was comfortably established there, out of sight, just inside the woods – chilly, away from the sunshine – the others left.

Kit entered the hotel suite.

"I'm beat," Kit said immediately beginning to undress. "I stink. I'm

famished. I really need to talk things over with you. What to do first?"

"Are you entertaining suggestions?"

"I thought that's what I just indicated."

"You shower. I'll order up some breakfast. We can talk as we eat and then you can sleep."

"Sounds fine and amazingly simple the way you configure it."

Twenty minutes later they were eating and talking as impatient Kit continued to drip on everything within arm's length.

"Lots of stuff," Kit began. "The pirate, LaPique II. Do we continue our course now that he's in the picture? Neither of us counted on such a threat. How did he find out we were here, or did he? Does that mean there is a leak somewhere? Father A or somebody on his staff? Juanita or Maria? How did he come by the map and does he have others?"

"I know. Lots of questions and problems. I'm about half way through the epistle you found in the bag in the chest."

"Epistle?"

"Not sure what else to call it. It was a letter, of sorts, written to his eldest son. This site must have been designed for him. It gives a succinct history of the LaPique family and provides many answers about Louie. It outlines the whole treasure hunting thing and warns of possible entrapments."

"Possible?" The wrong concept, I'd say. Anything else?"

"That's it so far. Like I said, there's as much left as I've already waded through."

"At what point was it written, do you think?"

"An interesting question, Kit."

"For sure, after all the other treasures had already been hidden. I'm not certain how much after, however. He hints that later on in the letter he will list all the children and their mother's names and villages."

"Does he name the oldest one upfront?"

"Ephraim, of all the strange possibilities."

"Sounds more Amish than French/Haiti/Brazilian."

David nodded. "Reminds me of that Johnny Cash song, '*A Boy Named Sue*'."

"You work on all the stuff," Kit said. "We need ideas – possibilities. I'm going to sleep until three. Then we'll make some decisions, okay?"

"Sounds like a plan."

At noon David received a call from Alex.

"The tide's up. The ship is on the move. Once it's out of the bay I'll come back to the hotel. I assume a strategy session is in order."

"Yes. Kit's sleeping until three. We'll roust Connie out then as well and meet to talk over a meal. I'm going to phone Father A. Call if there is any change in your plans or the apparent intention of LaPique . . . What are we going

to call him to keep him separated in our heads from the old man?”

“The boys were calling him LaPique the second,” Alex said.

“Too long for general conversation. Considering his trail of wicked deeds, I do think that *Number Two* would be appropriate. In the states, at least back when I was in grade school, when a student needed to go to the rest room he would raise one finger if he had to merely relieve himself of liquid and two if he had to stay a while longer. Our code words became going number one and going number two.”

“LaPique would definitely qualify as Number Two,” Alex said chuckling. David responded in kind. They would see what developed.

David placed a call to Father A and conveyed his concerns over a possible leak in their organization.

“Since the tax man and his department have been brought into it all, I’m afraid we have very little control over who knows about it. I’ve requested that it all be private and confidential but who knows who might have said something that got out to the wrong party.”

“The current day LaPique families,” David said. “I see there are several in this area. Do you personally know any of them?”

“All of them, I imagine. In addition to the nine sons he also had seven daughters that I have been able to identify. As they married, of course, the line followed many other last names.”

“I see. Yes. You’re saying the LaPique line has become well disguised down through the generations.”

“That’s correct.”

“Do you know anything about the LaPique who is a current day pirate?”

“Carlos? Just that he seems to be a legitimate descendant of the original although not through the sons. As I understand it he has taken that last name in place of his own, *Alvarado*. It is a common name in Portugal – less so here.”

“There is no delicate way of asking this, but the man in your congregation who will be seeking to sell the treasure as artifacts – is he trustworthy?”

“Completely. He has begun what he calls ‘leaking’ the story that soon there will be a substantial amount of such things offered for sale – to stimulate interest and allow potential buyers to get their financial ducks in a row. Perhaps someone could have read something into that and come up with the LaPique treasure.”

“This new LaPique – it seems he prefers to take on Brazilian ships. Is that your understanding?”

“Not really. Brazil has put him on their most wanted list but I think he actually is more of a menace to the ships of the small island countries up in the *Antilles* and *Lesser Antilles*. They just have no real resources to go after him. One other thing about him – and it may become his downfall. He attacks other pirate vessels, slaughters their crews, and takes their *booty* – if I may slip into the

jargon of days gone by. It may be those other bad guys who will eventually make him pay.”

“I believe he has come to join us down here,” David said. “Early this morning we spotted a ship that matches the description of his. It was down in the bay and a half dozen of the crew disembarked and examined the site of this last treasure chest.”

“Oh, my! Perhaps we should call a halt to things. We do have over ten million dollars just in the worth of the gold.”

“We may do that. We may not. Have you heard any . . . how can I word this . . . eerie stories about his ship?”

“Eerie? Well, there have been several reports . . . and this is going to sound weirder than eerie . . . that the boat appears all of a sudden as if out of nowhere and then slips out of sight as if it . . . disappears.”

“We witnessed it ourselves this morning. Do you know if that is a night time only phenomenon?”

“No. I don’t know. I have some connections that will be able to tell us, however. So it isn’t just a fiction. I thought it might have been a story made up to help the pillaged boat captains save face. Let me make a call and get right back to you.”

.....

“From the phrasing of your question, David, I assume you believed it would be a night time only event – the disappearing act. You are right. No daytime reports. He typically hits the larger ships just after sundown – while everyone is elegantly dressed and ornately bedecked, and contained in the dining rooms making for easy access to jewels and wallets. It is the smaller, day cruises that he approaches during the daylight hours.”

“Thank you for your time. I’ll get back to you. By the way, when will your artifact guy begin the auctioning?”

“He says not until we have everything we will have. He will then offer it all at once. To space it out, he thinks, will drive the price down – a glut on the market I suppose.”

David nodded. He would leave that up to those who knew the business.

“One other thing, Father. If you have any connections among those who would have reason to keep up with the new LaPique – Carlos – I’d appreciate updates as they become available.”

“I’m sure I can find us some help.”

David returned to the task of translating the sheets from LaPique. His father had been a professor of mathematics in Paris and was exiled due to his political beliefs. He continued to teach in Haiti. His mother was an artist, a painter, not something women of the day did for profit, of course. The marriage was not a happy or fulfilling one. His father again got involved in politics trying to bring civil rights to the commoners of Haiti. He and his wife were killed during

one of a succession of revolutions on the island. Nuns took his sister into a convent. Louie made for the hills and accepted the protection of the common folks to whom his father had become something of a hero.

He worked as a black smith's assistant for a time and for a clock maker who specialized in elaborate clocks with chimes, date and phase of the moon discs, and moving figures. At seventeen he went to sea and made numerous voyages between the new world and Europe. He worked for three years building sea going vessels in Lisbon, Portugal. He reported that while there he frequented the libraries and read history, philosophy, and government.

One night while walking the docks he was forcibly conscripted by a pirate crew and rapidly worked his way into favor with the captain. In the end he led a mutiny, and his days as Captain Louie LaPique began.

His sole set of advice to his son came in one sentence, which included six suggestions: Hone your wits, take what you want, live a detached life, trust no one, leave no witnesses, and be with a different woman every night (two nights and they will own and befuddle your soul).

The document suggested explanations in several areas of interest: how he survived as a young man, how he acquired the mechanical skills needed to booby trap the treasure depositories, and the source of his mental resources – a bright father and a mother who possessed the innate visualization skills of a natural artist. Other assumptions were possible. His father's social idealism got him first kicked out of France and then killed in Haiti. Louie would not get caught up in such political or social movements. He put himself first and sought power not through association with political forces but by physically seizing it at his pleasure. It may also explain the comfort he found in Brazil; he had probably mastered the language while in Portugal.

David's stomach growled. Kit's alarm went off. It was definitely time to eat. Kit stumbled out of the bedroom.

"How is it that when I first wake up I can't walk a straight line?"

"During sleep the various parts of the brain disengage from each other – that may define sleep, in fact. It appears that the last one to reengage while rousing into wakefulness is the section responsible for the automatic aspects of physical coordination."

"Cool! How do you know all this stuff? It's like you're a walking *www dot*."

"Interesting. Way back when, I was called a walking *encyclopedia*. Times change, I guess."

"One plus there," Kit said grinning. "Www is a whole bunch easier to spell."

"Let's eat," David said.

"In the hotel or out?"

"Let's go out for a change."

"Okay. Let me get dressed, then."

The menu at *Café de Carlos* boasted *steaks magníficos*. The translation seemed obvious so they each ordered the largest one offered. It was the first time either had experienced rice and beans in cheese sauce as a side with steak.

David filled Kit in on the highlights of his conversation with Father A and the gist of the translated sheets.

“So do we keep looking or throw in the towel?” Kit asked.

“You leaning one way or the other?”

“I’d like to stay, of course. I’m just not sure it’s the wise thing to do.”

“Unbelievable!” David said putting down his fork and taking hold of the table.

“What?”

“An eighteen year old male contemplating what the *wise* move would be.”

Kit grinned but didn’t mount a defense (Another first, perhaps for an eighteen year old male!).

“The new LaPique hasn’t threatened us,” David pointed out. “He may have decided that whatever information he had about a treasure at the monument was false so he has left the area.”

“Could be, I suppose. You’re saying we could start the next one and if we feel endangered we can stop at that point.”

“I didn’t hear myself say that!”

“You must learn to listen. It’s settled then. Let’s get on to the next little map.

An hour later they were in their sitting room examining the map between them. Kit took the lead.

“On the left there looks to be a capital ‘F’ made in the style used by Jr High school girls when they make posters for their candidate for class president. It has the black dot on it. That is separated from the right side by a diagonal slash. On the right is a building with a pointed roof. It looks to be riddled with holes – perhaps after a battle. Another black dot lies on the ground beside the building.”

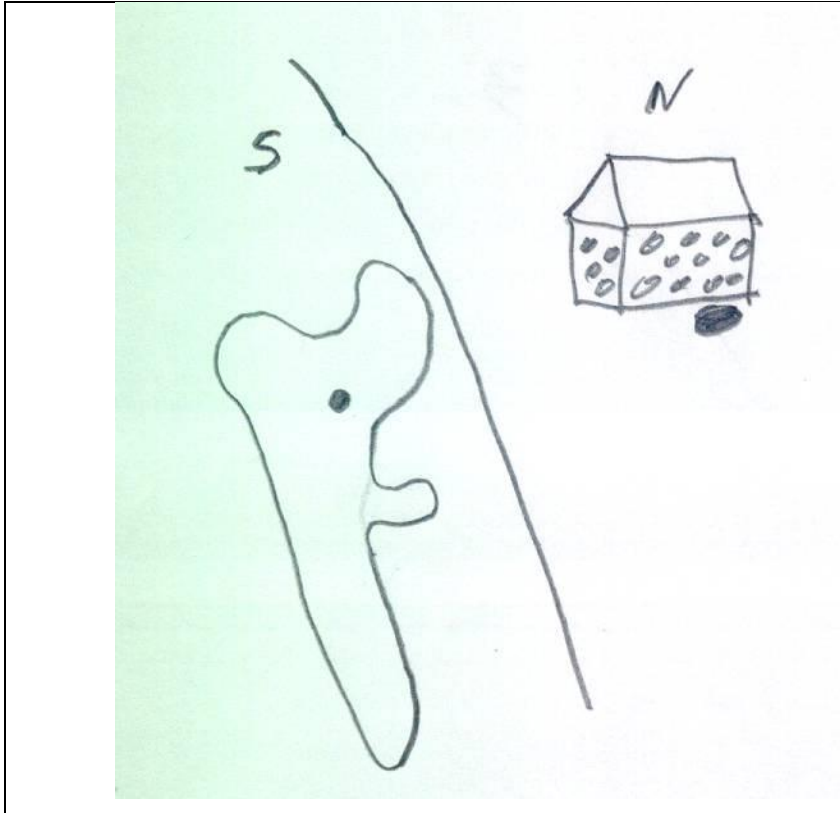
David added some possibilities.

“Could the diagonal line represent a coast line? Look at the ‘S’ and ‘N’. Do they mean we are to interpret the rendering as a whole to move from South on the left to North on the right. It would be a very strange way to draw a map.”

“Maybe it is two mini maps separated by the line,” Kit said.

“As if the top of the ‘F’ is headed south and the house is represented as being to the north of the viewer, you’re saying.

The Map of Pistol Island



It would put the dot on the south side of that building.”

They sat in silence for a time. David started over, suggesting a different perspective.

“We are looking for a place, an area, a space, a spot . . . so what happens if we approach the ‘F’ in that way?”

“A political boundary? A land area like a farm or ranch or city? An

island? Things like that you mean?”

David nodded.

“See what a shape recognition search does. I don’t see a country outline in it. Try states in Brazil, perhaps. I liked the idea of an island. See what that laptop will churn out for us.”

“Nothing in state shapes – that was *my* favorite, by the way. Major cities gives us nothing. There are so many tiny islands but let me give it a look. Lots of them are those just barely submerged dudes like where we located the bomb off the beach up north. Many are only surface islands for a few hours during low tide. But look here, Uncle David. *Console da pistola* – Pistol Island. How do you get a pistol out of an ‘F’?”

“Turn the map sideways with the ‘F’ at the top.”

“Ah! I suddenly see a pistol – probably one of those dainty pearl handled jobbies that dance hall ladies of the old West carried high on their thighs in lacy red garters after working hours so they could fend off all the amorous cowboys they had intentionally hornified during their performance.”

David smiled and shook his head.

“Where is it?” David asked.

“Like I said, high up on their sleek, firm, thighs, the way I remember the

pictures.”

“Not the gun, doofus. The island – Pistol Island.”

“You’ll have to agree locating the red garters would be lots more interesting,” Kit said grinning. “Let’s see here. It is part of a whole bunch of them hugging the coast and spreading north from *Porto Alegre* to *Blumenau*. That puts it some four hundred miles south of where we are here in *Paranagua* and the *Baía Obstruída* we just left. There are dozens and dozens of islands in that strip – a few sizeable but most tiny. Looks like about half are high enough to remain dry during high tide. The *Pistol Island* is one of the dry ones on the eastern rim, rather isolated out there, actually.”

“See if you can find anything about it.”

Several minutes passed.

“Here we go. Not much. A mention in a travelogue posted by a nun in 2000. Says it was a ten minute walk from north to south ends of the island along the single, unpaved path. There is a caretaker who lives by the dock between the grip and the trigger – I suppose that location is obvious. It belongs to a wealthy family from *Belo Horizonte* – that’s a city inland to the northeast of *Rio de Janeiro*. They used to use it as a summer retreat. Rarely visited anymore. There is a large summer home on the trigger and a rundown stable east of it. The terrain is generally flat, grassland, inland. The nun describes it as having twenty foot high cliffs along the western and northern edges with a row of higher, rugged, stone faced hills along the east and south. There are a few very old stone buildings that dot the island – left over from hundreds of years ago. Lots of small boulders and rocks are strewn throughout the area.”

“See if you can get a line on the owner. Then see if Father A can finagle us a photo shoot for the Stathopoulos Ship line’s Picture Magazine.”

“I doubt if Priests like to be a party to lies.”

“What lie? When we’ve finished we’ll send the pictures to the Magazine.”

“Ah! Short circuiting an outright falsehood by the clever use of fancy tongue work.”

“A phrase that I am certain has never before been uttered in the long history of human language.”

“Your welcome!”

“Then, thank you, I suppose.”

While Kit went to work researching the family, David called Alex.

“We will need a boat to take us down the coast some four hundred miles – the area of *Porto Alegre*.”

“Why not fly down and get a boat there?” Alex asked.

“Makes sense. I can see why *you* earn the big money. I’ll let you two arrange things. Sooner the better. Fly in tonight and get the boat in the morning if you can work it out.”

“On it. Kit find another nude beach down there, did he?”

"I doubt it. At least if it exists, the nun who described the island failed to mention it."

"Father A is on it," Kit said. "He knows the family. He seems to know everybody."

"Al and Connie will have us down there tonight. Make hotel reservations."

That done they returned to studying the map. The right half had not been seriously addressed.

"Maybe one of the old buildings, the nun mentioned," Kit said."

"And what looks like holes on the map may be attempts at drawing stones. A stone building made from the apparently abundant native material."

"What about the *two dots*?" Kit asked. "One on each portion of the map."

"Let's work on the assumption that the dot on the island is the location of the stone building shown to the right and that the dot beside the building designates the treasure."

"I'm fine with that. It will be some colder that much further south. We'll need to pack for it. Shall we keep these rooms or cancel them?"

"Let's keep them. Not knowing where we may be going next this is a nice half way point up and down the coast. I'll take care of that."

The phone rang.

"Father A, here. You are cleared at *Console da pistola*. The caretaker has been notified. You may stay in the summer house if you like. Though seldom used anymore, it is always kept ready, I'm told."

"Our intention is to find what we're after and leave as soon as possible. Thanks again for your help."

The phone rang immediately. It was Connie.

"We can be ready to fly south in an hour – six my time. Should arrive by seven thirty. Do we stay in the plane or have you arranged real beds?"

"Hotel rooms. Not sure how plush but they did guarantee beds. See you at six at the airport."

"What do you really think about LaPique two?" Kit asked as they packed.

"I'm calling him Carlos, by the way," David said. "I don't know anything you don't. Clearly he had some reason to be at the monument at *Baía Obstruída*. I doubt if he was touring the burial sites of ancient tribal leaders. It had everything to do with the treasure. I can't believe he just left."

"Step one was glued solid. Without it, nothing else could follow."

"I suppose you're right. I wish we knew if he had more maps" David said clearly concerned.

"And, *how* he came to have them – see, not *why* he had them, a question which would have taken us nowhere. I'm ready for some praise."

"Praise, praise, praise," David said intentionally mechanical in monotone.

"Interesting. Akin to profanity in a way. No need to involve any actually constructive thought in the use of the words."

David cleared his throat dramatically.

“Your use of the always more productive word *how* rather than *why*, has once again proved how intelligent, wise, and savvy you have become under my outstanding tutelage, young beloved one.”

“Now. Was that so hard? *Why* didn’t you say that the first time? Oops I do believe I just blew it, didn’t I?”

“*How* would you have come to that conclusion?”

“Show off. Nothing worse than a show off philosopher.”

Kit looked his uncle in the face.

“I hope I find somebody at Harvard with whom I can have just plain and simple absurd interchanges. I’ve always loved that about us. It helps bring the problems of the real world to a momentary halt and refreshes my being – like retreating to *Never Never Land* I suppose.”

“I will miss it, also. For some reason, Molly thinks it’s just . . . absurd.”

“Back to Carlos – LaPique II,” Kit said once again addressing the real world. “What do we do if we meet him? Apparently, he takes no prisoners.”

“Hand over your jewelry, show your red garter, and bat your eyes at him, I suppose.”

“Very funny. I’m trying to be serious, here.”

“I don’t have an answer, which may be a very good reason to reconsider the mission right now.”

“We always think of something – you and I together. We will innovate on the spot.”

“Your confidence in our skill is downright frightening. By the way, did you happen to find out if the island has electricity?”

“No, but if it does it will be produced from a generator. None of the islands are hooked up to mainland power or phone lines. I guess the phone part’s not so important anymore is it?”

“Thinking mainly of our own wellbeing, we carry our own these days. Downright *cellfish*, I suppose.”

“I knew it should be there but I just couldn’t pull it together,” Kit said smiling and shaking his head. “And now I see that you couldn’t either.”

* * *

The flight had been uneventful. The food had been good – both at dinner and breakfast. Alex had an inboard boat ready, waiting at the dock. The problem was that the dock was forty miles overland, east to a small port village. *Porto Alegre* sat at the head of a long narrow cove, which opened into the ocean some hundred and fifty miles to the south. The land trip took an hour over poorly constructed roads. It was soon obvious that they were even more poorly maintained. The island sat some hundred miles to the north. Kit had it in sight by eleven. By eleven twenty they were tied up and walking the dock to the

caretaker's quarters.

He was an older, English, gentleman who explained that his employer, Walter Hinsdale the fifth, was from a long line of Englishmen established at *Belo Horizonte* down through many generations.

"We are particularly interested in the remains of the old buildings that were constructed hundreds of years ago," David said.

"The man pointed south. Mostly down there. You can see the peak of the largest. Just roam around and you will run across others. Less than a kilometer east to west down there. No place to hide anything."

He giggled. The others hoped he was wrong! Kit privately wondered if the giggle meant *he* had already found all that was to be found.

"Any other visitors lately?" Kit asked, Carlos always on his mind.

"None. A few boaters every day. They honk and wave if I'm out and about. Otherwise they just pass us by as if we weren't here. The steep cliffs keep them from trying to dock and hike around, I imagine."

"We'll check back before we leave."

"I was told you might be using the summer house. It is ready and always open if you choose to stay the night. Lanterns for light. Light the water heater in the downstairs bath two hours before you bathe. Holds a hundred gallons. Should be sufficient."

They thanked the helpful old gentleman and hefted their back packs. Five minutes later they were at the stone house. More accurately, they were at what remained of the stone house. The wooden portion of the roof had collapsed decades earlier. The walls, however, stood straight without cracks as if begging for a new roof to make it again functional. The sole door was on the north side, adding some credence to the map, on which the south wall was shown without one.

Still outside they approached the area where the dot showed on the map. The ground was solid.

"But then it *would* be solid two hundred years after a chest had been buried," Kit observed.

"The simple burial of a chest is just not in a league with Louis' other sites," David said his brow drawing into wrinkles.

He began walking the grounds immediately adjacent to the south side of the building. He examined the foundation and kicked at the sod that abutted it. At last he spoke.

"What if the dot on the map merely means this is the *general* area. The dot on the cave was no more than that. The dot on the mound was no more than that. Let's begin a search pattern. Connie, Alex, how about you two scouring the outside close to the building. Kit and I will scope out the inside."

The search went on for fifteen minutes.

"I have an idea – over here against the middle of the south wall," Kit said.

David joined him.

"An indoor well some three feet in diameter," Kit explained. "It's bricked up inside and extends some two feet up into the room from the floor."

"Let's take a look down there with flashlights," David suggested.

"About twenty feet deep. Do you suppose there would really be a tapable fresh water table on a little chunk of rock like this?" Kit asked.

"I sincerely doubt it. More likely a cistern that collected rain run-off from the roof and kept it for future use."

"What about the two little round holes in the back of it up close to the top? They seem to be matched by similarly sized and placed holes in the wall to the outside." Kit said.

"I can only speculate. Probably one allowed for a pipe connection between it and the collection gutters at the base of the roof. The other might have been a run off or overflow pipe in case a downpour began over-filling it."

"You love these kinds of puzzles don't you," Kit said.

"I do. Always have. An archeologist at heart."

"So, you think the treasure is down there?"

"Certainly beats anything else we've found."

"Whatever *you've* found beats anything Connie and I have found out there," Alex said as they entered having just heard the last part of the conversation.

"Come. Take a look. We're open for ideas, conjectures, and flat out speculation," Kit said handing Alex his flashlight who spoke as he examined the hole.

"Seven or eight meters deep. One wide. Doesn't look to be a chest or other container down there on the bottom. Would have probably rotted away, sitting in the water as it would have."

"No water in there now," David said.

"No roof to collect it," Kit observed. "David thinks it was a cistern and not a well."

"The opening's somewhat sheltered from the rain by these thin, rock, slabs – from a counter top of a sort perhaps," Connie observed.

"Was there anything at all odd outside?" Kit asked.

"Not really," Alex said answering for them both. "There is a slight slump maybe a meter wide and extending from this side of the house south about ten meters."

"Slump?" Kit asked.

"In general the grounds are landing strip smooth out there," Connie said, "Except for that little indentation running south. Just a gentle dip – nothing of any significance. The Englishmen could have played croquette right across it."

"It probably slumped long before the English arrived," David said. "Let's take a look."

"It resembles your back yard the summer after they laid the new sewer line back to the alley," Kit said addressing David."

"Doubt if it was sewer two hundred years ago, son."

"A pit in which LaPique buried his help?" Kit suggested only partly in humor.

"One possibility for sure," David said. "I'd say it is time to investigate that cistern up close and personal."

"We'll need a ladder or some kind of seat on a hoist if we're going down there," Kit said.

"A ladder will be in the way," Alex said. "I like Kit's idea of a seat on a hoist. Let Connie and me go back to the caretaker's place and see what he'll let us scrounge."

Twenty minutes later they drove up in an ancient pickup truck. There was a winch in the back with coils of rope, a toolbox, odd lengths of two by fours, and a four part pulley rig.

"Al was like a boy in a candy shop back there," Connie reported, smiling.

"I believe we can work with what I found," Alex said neither denying nor confirming Connie's statement.

Before long, a teepee-like support structure made from three, ten foot, two by fours had been erected over the cistern opening. Its legs – resting on the floor – were tied together so they would not spread. The pulleys were strung with rope and attached under the top of the pointed two by four frame. One end of that rope was attached to a swing-like seat and the other to the hand wound winch, the base of which was secured in place with heavy slabs of stone.

"I'll flip you guys to take the ride down into the hole," Kit said.

"Ten years and three wars from now, maybe," Alex said. "I'll be going in."

Kit didn't question it. Alex made sense. It was experience and know-how that counted. The fact that he was the largest of the four seemed to in no way concern him.

"With the configuration of pulleys and winch I will seem to weigh something like fifty pounds. I believe you can handle that. If I begin to fall out of control just flip this lever on the winch and I'll come to jolting stop."

He strapped a miner's light around his forehead and hooked a flashlight to his belt. Kit fastened a small video cam to his chest and checked its transmission to his picture phone. With some difficulty the big man wiggled himself through the frame and into the seat.

"You will lower me a foot at a time. I will turn and examine the wall all around. That done, you'll you lower me another foot. Not knowing what we are looking for, I'm not sure how to set a plan beyond that."

"Sounds like a good starting place," David said. "Here you go. Connie and I will man the winch. Kit you keep watch on Alex and provide extra light as he calls for it."

He spent a minimum of a minute examining each new foot of wall. He was mindful about booby traps. At the bottom he avoided putting his weight on the slabs of stone there. Instead he hung upside down as if from a trapeze.

Satisfied with his examination he asked to be pulled up. He slid out of the seat and made his report.

“Down three meters there is a six inch hole on the south side. It is fitted with a piece of pipe that extends several meters out under the wall. That’s as far as I could see into it. There may be small rocks the size of a child’s fist at that point. The sides of the cistern are laid up of foot long, precisely cut, stones about six inches tall. They are cemented in place making it a fairly water tight container, I imagine.”

“On the video it appeared the stone work around the pipe opening was a different kind of stone,” Kit said.

“Good observation. It was. Light colored compared with the reddish-brown of the rest we’ve seen here.”

“I also noticed that same color up a meter or so above the hole and on the opposite side. Actually there were several pieces scattered randomly over a three foot square area.”

“Right again,” Alex said. “And that area was laid with a different kind of mortar – also lighter in color and more recent I think.”

“What you are describing is a section of the wall that was removed and then replaced,” David said. “The lighter stones could be replacements for originals that broke during the process of removing them.”

“You mean the treasure is hidden back inside the wall of the cistern?” Kit asked.

“Seems reasonable,” David said.

“What’s with the pipe opening below it?” Kit asked.

“I imagine a drain so water would never stand in the cistern at a level high enough to leak into where the treasure was stashed,” David said, speculating.

The others nodded.

“That could explain the slump in the ground outside,” David went on. “The pipe might lead into a deep trench filled with stones into which the excess water drained and was then absorbed into the surrounding ground.”

“You all know what’s missing, of course,” Kit said.

“The booby trap,” they responded as one.

David continued.

“There is no way to have anything fall from above onto someone entering the cistern. There is no above. The slabs of rock that form the bottom have the sides setting on them so they cannot release anything upward. It has to come from the sides or, since it is round, *side* – singular, I suppose. I’m going down to take a look. I’ll need a hammer and chisel – a small pick perhaps.”

Kit rummaged through the big tool box.

“Have both here.”

“I’ll take them.”

David was soon being lowered into the hole. His thought was that the trap would be set up to only be triggered by someone actually working to obtaining the treasure. LaPique would not have wanted it sprung for any other reason. Once sprung it became useless to assault any successive hunters. With that in mind he continued down to the point where one would begin trying to reopen the newest section of stone work.

Along the bottom of that section was a layer of mortar, which was significantly wider than those above. He could understand how a wider make-up layer might be needed at the top, if the stones had not been spaced exactly right and fell a bit short of filling the gap. But why at the bottom? Surely at the beginning the mason would have been working to make each layer the correct thickness. He chipped away carefully at one end of that layer. Several inches from the side, the point of his pick easily broke through the thin surface. It then became hard again for nearly eight inches when once more the pick easily broke through.

“You seeing this on the video,” he called up.

“Yes,” Kit called down. “Like a thin layer of plaster laid between several support rocks. Do you have an explanation?”

“I have an idea. Lower me another foot, please.”

He worked with his hammer and chisel clearing out one of those softer areas. It was two inches tall and a foot wide. He looked inside, then lit the hole and positioned the camera so those up above could see.

“Looks like the head of a very small harpoon,” Kit said.

“That it does,” David said. “And there looks to be at least six of them pointed out into the main opening here from several similar holes. They will undoubtedly be triggered by the removal of one or more stones in this new section. Where would one typically begin removing stones here if he wanted to look behind this new, replacement, section?”

“At the top and work your way down, I imagine,” Kit offered.

“My thought exactly. And if that person were positioned like I am here from a rope or a ladder, his abdomen would be the clear target area of those harpoons – arrows – whatever.”

“So, you suspect that the removal of a key stone near the top of that section will trigger the release of the harpoons into the abdomen of the unsuspecting treasure hunter.”

“That’s my guess.”

“Therefore,” Kit began, “We either remove the stones from the bottom up or hang trapeze style and work upside down from the top layer down.”

“It might be a good idea to trip those harpoons first for safety sake,” David said.

“My territory,” Came Alex’s big voice.
As he reached the surface, David’s phone rang. It was Father A.
“Just got word that Carlos LaPique’s ship was sighted heading in your
direction.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Do we work fast or get the hell out of here," Kit asked.

"Father A said the ship was spotted about three hundred miles to the north. How fast can those hundred foot yachts travel, Connie?" David asked.

"Close to fifty knots. Probably some slower from the extra weight of all the modifications that have been made."

"So, that should give us at least six hours," Kit said. "Any estimates on how long this will take?"

Alex made the first offering.

"An hour to remove the bricks. Another two or so to remove the treasure. If we don't put the stone back – and I see no reason to – and if we don't run into other complications, I'd say four hours."

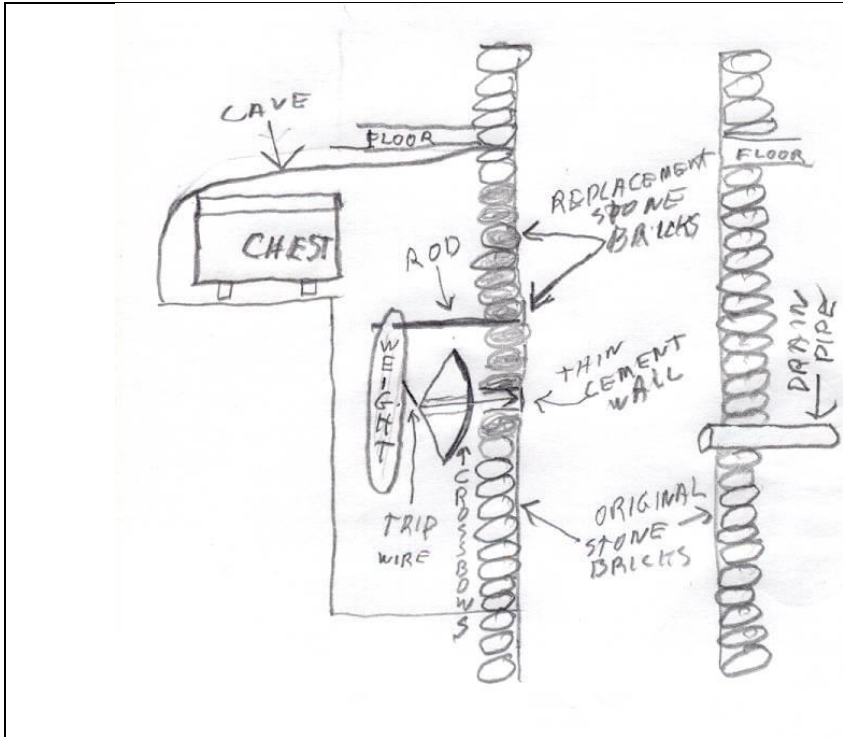
"Shall we give it a go, as the English owner might say?" Kit asked looking at David.

"If we see our time is running out we can stop and leave."

It soon became clear that hanging upside down from the harness at the end of the rope was extremely taxing. They took fifteen minute shifts. Once the first row had been removed the task became easier.

"We're down three rows and still no triggering mechanism," Kit said as David was working in the cistern. "What I'm saying is *be careful*."

"I can see what I believe is the treasure chest. Larger than the others. Set back some six feet in a little man made cave. There is no floor the first three feet. Then there is a ledge



David's sketch of the cistern on Pistol Island

on which it sits. No way it could have been put in place filled. I wonder why he insists on leaving it in the treasure chests rather than smaller pails or some such things."

"To tax his son's wits, I would imagine," Kit said.

David nodded and continued working.

"You may all want to watch this. I'm very sure I've found the trigger stone. I can feel a thick metal rod extending back nearly three feet from the bottom of the next brick. It is set in underneath it so the weight will hold it in place. Let me get some light inside and see what I can see."

He worked for several minutes positioning himself and the lights.

"Looks to be another ingenious device. The rod supports a weight – a long, narrow, stone with a hole in the top through which the rod runs. Below it, at the level of the row of small harpoon holes that are concealed behind that thin coating of cement, there are a row of crossbows set vertically.

"When the stone falls it apparently trips the triggers on the crossbows, the arrows are fired, and easily penetrate the thin cement coating in front of them."

"You're saying there is a lot more of that little cave below the opening we're working on."

"Right. Another problem. The chest sits back on a narrow ledge without

enough head room to open it. I'm not sure how he filled it. Perhaps a sliding door in the lid. Removing it will be a long and tedious job I'm thinking."

Alex moved to the top of the cistern and spoke to David.

"As a precaution why don't you come up now and we will knock that trigger brick off the wall using a two by four from up here. He was a clever bird and may have something else waiting in the wings – something we haven't yet located."

"Good plan. Pull me up."

The first several attempts with the length of wood proved it could not be leveraged properly. Alex withdrew it.

"Idea," Kit said. "Tie this short handled sledgehammer to a length of rope. Lower it and swing it back and forth, repeatedly hitting the stone, head on."

"Certainly worth a try," Alex said.

The others agreed. It was soon fashioned and lowered. It took some practice but Alex soon got the hang of it. With the third tap the stone separated from the mortar on which it was sitting. The rod was released. The weight dropped and four sharp arrows shot into the cistern with a force that shattered them as they met the opposite wall.

"Only four of the six fired," Alex said. "I suppose the others could have deteriorated over the years – bow strings, what have you."

"Not a chance I want to take," David said.

"How could we fill in those remaining two holes so if the bows should fire later, the arrows cannot enter the cistern?"

"Short two by four blocks should do it," Alex suggested. "Hopefully they will be just a tad too big and we can force them in place."

Alex was soon down in the cistern. He pounded the blocks in place.

"No crossbow ever made could dislodge them," he reported.

"I suppose we could have just reached down inside and removed the arrows," Kit said rethinking things.

"I considered that," David said, "But they were set in place under a board that makes them inaccessible from above."

Alex soon had the rest of the stone bricks removed.

"I see what you mean about the difficulties getting at that chest. Bring me up and let's think it out."

It was Kit with the first suggestion.

"We span the open area between the chest and the wall of the cistern with a couple of these shorter two by fours. Then we nail cross pieces to make like a floor to give us access to the chest. If there isn't a slide door in the lid we just cut a hole and begin the process of filling some vessel and pulling it up with the hoist. When we finish we can take it down to the boat in the truck.

"Seems to cover all the bases," David said. "What do you guys say?"

"Let's get at it," Alex said.

"I'm starved," Kit said as they worked.

"My backpack," Connie said. "Sandwich takeout from the hotel restaurant."

They ate as they worked. The nails were started into the crosspieces for ease of fastening them down in the little cave.

"There is only one of us small enough to work in there, Kit," David said.

"I already realized that. I'm up to it. Let me get down there."

Sitting on the swing seat he jockeyed himself close to the opening.

"Ready for the main support pieces."

They were lowered and soon set in place. The cross pieces followed and the nails were carefully driven.

"I'm ready to move into the cave," he called up to the others. "I can tell my pocket knife isn't going to be able to penetrate the chest. It's metal. Suggestions?"

"Hammer and a wood chisel is your best bet. Got room to maneuver the hammer?" Alex asked.

"I think so. Send them down. I'll see what I can do."

Connie had been fashioning a woven rope harness for the two gallon bucket they found in the truck.

"Didn't realize you were such an accomplished macramé artist," David joked actually more than a little impressed with the cradle he had constructed.

"Just wait 'til you see his tatting, and needlepoint" Alex added.

With the bucket set in place the tools were lowered. Kit began examining the chest.

"There *is* a sliding door on the top. That worked fine in here for filling it but it won't be of much help for emptying it. I can't reach in far enough to get the coins out. I'm going to begin cutting an opening that will run from the top of the front down to the bottom. As I empty a layer I'll cut it further down."

"Good thinking," David said. "We have the sacks ready up here."

It was just over three hours into the six hour timeline when the first load of coins reached the top. The whole process was going along smoothly though well behind the anticipated timeline.

At four hours Kit announced the chest was half empty. The cramped quarters were beginning to take its toll on him. He ached everywhere one could ache. He kept to the task although the endeavor slowed remarkably.

At five and a half hours the last coin had been removed and Kit was back up top. He pulled out the map to show the others.

"On the very bottom. I was sure there wouldn't be one."

"We need to be on our horses," Alex said.

"You've been full of idioms today," Kit said. "What's the deal?"

"Like Marc said, the only way to really master them is with native speakers."

They climbed into the truck, David and Connie in the cab the others in back. Kit knelt on top of the cab and pointed his binoculars north along the coast.

"Good news and bad news, Guys. Bad news is I see what has to be LaPique's yacht just coming into view. I'm afraid I was kidding about the good news."

"Crank this thing, Connie," David said.

It was difficult going across the rock littered landscape. Connie did his best wanting to return the vehicle in running order.

He backed onto the dock beside the boat. They handed the bags from one to another until they were all safely stowed. There would be no time for the social graces. They left without speaking to the caretaker.

Connie soon had them heading out of the cove and toward the open water along the coast. LaPique was no more than a hundred yards to the north. In a move that surprised everybody, Connie turned the craft *north*.

"Break out the fishing poles guys. Look relaxed. We're going to party ourselves right past them. If we make a run for it south we risk being fired upon. Guzzle from the pop cans as if drinks were flowing freely."

"I suppose none of the options seem very positive but, we're committed to this so let's do the best we can," David said.

The minute it took to pass the yacht seemed like ten. Several sets of binoculars followed their every move. The good thing was that no shots had been fired. The bad thing was they were headed north.

"Will they hurt the caretaker, do you think?" Kit asked.

"I don't know," David said. "Not knowing why we were really there, the old gentleman has no reason to lie in order to protect us. I imagine he will be alright."

"I'm going to suggest we turn back south as soon as that big boat moves into the cove," Alex said.

"It was my plan," Connie said. "I'm not a raw recruit in these matters, you know."

"Perhaps not, but are you aware we are running dangerously low on fuel?"

"I am. We passed a fuel station on the coast about twenty kilometers before we got to the island. If we don't make it I'm counting on the strong arms of you seasoned veterans to paddle us to safety."

They sputtered into the fuel station at five forty five. Connie's smug look, flashed at Alex, silently shouted, 'I told you we'd make it.' Just after six they were on their way again fortified with sacks of assorted takeout food to sustain them until they would reach their hotel around midnight.

Kit and David ate and were then soon asleep as the boat sailed silently south. At nine, Alex took the wheel so Connie could rest.

He was uneasy, having no way of keeping track of LaPique's movements.

Their little boat was no match in speed to the big yacht. He was not as confident as David about the caretaker's safety. He'd known LaPique's type – mean just for pleasure, and necessarily ruthless for protection.

They decided to drive directly to the plane and load the gold aboard. Alex remained there as its caretaker. The others returned to the hotel.

David and Kit opted for sleep rather than beginning work on the new map.

They were awakened at six o'clock by a call from Father A.

"Just heard from the Englishman whose island you visited. He reported that just after you left a huge yacht pulled in and two dozen rough looking men scoured the island for three hours, doing considerable damage to the summer house."

"Is the caretaker alright?"

"Yes. They looked so threatening that he hid in the storm cellar and never had contact with them."

"Any idea where they went when they left?"

"Sailed back north. That's all I know."

"We certainly appreciate your call. We got the prize of all prizes here. Not sure when we'll get it to you. Have to have a strategy meeting this morning. Later."

Kit had been listening to David's side of the conversation as he stretched himself to life.

"The old man wasn't hurt, then?"

It was his first concern.

"Apparently he hid from them. They did considerable damage on the island, however."

"I suppose they found what we had done."

"I'm sure they did. They really have no way of knowing how long ago we were there, however."

"Maybe after two dead ends, Carlos will give up," Kit said more hopefully than realistically.

"Or maybe not. We can't count on that."

"Let's get to work on the new map," Kit said. "How about ordering in breakfast?"

"You do that. I want to check in with Alex and make sure things went alright last night."

Alex was fine. He had slept. Connie was already there with him. He had taken breakfast.

Kit and David worked as they ate. Kit talked through what he saw.

"Looks like another mountain with a river. I don't think I like the placement of that black dot. Looks very inaccessible. I imagine it is a pass through a mountain. It certainly has distinctive features. It resembles a face with a feathered headband and a string of snot running out his nose."

"Your mental images are so elegant, Kit. The black dot could just be a nostril. What about the blacked wedge above it? Like an eye or a Lone Ranger mask. Represents a deep crevice I imagine."

"The nostril is the only dot we got," Kit noted. "We have to go with that for starters, I suppose. You'd think the old guy would be smiling."

"Why's that and I do realize I'm going to regret having asked."

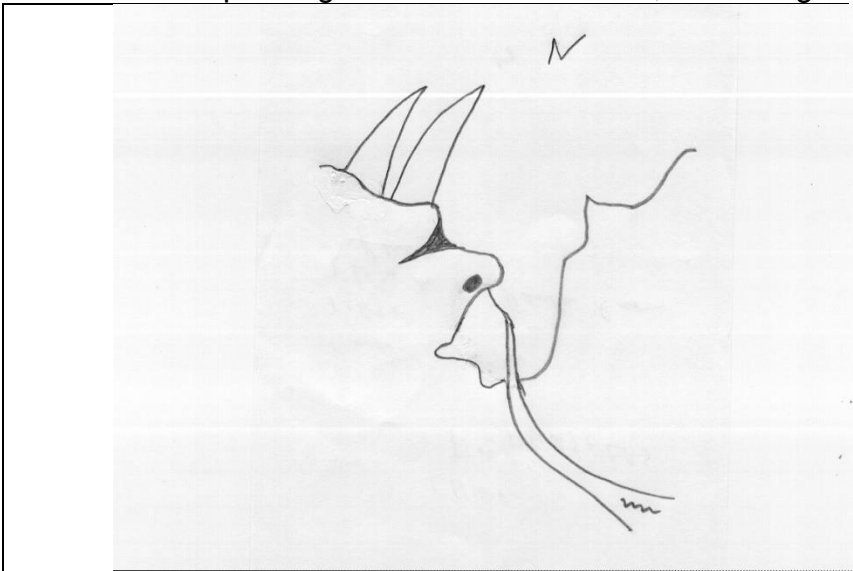
"He's staring right into a perky, young, breast."

"Where do we start looking?"

"I usually begin by feasting my eyes on the nipple and work my around it toward the edge."

"Not that, doofus! For the treasure!"

"I was speaking of a treasure of a kind," Kit said grinning,



The Map of Three Feathers at the River of Fire

pleased he had bested his uncle for the moment.

"Geological structures, I suppose," Kit said opening the laptop. "Let's see if I can come up with something."

.....

"Oddly, the shape recognition program doesn't recognize it. Should I look outside of Brazil?"

"I'm inclined to say no. Can you email that image to Father A? He may have an idea or know somebody who does."

"How about I begin with Marc instead. I'm still concerned about leaks out of Father A's office. Marc seemed knowledgeable about the geography of the country."

"Sure. A very good idea, in fact."

The email was sent and they waited. David spoke.

"Looking at the map I'd say it is either a huge gap through a mountain or that stream of water is very narrow."

"Interesting observation. Or, maybe a dry season version of a larger wet season river."

"I think you just complicated things," David said with a sigh. "A fascinating possibility that opens up others, however. How about downstream from a dam that has cut its flow dramatically since the days it was churning away at that hole through the mountain?"

"One could say that idea is a dam site better than any other we've had. Let me look up the oldest dams in the country. Had to have been built before when . . . 1775?"

"Start there. We can go both directions from that point."

"Would you believe no sizeable dams built before then?"

"I suppose that makes sense in terms of available technology."

"Hey, what about landslides that could have filled up a gorge up stream?"

"Go for it. Maybe near a mining area where explosives could have discombobulated things."

"That the scientific term?"

"Absolutely!"

"Get this," Kit said turning back to the screen, "In 1781 a mild earthquake rocked the area east of where the *Tiete River* branches off from the *Parana*. One of its tributaries from the north was blocked by a massive rockslide forming a lake. The pressure that eventually built up in that lake cut an opening to the south and changed the main course of the river there. Over time some water made its way back to the original river bed, though at a much reduced flow rate. Since then, it seems to have gradually regained much of its former size and the newer branch of the stream has become smaller."

"Let's see if that helps us in any way," David said. "How about whipping up a virtual trip from the satellite program down that original river?"

"Yes! Okay! Now we're cookin'," Kit said.

A few minutes later they were following the river with a virtual visual image.

"Whoa Nelly!" David said.

"I saw it, too. I was driving too fast – big surprise."

Kit grinned at David.

"Let's back up and take it really slow. There it is big as life but the flow of the river is ten times that we see on the map. LaPique must have arrived there soon after the quake. We're beginning to focus in on his timeline. Let's say he was there sometime between 1782 and '84."

"Does the formation have a local name?" David asked.

"I'll estimate the coordinates and then do a different kind of search. The branch river of interest is the *Rio do fogo* – River of something or other – River of Fog, maybe?"

"Do an Alta Vista translation. I don't think it is fog. More than likely *fire*."

"Bingo on that, Unc. *River of Fire*. Oxymoronish, I'd say. River of Fog makes more sense."

"My email alert is blinking. Probably Marc. Let's see. Yes it is. Another bingo, Uncle David. He knows of the place. It's an outcropping called *Two Feathers* and it overlooks the point at which the *Rio do fogo* crosses through the *Montanha Do fogo* – Fire Mountain. Perhaps the river's name is not so unreasonable after all. Let me thank him then I'll be back after it."

"Any information about how the river got its name?" David asked once Kit had finished.

"Marc is emailing you an English translation of the paper you agreed to look over. And, I have not really looked for stuff about the river. Let's see. . . . Here's something from the diary kept by a missionary. Dated September 11, 1770. I'll read it out loud.

God has smiled on this territory. He has created tall, majestic mountains and swiftly running streams. There is an abundance of small game in the valleys for us to feast on. With Spring comes a vast greening of the land that renews our souls. Wild flowers are in bloom across the valley floors for as far as one can see. God is good.

There are abundant signs of a flood here some months ago. It devastated the natural habitat back a half mile from the still roaring River of Fire. We can only speculate as to why, in His great wisdom, God caused that to happen. Praise God! Man cannot comprehend his purpose nor understand the reasons for visiting such hardship upon the land. It tries our faith. Perhaps that is the sole reason; to be steadfast in our knowledge of God and his wisdom. We pray for the quick return to normalcy here though leave that in God's hands, of course.

I am here to witness what the natives call *ver da respiração do deus*, the seeing of God's breath. I may be too late as I am told it is primarily a winter event. If God wants me to see it he will make it happen. The natives tell of times when the water boils and the steam catches fire burning hot and blue and free of smoke for weeks on end, reaching a height above the tallest trees. I will wait one more week and must then be on my way west to the Parana to meet up with Brother Adams and our main party.

"First time I've heard god described as a fire breathing being," Kit said. "Do you suppose it holds any truth?"

"About god's breath?"

"No. About fire rising up out of the river water."

"Lore is rarely complete fiction. Think about what might surface on a body of water and burn if ignited."

"Oil?"

"And that would appear how?"

"Billowing black smoke and yellow-orange flames."

"Something else, I suppose, then?" David said quite sure he had it figured in a general way at least. "Add in the concept of boiling or bubbling water."

"Natural gas? It burns blue and produces no visible smoke. If it rose from the river bottom its bubbles would make the surface appear to be boiling."

"That 's my idea, too," David said.

"But why in August and not at other times?"

"Conjecture here. Perhaps as the cold of winter gives way to the thawing of spring the earth under the river shifts as it readjusts to the warmer temperature and for a short time allows the gas to escape through a fissure from a subterranean, gas filled, dome."

"Then, the temperature or the increased weight of the spring runoff in the river compacts or in some way closes the fissure," Kit added completing the picture, more or less to his satisfaction.

"I hadn't yet moved that far, myself. A very good possibility, however."

"People are strange beings," Kit said putting the laptop aside.

"We are but in so many ways I have no idea where you're going with the comment."

Kit smiled acknowledging some humor in the truth David spoke.

"Most people just flat out need acceptable answers to all questions and they so easily abandon logic and fact on their way to finding them. So many of the answers people hold as sacred or absolute are . . . rootless, I guess you could call them. The answer, which seems to be satisfactory because it reduces the anxiety of not knowing, if traced backwards to its source, loses its way – is not really connected. How can I say that better? There is no factual or logical path between problem and answer. And people so want to hold on to the answer, they are even willing to acknowledge the gap and the illogic, naming it *faith*. As if merely having a name makes it legitimate.

"Like the missionary just now. God is the ultimate answer to all questions. When good things come ones way it is because of god's love and graciousness. When bad things come ones way it is god's way of teaching some lesson or testing ones faith in him. People have created a god that causes all things good and bad. It seems to serve their need to know that events do not just happen by chance or because of the fortuitous convergence of forces or processes of nature, which are generally beyond human control. Even when bad things happen they want them to have been purposeful – under some being's control – god's control – the devil's, perhaps. Most people don't seem to be able to cope

with the idea that some answers are just not possible at our present state of knowledge and intelligence. Many even translate that situation as proof of god's existence – a fully implausible leap by any measure.

"They have invented prayer to influence god's will – as the missionary did, invoking it to speed the return of the valley to normal. But, they have built in a failsafe device. If prayers are not answered it's okay because god has reasons we cannot know. God can't loose and neither can those people who are so insecure as to require an answer for everything."

He wasn't finished.

"Remember that paper I did for Senior Seminar on the power of prayer? I located every study I could find dealing with prayer based healing. I removed only those that had major flaws in procedure and I did that before examining their findings. There were nineteen left and represented Christianity, The Muslim faith, and the Native American Tradition. The result was overwhelming. People who were systematically prayed for recovered no faster and no more completely than those who had not been prayed for.

"I noticed that none of the studies had been undertaken by religious groups. I had to wonder why and asked Dr. Tim at the college religion department. His answer was refreshingly forthcoming I thought. He said, 'Perhaps we are afraid if our belief is not upheld our faith will unravel. To explain it away will require a series of new fictitious structures. Lord knows we already have way too many of those in modern day religion'."

David smiled.

"Dr. Tim is a good man. An interesting mixture of orthodoxy and openness."

Kit's phone rang.

"Alex and I are just wondering how the game plan is coming along. Al's getting itchy feet."

"I'd suggest *Tenactin* or maybe *Lamisil*," Kit giggled. "Seriously, we need to get to a remote area about six hundred miles NNW of here or two hundred and fifty miles northwest of our previous stop at *Curitiba*."

"My suggestion is that we fly back to Curitiba and then go by helicopter from there," Connie said. "What spot are we interested in?"

"A gap through the Fire Mountains, cut by the Fire River at the point where it flows between one outcropping that resembles an old, toothless, Indian and another resembling a beautiful, young, boob."

"Sounds like a floor show I once saw in Vegas. When do we leave?"

"He wants to know when we leave," Kit relayed to David.

"Soon as possible, I'd say."

"ASAP."

"Meet us here in an hour – 8:30."

Kit folded his phone. Just time for showers and packing. We're running

up quite a tab on Ari's credit card. Hope it doesn't just suddenly stop."

"It won't. Don't worry. Ari always wanted to feel like he was looking after me. He would be pleased to know that he is doing just that right now."

"Hooray for Ari! Who showers first?"

"Be my guest. I'll get us packed up."

* * *

The two, sleek, tail mounted, engines quieted on the *Curitibi* tarmac at ten o'clock.

"Back to the hotel first or be right on our way?" Connie asked.

"You guys got clothes and such?" Kit asked.

"We're ready."

"David? We go?"

"We have to do something with that gold first. Can't just leave it here in the plane."

"Got that covered," Alex said. "Your Father A will be here any minute in an Ocean Pacific security plane to take it back to *Joao Pessoa* with him. Sooner the better. I get the Willies around this kind of wealth."

By nine the gold was transferred and they had received the unrequested blessing of the priest.

"Figured it couldn't hurt," Father A quipped through a broad smile. "Consider it my way of appeasing *my* jitters."

They moved to the waiting helicopter. It was equal in size to the one they had used before but was enclosed and had larger fuel capacity.

At ten thirty they were in the air. At ten thirty-one Kit was in the lunch box. It was a three hour journey into a generally rugged and unpopulated area of the southern Brazilian Highlands. The view from above was spectacular. The mountain ranges, while in general presenting north to south orientations were actually formed by dozens and dozens of smaller mountains angling together like feathers on the shaft of an arrow.

By eleven they were following the *Tiete River* west north west.

"Coming upon the mouth of *Fire River*," Connie announced. "It will be to our right."

"I see it. There!" Kit said adjusting his binoculars. "The place we're looking for is about seventy five miles on up stream. Can we go lower to get a feel for the river?" Kit asked.

Without responding Alex took them down to a hundred feet.

"Sure moves a lot of water for a short river," Kit observed.

Alex kept low. The valley gradually narrowed and by the time they arrived at the gap it was no more than a hundred feet wide – forty of that taken up by the river which tapered briefly to twenty feet of ferociously churning white water at the pass itself. There was a narrow strip of meadow across the river to the east from where they landed.

"I can see why the old missionary raved about this place," David said.

"There's the old guy with the feathers just as promised," Kit said looking up, shielding his eyes from the noontime sun. "And over there is the *main* attraction."

He pointed at the upswept – 'perky' – formation across the river.

Alex was immediately engrossed with his binoculars, examining the area of the black dot, under the nose on the formation. Kit was looking elsewhere.

"A small cave opening, for sure," Alex said. "It will take some real creativity to get there. Once again the chopper won't be of any help. Couldn't get anybody within ten meters of it. No access from the bottom – smooth, solid, rock face. It's probably down from the top of the head, across the eye and onto the nose. From there it will be travel by rope time. I think Connie and I should go back up in the chopper and take a close look while you guys make camp."

Kit wanted to make some smart remark about getting stuck with the real work while the others went off on a pleasure trip but he held his tongue. Being mission director had a way of forcing maturity. He wasn't at all sure he liked that.

At 12:30 the helicopter was back. The camp site was organized. Kit had a fire started and a pot of coffee shared its aroma across the area.

"Hot dogs, potato salad, and chips," He announced as Alex and Connie approached.

"You guys are getting to be the regular campers," Connie said looking around. "Fire circle in place. Tents up. Grub cooking. I'll recommend you."

"Just wait until you taste these anchovy hot dogs," Kit said kidding.

"So, what did you find up there?" David asked as they got comfortable on the grass around the fire.

"Nothing easy, for sure," Alex said. "We have to get right under the middle of the nose. It's some three meters wide. The Cave opening is only a meter wide and maybe two high. It butts right up against the underside of the nose. We couldn't really see inside it from the air."

"Interesting but can we get to it?" Kit asked.

"Al can get to anything," Connie said.

"It will require an interesting configuration," Alex explained. "We can land up top behind the feathers. We'll rig a rope ladder, anchored around the front feather, from where we can descend to the relatively flat top of the nose. From there we will drop rope ladders down both sides of the nose and tie them together underneath. That will take us to within easy reach of the cave opening."

"So, these rope ladders you speak of. We get them at the local *Rope Ladder Store*?" Kit asked more in good humor than sarcasm.

"We spend the next ten hours making them," Connie said. "Not difficult. Just time consuming."

"Let's get at it, then," Kit said standing.

"Unlike you who gorged his face during the whole trip," David said, "The

rest of us are hungry and need to finish the meal. I suppose you can begin unloading the rope."

"We'll use the half inch rope," Alex said. "Begin by unrolling two coils beside each other – about thirty centimeters – a foot – apart. By the time you have that done I'll be ready to show you how to proceed. Also need several spools of the heaviest brown twine. You can begin cutting that into foot long pieces to use as ties."

Connie had been fairly accurate in his estimate of the time it would require to build the ladders. The ropes had been crisscrossed forming diamonds. They were bound together with the twine where they crossed each other. The design created a very strong and easily managed ladder.

Alex hung one from a high branch so David and Kit could practice. The somewhat awkward process was soon mastered. By midnight they were all asleep.

Kit was up by six rearing to go. He built up the fire and had eggs scrambling and bacon crisping by the time the others crawled out.

To the west of the feathers – behind them – was a sizeable flat, level, solid rock area tailor made for a landing pad. It took some time to secure the first several ropes between the feathers. That accomplished, they hung the ladder, which gave them access to the flat upper surface of the nose. Ropes were arranged to span that area. A rope ladder was secured to them at each side, which allowed them to hang well below and to each side of the cave entrance.

A draw rope had been attached to the bottom rung of each ladder. It was dropped over the front of the nose and was then cinched up to draw the two ladders together underneath.

Alex was the first over the side on his way to the cave. Kit followed but remained on the ladder until Alex had scouted a ways inside the opening. He came back to offer his report.

"Seems safe. Solid rock floor. I didn't see a chest but it continues back at least twice as far as I went. Let me give you a hand."

He called up to Connie and David who were standing atop the nose.

"One of you stay there. We need one of us up there at all times to pass along supplies and in case of emergency. Bring flashlights. I'd prefer it be Connie in case the helicopter is needed."

David made his way down the ladder and into the cave.

"The keyword for the next ten minutes is 'booby trap'," Alex said. "Let's move ahead and see what we have here."

With a silent smile to himself, Kit let pass the fact that 'booby trap' was actually *two* words.

The walls and ceiling were generally stucco-like in surface – irregular and bumpy in over all configuration. The height remained constant between six and seven feet – occasionally a bit lower for a short way. The floor sloped gently into

the mountain. After fifty feet the tunnel curved to the right – north – and opened into a larger, taller, circular room thirty five feet wide and ten to twelve feet tall. In there, the surfaces were damp. They saw no signs of life.

"So far no booby traps," Alex said as they stopped to look around the room.

"And, *no* treasure chest," Kit said putting on a glum face.

"We seem to have a choice now. A tunnel to the left and one to the right," David said.

"Look at the floor just inside the one to the left," Kit said. "A jagged opening. Reminiscent of the fault openings in the ceiling of that cave that was set to pour tons of debris down on us."

"Yes. It looks to be a natural crevice or fault opening. Easily big enough for a slender, young, man to slide into."

"At this point what purpose would that serve?" Kit asked knowing full well he was that slender, young, man.

"I wasn't suggesting it. Just making the dimensional observation. Let's look into the other one first. It seems to be wider and higher."

Kit took the lead.

Some thirty feet into the tunnel it narrowed to eight feet at which point they encountered a man-made structure. Thick, rock, walls had been constructed to jut out from each side. They spanned the height rising tight against the ceiling. Filling the two foot gap left between them was a door of sorts – like a cell door made of closely set iron bars. It was latched but not locked. The latch was tied down with oiled leather thongs, mostly deteriorated through the years.

"Let's not touch the door," Alex said moving to examine it.

"Looks like it was intended to keep out large animals and birds," David said. "The ties are clearly not meant to keep people out – just to keep the wind or animals from opening it."

Beyond the door was the chest sitting intact on the floor. In front of it was . . . a contraption – an apparatus – a gizmo.

"It's a bingo if you're a *Rube Goldberg* fan," Kit said.

"How do you know about that old gizmo inventor of all things impractical?" David asked.

"One of your books, I imagine. Probably thought it had something to do with Rubik's Cube.

They lit the area with their flashlights.

"Look at that thing," David said. "Built in such a way we can't get to the chest behind without moving the gadget."

"And that is most likely the booby trap," Alex said moving in to get a closer look from just outside the bars.

"There is another one of those fault openings in the floor about four feet in front of it," Kit said.

"I don't know about you two but I'm suddenly feeling very light headed," David said.

"I've been noticing that, too," Kit said. "I have a headache as well."

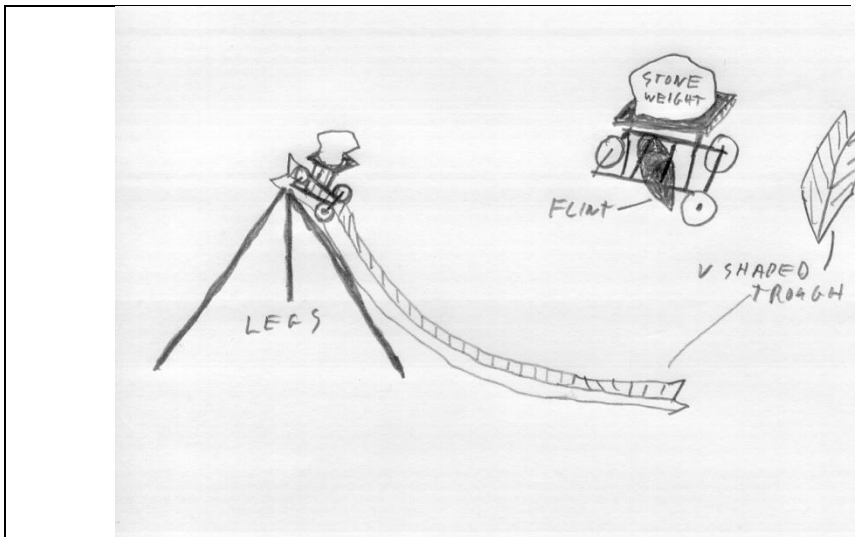
"And I'm nauseous," Al added. "Most likely natural gas leaking in here from one of the fault lines. Kit, get a picture of that gadget from several angles then let's move back out to fresh air."

Back at the entrance they breathed deeply, finding it difficult to clear the noxious fumes from their lungs. Alex called up to Connie.

"We need gas masks and form fitting goggles. Got into a hive of natural gas down here. Don't toss any fire crackers our way."

Kit gulped at the picture that conjured in his mind's eye.

"I think I understand the Rube Goldberg gadget," David said taking out his pad while they waited for the masks to be lowered. "Here is the curved metal trough – like a V shaped piece of iron that has been heated and bent in to a gentle curve. It must be what . . . eight feet long with the left side up some four feet supported by three iron rods for legs, and the right end resting on the floor."



David's rendering of the Flint & Iron Ignition Gizmo

"Remember the small mechanism sitting at the top – like a miniature tricycle about five inches tall with the tires removed revealing the grooved wheels. Instead of handlebars and seat it has a flat roof-like structure which carries a stone which looks to weigh maybe a pound. Extending down into the trough from underneath – basically where the peddles would be – there is a sharpened black arrowhead-like stone. That, I believe is flint."

"So when the wheeled mechanism is released at the top, it follows the iron

track to the floor. Along the way it spews a barrage of sparks as the flint contacts the iron. The sparks, in a cave filled with gas, ignites the gas and . . ."

"Kablooy!" Kit said finishing the idea. "That guy was really ingenious."

"I'd say your uncle isn't such a slouch himself," Alex said.

"What sets the tri-wheel thingy in motion," Kit asked.

"Not sure. Maybe just moving the contraption. More likely something to do with opening the *unlocked*, iron bar, door – a hidden, small-link chain, perhaps."

Without fanfare three gasmasks and goggles arrived, swinging within reach at the cave opening. A few minutes later they headed back into the cave.

"The *smoking light* is definitely off, Guys," Kit said trying to make light of the extreme danger.

They looked through the door confirming most of David's ideas about the ramp and tiny vehicle. What they had not noticed was that all the metal parts on the V shaped ramp were coated in tar – thick everywhere but on the inside of the V where it had been carefully applied, paper thin.

"Just enough to keep out moisture and prevent rusting," David said, "But not enough to prevent the sharp piece of flint from easily penetrating it and leaving sparks in its wake."

"If we could just knock that tri-wheeler off the ramp we'd be home free, don't you think," Kit said."

David looked at Alex as if to pass him the question.

"Makes sense. Have to be done before we open this door and without any contact with the door or other metal surface. I assume opening the door will set it into motion."

Alex slipped out of his backpack and knelt beside it searching for something inside. He removed a telescoping wand and opened it to its full two meters. He screwed a hook onto the narrow end.

"Doesn't look quite long enough to me," Kit said eyeing the distance and then the wand.

"It *will* be at then end of your willowy arm," Alex said. "Practice handling it. Try touching the third button down from the top on my jacket, things like that to get the hang of it."

As Kit practiced, two pointed ears, two dark eyes, and a small, black, quivering nose appeared above the rim of the open backpack. It was a little critter who had probably entered the bag at the campsite and been zipped inside.

Before Kit could point it out and begin plying it with high level baby talk it bolted and headed for and through the iron door, and up the little ramp.

"Hit the deck!" Connie called.

The others complied just as the sparks began to fly and a flaming, deafening, explosion filled the air.

CHAPTER NINE

"Hey in there! Al, David, Kit! Where are you? Are you okay?"

It was Connie carefully making his way back into the tunnel through the thick, dust laden, air. His voice roused Kit from the concussion induced unconsciousness he and the others had experienced. He shook David. Connie knelt and attended to Alex. Both were soon awake and sitting back against the wall.

"What a rush!" Kit said, once he had determined the others were relatively undamaged.

"Speaking of a rush," Connie began. "From where I was sitting up there it looked like fire spewing from a dragon's mouth. Shot thirty meters out over the river and set a small stream of gas aflame right down to the surface of the water where it spread up and down the stream another hundred yards. It was all over in ten seconds. What happened in here and why did you survive?"

"The question is, '*how* did we come to survive'," Kit said turning to look at his uncle.

"It is a fascinating phenomenon actually," David began almost humorously deliberative considering the situation. "I've read about it happening in mine explosions. The lighter than air gas was concentrated near the top of the tunnel here – fortunately the concentration must have been seasonally low. When it ignited it expanded toward the area of least resistance, out into the front section of the tunnel, initially along the ceiling. That forced the air out there to go elsewhere and some of it tried to escape back into here along the floor establishing a safe high pressure layer of less flammable air that enveloped us on the floor. The concussion must have rendered us unconscious for a few minutes. How long has it been?"

He looked at Connie.

"No more than five minutes. It was like one quick, spewing, flash and it was all over."

"It blew the door of iron bars open and toppled the ramp. That chipmunk like animal must have triggered it."

An examination of the ramp proved just how well engineered it had all been. A trip wire from the door was arranged to pull a pin that held the tri-wheeler

in place. Any vibration of the gadget would do the same. It had moved less than a foot down the ramp – according to the slit it had cut through the tar – before it had created enough sparks to set off the gas.

"Ready for the bad news?" Connie said.

"Bad news?" Kit said. "You're making it sound like this near death experience of ours is the *good* news."

"We *did* survive, Son," David said.

They turned back to Connie.

"Just as the flames raced downstream, a small boat – looked to be a fifteen foot inboard Chris Craft – came within viewing distance of our campsite. It was flying the Jolly Roger."

"Skipping right on over plans B, C, and D," Kit said, "What we got for plan E for escape?"

Alex had the suggestion.

"The chest is intact. With a little help from the explosion I think the four of us will be able to haul it up to the cave opening. Cinched into a rope cradle I imagine we can snag a line from the chopper, swing it out, and carry it to safety."

"And just what sort of help did the explosion provide?" Kit asked.

"The floor is now strewn with tiny, gravel-like pieces of stone. They should act like little rollers under the chest, reducing friction by about a thousand percent and allowing the four of us to pull it to the opening up front."

"Good going big bang!" Kit said nervously offering a short burst of applause.

"Connie? Can we manage to snag a line from the copter?" David asked.

"If we have a roper in the audience."

"A roper?"

"A cowboy good with a lariat. Aren't all you Americans cowboys?"

"I came in second at survival camp," Kit said. "Had to rope a moving target at twenty five feet. I hit eight of ten. Can't say I've kept in practice this past year."

"You're our man then. I'll fashion a large wire hook to the end of the dangle rope from the helicopter. You merely lasso it and pull it into the cave. The rest will be a piece of cake. Then you'll climb up onto the nose, I'll come in close enough to lower a ladder and you'll scramble aboard. If the bad guys have come back we'll leave out directly. If not, we can land and gather our camping things before we go."

It took half an hour to move the chest to the opening in the front of the cave. It had been exhausting work even with the fortuitous help of the 'big bang'.

"We really can't chance taking time to rest," David said. "Although there doesn't seem to be anybody poking around our campsite we better take all precautions. The flaming river may have dissuaded them. Kit, we are going to leave you here. The rest of us will get back up top. We'll send you down a rope

to use as a lariat. Once you have pulled in the *dangle rope* as Connie calls it, secure it well to the chest and then make for the top yourself."

"You and Connie go on ahead," Alex said. "I'll stay here for a few minutes and help Kit fashion a secure sling for the chest."

That decided, the others left. Creating slings was clearly not a new undertaking for Alex. It had soon been completed and, administering an uncharacteristic hug, he left the cave and climbed the rope ladder to join the others.

Kit filled the time with practice tosses at a large standing rock back in the cave. He was pleased with how soon his judgment of distance and his coordination formed a useful coalition. His phone rang. It was Alex.

"We are ready to take off, Kit. A warning here. If Carlos and his men are still in the area, the sound of this chopper will most certainly catch their attention. If they begin shooting I'll lay down a few rounds in their directions to hold them at bay and let them know we are not going to be pushovers when it comes to all this. That should allow you time to scamper up the rope ladder to the safety of the old boy's nose. Keep low up there – on your back if necessary so you can more easily grab onto the ladder."

"Roger that," Kit replied.

He had nothing further to say. He made a few more practice tosses then moved to the opening readying the rope. He heard the helicopter moan itself to life. He heard the whirring and clacking of the blades. He soon saw it overhead with the rope and wire U hanging underneath it.

Connie maneuvered to within thirty feet easing closer, eventually holding steady at twenty. Kit noted that they were dangerously close to the overhang above. He also noted that just below the wire target they had affixed a small boulder to help keep the rope taut. Still it swirled some in the down draft from the blades.

Braced by a deep breath, he tossed the rope. It missed by several feet low and outside.

"I need to adjust for that wind," he said thinking out loud.

He re-coiled the rope and tried again. His adjustment had been well conceived and the rope slipped over the wire target. He gently whipped a ripple down the rope to draw it tight around the wire.

As he pulled it toward him, Connie descended a few yards so it would more easily reach the cave. Kit pulled it in and tied it to the rope cradle in place around the chest.

A shot rang out. Not from the ground but from the nose of Three Feathers. Clearly even plan E was not going to be sufficient. The boy improvised.

He sat on the chest straddling the dangle rope and crossing his legs around it. He wound the lasso rope around himself securing him to the chest and

tow rope. Connie understood. Kit circled his arm above his head indicating it was time to leave.

Several rounds were fired from the helicopter in the direction of the rock formation. The helicopter rose into the air. The chest was dragged off the lip of the cave jerking and twisting out into space. Kit established a death grip on the rope and closed his eyes. More shots. Some were now rising from the campsite as well.

Connie dipped close to the river. Alex fired an automatic weapon into the floor of boat. It began to sink. The copter rapidly pulled high, flying an erratic path. Kit hoped above hope that didn't mean it had been hit. The sporadic exchange of shots continued.

They flew on for fifteen minutes then descended close above a clearing near the river some twenty five miles to the south. David placed a call to Kit.

"Connie will bring you down close to the ground. Wait to a safe distance – safe to me and not necessarily to you – then jump off and run clear. He'll touch the chest to the ground and we'll cut the rope. Then we'll set down and collapse together."

The humor was lost on Kit who had been hit in the shoulder by a bullet. He had lost a significant amount of blood and was struggling to maintain consciousness. He cinched the rope tighter around himself and blacked out.

"He's not jumping to the ground," David said. "I can't raise him on his phone."

"Perhaps he dropped it," Alex said.

"You'll have to put them both on the ground, Connie," Alex said. "I'll cut the rope the second it touches down."

Connie nodded. He eased the helicopter straight down. Contact was made amid a swirling cloud of dust. The rope fell free and they landed twenty yards from where Kit had fallen off the chest onto the ground.

"He was hit back there," Alex said having won the foot race to the boy's side.

"Tore up his shoulder, I'm afraid. Let's get him untangled from the ropes. Connie, get on the radio and find the nearest first aid station. We have a bullet in the shoulder. The slug is still in there. Lost lots of blood. We have a general purpose IV we can set up. Get recommendations."

Connie returned to the helicopter. Mercifully, Kit remained unconscious.

"Kit and I share the same blood type if that will help," David said sitting cross legged to cradle his nephew's head in his lap.

"I'm feeling really uneasy staying here much longer," Alex said. "This Carlos LaPique fellow is nobody to be messing with. Let me do what I can to tend to the wound and then we'll get him back onboard."

David nodded and began tearing away Kit's shirt to expose his shoulder.

"It's a clean wound," David said. "Do you think it hit bone?"

"Something stopped it in there. Can't tell what."

He doused the wound liberally with alcohol and applied a pressure bandage; the bleeding slowed. They moved him to the helicopter and arranged a sleeping bag for him on the floor.

"I have coordinates for an aid station. A small missionary hospital about an hour north. Wrong direction but by far the closest."

"Let's go then."

"Aren't we forgetting something?" Connie said.

David and Alex exchanged furrowed brows.

"The chest?" Connie said as if prompting.

"Oh. Yes. What about that?"

"I can set down beside it. We can winch it inside. Shouldn't take but five minutes."

"Let's do it, then," David said. "Kit would never forgive us!"

That accomplished, with no more trouble than Connie had anticipated, they took off NNE for the hospital.

The staff was waiting and prepared to do what needed to be done. The procedure took over an hour but in the end the news was generally positive (which in medical lingo usually means negative but in this case actually *did* mean positive).

The doctor wanted to keep Kit for observation but David chose to leave and find further medical assistance as needed in *Curitiba*. He wanted to take no chance that the bad guys would find them there and cause problems for the hospital. Armed with pain pills, myicins, cillin's, and salve, they left for civilization.

Kit wandered in and out of consciousness for some time. His main concern seemed to be about the safety of Miss April who apparently made her appearances between pages 16 and 21. That was all the information his subconscious chose to divulge. Undoubtedly she had fallen into the hands of the pirates – a fact the men did not pass on to him. He didn't need to have his list of ailments extended to include libidinal depression.

By the time they landed at the airport he was fully conscious and hurting, trying to lift his own spirits.

"Well, I didn't get fried up there in that cave and I didn't get completely drained of my vital, red, fluid while lashed to a chest, hurtling through space. I suppose I should feel fortunate."

"As we all should," David said.

"And then there is that really bad news," Alex said grinning.

"Oh yes. That really, *really*, bad news," David said nodding and going along.

"What would that be?" Kit said adjusting his arm in the sling with obvious discomfort.

David handed off to Alex with a turn of his hand.

"It is with deepest regrets that we must report the confiscation of Miss April who appears between pages 16 and 21 of something or other magazine."

"May I ask how you found out about her?"

David provided the answer.

"You've been blabbing about her for the past several hours."

"Certainly worth blabbing about," Kit said, smiling. "The Misses May and June are not all that shabby however. I'll get through the crisis. On another topic have you looked at the contents of the chest yet?"

"No."

"Waiting for me? Nice?"

"Actually, in and among the several crises, we haven't thought about it I guess."

"*Several* crises?" he said turning to David.

"Well, *you* of course *and* Miss April."

Kit ignored the overworked butt of humor.

"Let's take a look."

Alex cut the lock and with David's help cautiously loosened the lid enough to open it.

"Mostly jewelry, the way it looks," Kit said. "Looks like the edge of another map showing there between the diamond tiara and the emerald broach. Can you believe I'm more interested in an old piece of pig skin than I am the jewels?"

It required no answer.

David removed the map and handed it to his nephew who stuffed it into a pocket without viewing it.

"Time to get the boy back to a bed in the hotel, I think," David said.

* * *

He slept fretfully and awoke at seven that evening. The other three were in the sitting room enjoying Chinese.

"I smell *goo goo gai pan*," he said as he gingerly made his way out of the bedroom. "Got plenty," David said. "How's the pain?"

"The pain is doing very well, I'd say. It is the *absence* of pain that sucks big time right now."

"I'll get your pain pills. You are overdue by almost two hours."

"We took the liberty of pilfering the map from your duds," Alex said holding it up.

"*And* my duds, I see."

"Figured you'd be most comfortable in your usual sleep ware," David quipped.

Kit nodded and turned the conversation back to the map.

"What did you find?"

"We found we really needed you to help us get a handle on it."

"Finally, the kid gets some respect. Yea! Ouch! Where are those pills, Uncle David?"

That handled – amid his protests that *two* could certainly *not* be enough – he joined the circle around the coffee table. The pills were followed with all the leavings from the various white take out boxes.

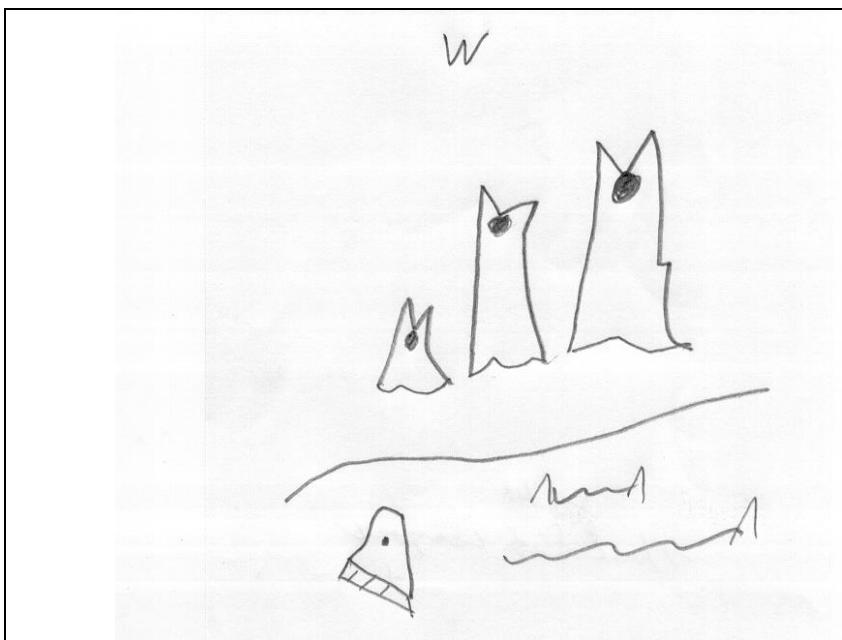
"Has the chest been delivered to Father A yet?" he asked.

Yes it has," David said. "That fund is really adding up.

Kit eyed the map.

"What we got here on this map? Maybe three mesas with

V shaped chunks cut out of their tops. Maybe a coast line or shore line in that minimally curvy line. These look like wave or water markers. The odd shaped chunk of something in the water? An island?" Not much to go on here."



**Map of The
Three Stranded
Fish Site**

"One thing I noticed," David said, "is the direction of the wave or water indicators. They are laid in parallel to the coast line or shore line. That would not suggest flowing water as in a river. It would suggest a lake or ocean."

"What have you made of the *four* dots instead of the *one* we've encountered in the past?" Kit asked.

"We're not sure," David said. "Notice they come in four sizes – the smallest one on what you described as the island and the biggest on that tallest mesa or whatever."

"Could those V shaped peaks represent volcanoes," Kit asked.

"To my knowledge the South American volcano range hugs the west coast. It might be worth checking out, though."

"Now that you say that, I'm sure you're right. Still, those *are* strange features."

"We know from the previous maps that things are not necessarily drawn to

scale," David said. "Also, I don't recall mountains having base lines on his other maps."

"If not mountains, what then?" Kit asked clearly energized by the new possibility.

Silence.

"Back to those waves for a minute," Kit said. "What's with the inverted Vs? The top wave has them at both ends and the lower one only at the right."

"Could just be some problem with the implement used in impressing the figures into the pelt," David said.

"Fat chance. This is the genius Louie LaPique we're talking about."

"You're probably right there."

"Little mountains or hills?" Kit asked thinking aloud.

"Might be. No telling how tall or short they could be."

"But then what are the wavy things?"

"Maybe sharp rocks sticking up above the water with the waves showing between them," David said.

"Nothing feels right to me, Uncle David. Could that dividing line be like the one on the other map and indicate two separate areas of interest? Like could those three bigger objects to the top all be down there on the Angular Island shaped like a grand piano – like the stone house was represented on the Pistol Island map?"

"I feel your concern. Do you think LaPique would have used the same technique on two successive maps?"

"Doubt it," Kit said. . . . "You other guys can just jump in here anytime and solve this thing you know. No special credentials are required."

Alex responded. "You two are the brain trust. I'm the brawn. Connie's the finesse guy."

It was worth a smile.

"At this point I usually begin either pacing or doing push-ups," Kit said. "Neither seems likely right now. I feel all boxed in with no possibility of reprieve."

"The boy is profound even when not trying to be," David said.

"Yes I am! How I am?"

"Reconfigure those three large mountains to the top as horizontal objects rather than vertical."

"Holes in the ground?"

"Canyons – double *box* canyons," David said.

"I've never heard the term."

"Canyons that are boxed at both ends."

"Ah! Like giant sized bath tubs."

"Perhaps. Do you need time out here to fill your fantasy with giant sized girls bathing in them?"

"I think you've just taken care of that. Thank you. How are they made?"

"Well," David began with a glint in his eyes, "A giant sized daddy and a giant sized mommy who love each other very much . . ."

"Not that! The holes, you sick old man."

"Some are giant sink holes. Others are cut into deposits of softer rock by rivers that later dry up for some reason."

"So, we may have three canyons, side by side, perhaps along a coast line with that little island just off shore. And, the water body is dotted with protruding, sharp, rocks."

"Here's the laptop," David said placing it on his lap (reasonable!). "Can you make that thing work in your condition?"

"I could make this thing work with one arm in a sling – Oh! I *have* one arm in a sling. Let's see what I can do."

"Looking for images of canyons or cluster of canyons or double box canyons."

He worked in silence for some time. David looked on, craning his neck to monitor the monitor."

"None along the coastal region," he said at last.

"Remember, it could be beside a lake – a large lake most reasonably," David said.

Kit searched on.

"Got nothing, Uncle David. Suggestions?"

"Here's a way out idea. Look into underground or disappearing rivers."

"Yes. Way out. I have no idea where you came by that idea, but I'll look."

.....

"The *Caatinga* is an area in northeastern Brazil – just to the west of *Joao Pessoa*. It is an area of erratically fluctuating wet and dry seasons. When it's wet it is flood time. When it's dry the earth is red, hard, and cracked. Flora uniquely suited to such wide variations flourish in the area. Lots of intermittent streams – flow when it rains and dry up when it doesn't. But, there are also some rivers that flow underground, surfacing for short runs and then return into the ground. They provide what water there is for the animals during the dry times. Let me see if I can get names and images."

Again, he worked silently for some time.

"There is a significant intermittent river known as the *Iguato* that flows southeast of *Teresina* toward *Juazeiro do Norte*, which actually ends up not too far from *Joao Pessoa*. The area of our interest is probably some six hundred miles to the west of there. Get this. Terrain presents occasional, huge, sinkholes, many of which catch and hold rain and supply water for months after the dry periods set in."

"We need three of those babies in a row," David said stating the obvious. "Or, there needed to have been three back in the late seventeen hundreds at least."

"Just suppose I could find such a place. How would you explain the map then, Uncle David?"

"The imp is showing through that face of his, gentlemen," David began, "But I'll take him up on his challenge. The line represents the *Iguato River*. The three formations above it are large sink holes. The island below becomes a low mesa or raised plane on dry land. The inverted Vs become low, jagged outcroppings of stone and the waving lines between them represent surface streams that are connected to underground rivers at those outcroppings."

"Give that man a cigar – make it two! One to rot each lung." Kit said kidding him. "The three sink holes have been there for centuries and are known as the *três peixes encalhados*, the *three stranded fish*. Aside from the *Iguato River* I find no names for the other features."

"We still have to deal with the *four dots*," David said.

"At least they aren't way up in the unforgiving cliffs of some odd mesas," Kit said. "I've had my monthly quota of high rise caves."

"I suppose the size of the dots is to tell us something."

Kit nodded. "Smallest to largest, I'd think."

"Me, too. Is this another helicopter ride?"

Connie made a call to the airport and talked to several departments.

"We can fly the Big Goose into *Juarzeiro do Norte*. A very modern airport. I've reserved one of only a few helicopters available there – a reserve rescue copter."

"Do we go directly from here?" David asked.

Kit was ready with a response.

"How about touching base at *Joao Pessoa*," he asked. "I think a night in that bed and a couple hours on that beach would speed the healing of my injury – the one I received rescuing the jewels for all the needy children."

He held his left shoulder with his right hand and made sad puppy eyes at the others.

"Probably a good idea to give that shoulder a little longer to care for itself," David said. "Okay with you guys?"

"Hey!" Connie said. "We're just along for the sun and the wild women. So far we've only been offered sun."

"We will leave in the morning then," David said.

Alex and Connie stood and left, returning to their rooms. A few minutes later Alex rang the bell.

"Hey!" Kit said opening the door.

"I brought this for you."

"A giant condom tailor made for T-Rex?"

"Actually, smart Alec, it's a plastic tie bag used to protect rifles from moisture. Thought you might be able to fashion it around your arm and shoulder so you could shower."

"Very thoughtful. Thanks. Yes, I can see how to make it work. Hadn't thought that far ahead. By the way, I was filthy up in that cave. How did I end up so clean?"

"Two beautiful young nurses diligently worked to clean you up – took longer than I thought was reasonable but then they were young and probably inexperienced at navigating washcloths around the male anatomy."

"If you are pulling my leg don't tell me. I'll be quite able to enjoy that fantasy later."

David helped him modify the bag and slip into it. He was off to the shower and wonderful new reveries.

* * *

The Goose took off at six a.m. and set down at eleven. Kit decided to forego the beach, opting for a padded lounge at the pool. His energy level was decidedly low. David joined him.

"You seem exhausted, too, Uncle David. That explosion must have really taken it out of us."

"Or," Alex said, walking into the latter portion of the conversation, "It might have something to do with the three pints of blood he let the doctors drain from his arm into yours at that one horse hospital."

"Really?"

He looked at his uncle.

"Thanks. I didn't know – didn't suspect. I guess I owe you three."

"Nothing I wouldn't have done for myself, you know."

Kit laughed at the absurdity. Alex shook his head. David looked contentedly smug.

Connie joined them with four lemonades on a small round tray.

"I'll have to admit that although you're a good waitress, Connie, you just have all the wrong parts to make it interesting."

"I do know how to pour this stuff on young smart mouth's heads you know."

Kit patted his injured shoulder and put on a pout.

The men pulled up chairs. Alex had the question.

"Any idea when we leave again? I need to extend the rental on that helicopter."

"I'll be ready in the morning," Kit said. "Better ask the old man here when *he'll* be ready."

"I'm already packed and ready to leave," David shot back. "Clothes, maps, plasma. I'm ready."

He pointed to the spot on his lower left arm where the Band-Aid remained from the transfusion.

Alex turned to Connie.

"The boy has the better puppy dog eyes but I'll give the professor the edge

on the pouty lower lip."

Connie nodded, adding:

"When they faint dead away out there in the heat I got dibs on carrying the kid."

"Back to the real world here, guys," David said, "We can go in the morning. How far is it again?"

"Less than three hundred miles to *Juarazeiro do Norte*," Kit explained. "Leave at six, arrive at seven. The site we're after is another three hours out from there by copter."

With that set, Alex and Connie left. David swam laps stopping at fifty. Kit charmed a half dozen Brazilian Beauties regaling them with an impromptu story about how he had been caught in the crossfire of rival gangs in Miami while attempting to whisk a small child off to safety. Later he would refer to it as metaphorical rather than a falsehood.

When David returned he sensed that Kit was upset.

"What?"

"I was just chatting with six bright young ladies from various parts of the country. When I asked them about the street kids they all agreed it was just a myth – that they didn't really exist. I asked how they would react if I could show them a few hundred before noon today. They wouldn't talk about it. It seems to be an out of sight out of mind thing."

"That's been my understanding," David said.

"They wouldn't listen to me. They wouldn't hear what I was saying. They aren't dumb. They remain ignorant by choice. What gives with people like that?"

"They certainly don't want to take responsibility for things beyond the end of their noses, do they?"

"I thought that's what I just implied."

"Yes. I suppose so. I'm not sure how else to respond. Try this. If a person was faced with a problem that seemed to have no answer and which only tangentially ever affected him, what might be an easy way for him to handle it?"

"Yeah. I see. Put it out of mind. That's not just peculiar to Brazil and the street kids. I've seen it a lot in my life. I try to talk with other kids about the possibility there may not be a god or a life after death and they come up with responses like, 'I know there is and that's all there is to it'. They refuse to discuss it. Same when I bring up the kids in our area who have to go to bed hungry every night."

"Issues that make folks uncomfortable are issues they go out of their way to avoid considering. And the several you just mentioned rate really high on the discomfort scale for most folks."

"They would rather remain ignorant and comfortable than knowledgeable."

"Than knowledgeable *and* uncomfortable. You slighted the other option a

little there."

"Okay, but how about topics that shouldn't be uncomfortable like when I asked my step dad about how babies got into mothers' stomachs? He got all frazzled and sent me to you."

"You began the question with an inappropriate assumption. Talking about the birds and bees rates up there very close to no afterlife on the discomfort scale for many parents."

"Hard to understand. The most essential biological function humans have to perform if the species is to continue, and people are uncomfortable helping their children understand about it. What greater thing can there be than to procreate – to bring a child into the world to love and care for and teach?"

"You're preaching to the choir, Kit. I'm on your side. Clearly sexual activity has become base, dirty – one of those things they do and enjoy but are embarrassed or ashamed to talk about. They probably don't see it as the ultimate expression of love between a man and a woman. When it is anything else, it is really *not* precious. It becomes merely a sport or a selfish, pleasure seeking, recreational activity."

"You make it sound like it *shouldn't* be fun," Kit said.

"I didn't intend that. Goodness knows there are few things that are any more fun. Mother Nature built that into our adult being and to be honest, in terms of evolutionary biology, it really has nothing to do with love and everything to do with reproducing the species, which happens because it *is* such a pleasurable experience.

"But once humans formed social groups and then began maintaining individual family units, and moved beyond the 'it takes a village to raise a child' philosophy, mates staying together through love became essential. The ideal environment for a child is to have a loving adult male and female heading the family. That's not to say other arrangements cannot be made to work. But children can best learn about and learn to deal with males and females when they grow up with both of them and have the same set of them to rely on throughout their upbringing. Stability. Trust. Safety."

"And the street kids have none of that – not even the village thing – well, not in a positive way. What they have is each other, a collection of equally ignorant beings trying to help each other survive. They've had no models of love or loving behavior. Their entire world is frightening – terrifying even, I assume. They never get to experience family so they can reap none of its benefits."

"So, is the plan that you and Father A hatched going to deal with those issues?"

"It is now. Well, it really always has, but I hadn't truly considered the impact we've just been talking about."

"Sometimes it seems exhausting just considering all the issues there are to contemplate, doesn't it, Kit?"

"It does. I apparently don't even stop thinking about them when I'm unconscious. When I was 'out' yesterday – maybe while they were digging at that slug – I had a strange dream. I was sitting in a huge bathtub surrounded by all the chests of gold we've found and I kept yelling at somebody to take it away because it wasn't mine. I scrubbed myself with a big bar of soap and a brush. A man said he had arranged things so I could keep it all. I repeated that I didn't want it. He said if I didn't take it I would be committed to an asylum for the disopulantists – dis-opulant-ists." The emotions that accompanied it were those of terror and helplessness."

"And now that you've had time to think it through, what was it all about?"

"I could have predicted that question almost down to the very words, you know."

"Not a surprise. Glad to have you carrying that part of me with you."

Kit nodded, understanding that there was a lot of his uncle that now resided inside him. It wasn't really his uncle, of course, it was a duplicate or near duplicate of ideas and questions and values, modified as required to fit the spaces Kit had for receiving them.

"That's a really cool process, you know – how values and ideas get duplicated and reset inside others. It's a way to make them and the donor immortal, sort of. Thank you. I'm sure I don't say that often enough."

"You are most certainly welcome for my contribution to whatever esoteric topic we may be considering."

Kit grinned feeling no need to explain further. Instead he returned to the topic of his dream.

"I was so uncomfortable sitting there thinking all that wealth was mine. I suppose most folks would have reacted differently. I'm surprised I didn't. My dream has always been to have lots of money so I could help lots of people. But that wasn't the feeling at all.

"It's as if I have come to think of people who seek after monetary riches as bad people. I'm not sure I like that about me. If I were to start a religion, opulence and greed would, however, probably top the list of sins. Keeping more than you need to get along on would be up there, too, as would not going out of your way to share and be helpful. Maybe it's all the same package.

"Can you just imagine what a different, what a *wonderfully different*, world we would be living in today, Unc, if every child who is now an adult had grown up in a home that stressed altruism, compassion, helpfulness, love, and the preciousness of all people above everything else; where compulsively obtaining stuff, and money, and power were not modeled. Where needing to be entertained had been replaced with the pure enjoyment that accrues from relating positively with others and from being helpful and productive and learning the lessons of history. Where competitiveness was generally subservient to cooperation.

"I just don't understand how such an intelligent species can be so damn dumb. It's worse than ignorant. It's *intentionally selective ignorance* sealed inside a thick, black, envelope of self-indulgence."

"Wow!" David said. "Lots of stuff in there, well, lots of stuff that was in there now out here."

Kit grinned. If a grin can be laden with concern and frustration, that was the kind of grin that lingered on his face.

Kit had internalized a copy of his uncle's social conscience. They both understood they were different from many other people – most, perhaps. They had each grown fond of and comfortable with a minimally sustaining lifestyle – one that was simplified with few things or needs beyond the essentials. The rest of their beings were filled with joy and happiness and all those positive traits they believed were necessary to help the human species survive, grow, expand its horizons, and live in a safe, productive, cooperative, happy, caring, society.

They based their philosophy on what has been called *Mutual Facilitation* and *Reciprocal Esteem*. The first merely represents the state in which each person assists those around him to have a good, safe, and happy life – people, freely and eagerly, helping each other. The second is the basis for that; respecting each other as precious, deserving, human beings worthy of a good life and all the social perks so long as they play straight with the rest of us. For those who don't, society does the very best it knows how to help them modify their approach so it moves to within acceptable limits. When that doesn't happen those who would wreak havoc are separated from the rest.

Kit and David believe that it is the only reasonable way for a free society to exist if it *is* to exist for very long. The lessons they have read from history suggest that once the universally shared concern for human welfare is replaced by any other bottom line – power, territory, money, stuff, entertainment – the society begins its downward slide into oblivion. In this day and age of a global society, any other approach will surely deliver the extinction of the human species.

Many folks don't really care if the species continues or dies out so long as it sticks around long enough to meet their own selfish, gluttonous, desires during their lifetime. Short of an unimaginable catastrophe most of them will never change. It is why Kit and David are committed to helping the youngest generation cultivate a sense of the preciousness of people and to build a desire and the skills to help one another.

Prior to puberty Kit voiced his concern to his uncle that he was worried that once sexual development had come his way he would leave his altruistic ways behind and join the ranks of the self-centered adults he was beginning to see around him as the scope of his social contacts was gradually extended.

His twelve year old logic went like this: Listening to the teenagers talk about sex, it became clear to him that it was, for them, a purely self-centered

activity. Masturbation served no one but the masturbator – not that that he thought that was intrinsically bad. It just didn't reach beyond the person, so remained self-centered. Furthermore, he had never heard a guy boast that he was going trolling for 'one of those girls' on Friday night so he could administer the most fantastic night of pleasure *she* had ever experienced. It was always about the guy. He saw the 'love 'em and leave 'em' syndrome going on all around him – in *fact*, as well as the basis for frequent conversation.

He was convinced that the desire for – perhaps the need for – sexual activity added an innately selfish aspect to being a person that was not present prior to puberty. Once it arrived, it seemed all encompassing and he doubted if it could be removed. He figured if that selfishness was so important in one aspect of life it very probably spread into others.

It was therefore easy for him to accept his uncle's belief that the ultimate sexual relationship should be reserved for marriage. In that way it would be imperative to learn to give great pleasure to the other as a consistent part of sustaining the lifelong commitment and relationship. With sexual fulfillment readily and lovingly available there would be far less time spent in its selfish pursuit. Monogamy would facilitate a positive, mutually facilitating, family-based, society, *always* there for the kids. Anything less would not.

Few issues in life are that cut and dried, and as he matured he came to realize that. The essence of the concept seemed sound, however. Like most teenagers he had been eager to experience intercourse since early on in his adolescence. He had not. He had not because he maintained his belief in the ultimate importance of solid, loving, families that worked things out and stayed together and worked hard to make life wonder-filled for all of its members. Saving that ultimate of all positive human sensations to help sustain his marriage still made complete sense to him. Marriage must be based on a foundation of love, mutual interests, shared values and common goals all laid out and understood *well before* the marital commitment is made. In Kit's experience, too many marriages seem to be based first of all on sexual convenience instead.

After his reverie he smiled and turned to his uncle.

"I wonder if there is an asylum for the un-promiscuous-ists?"

CHAPTER TEN

David had reserved rooms in *Juazeiro do Norte*, which turned out to be a bustling city of several hundred thousand people – a center for all things agricultural. By noon they had checked in and eaten. Kit's pain continued although he neither dwelled on it nor complained. He was adjusting to the one handed life and felt fortunate it was his right arm and hand that remained functional. The injury had been clean and did less damage than first glance had suggested. A few inches lower and it could have been life threatening.

By one o'clock they were aboard the helicopter heading across the low plains toward the Three Stranded Fish.

"I suppose those sink holes look like fish," Kit said. "With the open mouths at the far end. Not sure from what vantage point all three could be looked upon, however, considering the huge expanse of low lying meadow land that surrounds them."

"I expect a progressive treasure hunt of some kind," David said choosing a new direction for the conversation. "I can figure no other reason for the use of four dots – four sites."

"That's what I've been thinking although it's really not clear. If we know where we're going – from the placement of the subsequent dots – then why will we need to visit each site? Why not just go to the last one and collect the chest?"

"It is clearly not going to be that easy or predictable," David said.

"I suppose a part of the treasure could be stashed at each site," Kit said.

"Possible, for sure."

"Do you suppose all four sites will be booby trapped?"

"No way to know, of course. We'll proceed as if they are."

Kit addressed Connie through the mike and earphones.

"When we get there let's fly slowly around the area so we can see what's there."

Connie nodded that he understood.

"LaPique must have come in a boat from the north during a wet season," Kit said beginning to think things through. "The *Iguato River* doesn't flow all year

round. It feeds the *Paranaiba River* that flows to the northern coast. He could have used that. During that wet season those sink holes would have been filled with water, I'd think. Therefore, what we're looking for will probably be near the top."

"The three largest dots are right at the near side of the V shaped indentations," David added not sure just how what he had offered might be helpful.

"I suppose speculating isn't helping," Kit said. "I guess we'll set down in the area of that piano shaped highland?"

David nodded responding to the question that was in Kit's voice.

At last Connie pointed straight ahead.

"Thar she blows, gentlemen."

From above, the holes did resemble the bathtubs Kit had envisioned.

"Baby Bear, Mama Bear and Father Bear," Kit said. "Do you suppose there *are* bears out here?"

"You are asking me? *You're*, the guy with the built-in laptop?"

"I was counting on the built-in *www* thing in my uncle."

"I'll give it a try," David said closing his eyes and leaning his head back the way Kit did when engaging his photographic memory. 'Only one kind of bear in Brazil – the Spectacled Bear. Comes in a variety of colors and sizes. Lives in lots of different environments. Loves fruit but will eat most anything including animals. Usually nocturnal and sleeps in trees during the day. Best thing about it, I suppose, is that it is very shy and has seldom been known to attack people unless they are messing with its young."

"See. Was that so hard? Really though, how could you have known that?"

"The answer, Grasshopper, lies above the magic pads."

"Oh, *Esoteric One*, you are even more cryptic today than usual. A question to guide my humble search if you please."

"A less esoteric offering, then. Check your laptop, kid!"

Kit flipped it open. As the screen glowed to life so did a picture of the Spectacled Bear.

"So, Wise Master is not above cheating."

"Correction. Wise Master is not above utilizing modern technology as taught to him by suddenly cantankerous nephew. I thought we needed to know what kind of dangers we might be up against."

"Good move. Snakes?"

"A wide variety including Boa Constrictors and several lethally poisonous ones. They aren't even all that pretty. They come and go from the area in which we will be landing."

"Over the piano now," Connie said. "Shall we land?"

"Let's do it," Kit said. "Snakes be damned!"

"I believe that was already handled back in the *Garden of Eden*," Alex offered, giggling to himself.

"A biblical scholar as well?"

"My mother insisted on religious training. My teachers often didn't seem to be all that taken with my presence – with my questions, perhaps, would be more accurate."

The helicopter sat down and the blades slowly slumped to a wobbly stop. The four of them were soon on the ground. The area was a low plateau the size of two football fields side by side. It had virtually inaccessible vertical sides, though no more than thirty feet high. Scrub and oddly shaped, trees dotted the area.

"If the placement of the dot is an accurate representation of the first *whatever* we are to locate, it's most likely just over there ten or so yards," David said.

"Like at or near that cluster of tall, sharp, rocks, I suppose," Kit added as the four of them moved in its direction.

It consisted of five, pointed, brown, rocks looking to have been planted in a tight circle with their points up. They varied from six to nine feet tall and the largest was no more than four across at the base. They were clustered like leaves awaiting the tulip stem to spring from their center.

The men began examining the outcropping.

"Difficult to see how anything could be booby trapped here," Kit said continuing a cautious approach.

"It would help if we had any idea what we're looking for," David said after having circled the rocks for a third time.

"I imagine it's somewhere inside the circle, don't you?" Kit said unnecessarily.

Still, they all nodded as happens when certainties seem out of reach. Alex moved between the two smallest of the array.

"Something oddly interesting in here," He said. "It could be a small box constructed of four, flat, upright, stones with a fifth resting across the top – overlapping the sides. I think I'm unwilling to just push that top piece aside, considering the things we've run across in the past. Let's rig a contraption to lift it off from a distance.

"We'll need a coil of small rope from the copter and a piece of wood long enough to span that central opening and rest securely in the crevices between the tops of the outer rocks."

"I'll get the rope," Kit said.

"We'll have to cut a sapling, I guess," Connie said looking around the area. "Seems a shame, the way they've obviously struggled to survive. I'll take care of that."

In a short time the pieces had been gathered. Connie formed a double

slip loop at the end of the rope, which Alex put in place around the top stone. One loop was cinched up tightly around each protruding end. The rope was run over the wooden support, which sat two yards above it.

"We'll move back to the end of the rope," Alex said.

Once in position, Alex and Connie drew the rope toward them, lifting the stone lid off the rock box.

"No explosion at least," Kit said.

"No noxious fumes visible," David added.

"No flash of flames or billows of smoke," Connie said.

"Let's take a look," David suggested.

Alex tied the end of the rope to a stake he had driven into the ground for that purpose. Then they moved back to the formation. The hanging rock was easily visible between the big stones. A closer look revealed the four sided little box on the ground.

"A small leather pouch on the bottom of the box," Alex said. "Hand me a stick about a meter long."

Connie obliged. Alex moved the pouch around within the box to make sure it was not booby trapped. He then leaned down and removed it. Once outside he handed it to Kit.

"Hide scraped thin and sealed in wax," Kit noted examining it from all angles. "I can't really manage the opening," He said handing it to his uncle.

David soon had the flap freed and they looked inside.

"A key," David said. "A large old fashioned black wrought iron key. It, too, is coated in wax."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Kit said genuinely enthusiastic for the first time since his mishap.

The men noted it with happy glances shared among them. David handed him the key – black iron, six inches long.

"Well protected from rust and decay," Kit said. "I wonder what it may fit. Looks way too big for a treasure chest."

"Time will tell, I'm sure," David said knowing it was no answer but it was the best he had to offer.

They returned the site to its former state and climbed back aboard the helicopter. The smallest sinkhole was no more than two thousand yards away but the sides of the mesa were sheer drops and they had to cross the river so opted for the ride. It was a shallow, slow moving stream of brown, smelly water. Kit was privately happy he was not one of the animals that had to depend on it for drinking water.

Connie landed well back from the edge of the hole in case the land was soft or unstable. The sides of the hole were sheer. The odd V-shaped indentions on the west edge were caused by a long row of jagged rock outcroppings forming a low cliff nearly three quarters of a mile from northeast to

southwest. Each hole sank to a depth of thirty feet. The smallest was an oddly shaped twenty by twenty five feet. The middle one was thirty by seventy and the one on the far right, forty by eighty or ninety.

Alex surveyed the point of the Vs to determine exactly what the dots might refer to.

“There is that stone ledge running the width of the openings on each one down about three meters from the meadow,” he said. “Looks to be plenty solid for us to work from. We’ll need ropes and picks.”

Armed with their supplies they approached the west end of the smallest sinkhole.

“I think I’ll keep watch from up here,” Kit said, “At least on these first two. I’m thinking the big payoff will be in number three.”

“Every crew needs its lookout,” David said. “Lots of pain, Son?”

“It’s doing okay, actually. I just want to keep it that way.”

David shook his head, dramatically – overly dramatically.

“It must have escaped during the dark of night. I didn’t see it go,” David said a sympathetic hand to Kit’s good shoulder.

“Escaped? What? I don’t follow.”

“*Adolescence*. A week ago it was there in full bloom neatly wrapped in an armor of angst. Suddenly it’s mostly gone eased aside by the wisdom of adulthood. Had to have been at night or I would have noticed.”

Kit and David shared a long held special smile. The others smiled as well.

A climbing rope – knotted every foot – was secured to a tree and dropped into the hole. It was Alex who was over the side first and onto the ledge below.

“Stable, dry, safe,” He called up.

David went second and then Connie.

“We are assuming this is the correct spot without having any bona fide supporting evidence,” David said as they began exploring the jagged, brown, point of solid rock.

They scoured the surface for ten minutes, pulling at every small outcropping and slipping knife blades into every crevice.

“Look here guys,” David said at last.

“There are four very narrow slits forming an almost perfect square here at eye level. If it’s man made, it was made by an artist. That crack’s no more than a couple of millimeters wide.”

Alex turned to Connie.

“The American turns to metric when precision is needed, notice?”

Connie smiled and nodded.

David acknowledged the humor with a quick smile and continued.

“Then, there is this half inch – that’s about one and a quarter centimeters for you parochially, measurement, snobbish, Europeans – *hole* just below it.”

Alex moved to examine it and nodded, the meaning of which was not

immediately obvious. David continued.

“How can we slip anything in these slits and get the leverage we need to move that stone? It’s bound to be heavy – a foot square and we can’t determine how deep.”

Kit was monitoring from the video camera David had mounted on his cap. He had a suggestion – comment – challenge – whatever. He shifted his voice to a lower – David-like - register.

“You’ll never succeed thinking within those lines, Grasshopper. Think about what would make it easy to move the stone and then create it.”

David played along, feeling oddly comfortable in the role reversal.

“Well, it would be easy if it stuck out a few inches from the wall of rock. That not being the case we move the rock wall back to create a hand hold.”

“Very good!” Kit called down. “Need any special tools from the copter?”

“If Al doesn’t have them in his utility belt they have not yet been invented.”

Kit chuckled and nodded although it may have been a slight exaggeration.

They went to work chipping away at the rock to the left and right of the square. It was not easy. Two worked then the third spelled one of them. They rotated in that way for nearly an hour.

“Kit,” Alex called at last. “We’re going to need the red C-clamp from the tool box. Not the sissy little one. The Alex-sized one.”

Kit was soon lowering it, suspended from a length of brown twine. Alex looked up and nodded. He unscrewed the turn bolt as far as it would spread and then spanned the rock, side to side across its middle. Connie tightened it as Alex held it in place. David felt momentarily useless. He directed the camera so Kit would feel included.

With the clamp in place Alex attached the loose end of the climbing rope to it. They moved back several yards and the three of them tugged a series of gentle tugs. The stone moved and fell out of the hole and onto the ledge. From the outside it appeared to be a carefully hewn, solid square of stone. Whatever they were after was most likely inside the opening rather than inside the stone.

Before Alex reached inside, he lit the area with a flashlight.

“Oh, Oh! Not good,” He said. “You two get out of here, now!”

They followed his directions and pulled themselves up the rope receiving a hand from Kit at the top. Alex picked up his backpack and forced it into the hole, turning and twisting it until the opening was entirely blocked. He called to the others.

“A nest of unhappy snakes in there. See if you can locate an opening directly above – one that could give them easy access to the area down here. Be careful. Ten to one they’re poisonous.”

The others cautiously searched the area. The opening was obvious – a small, natural, crevice down into the rock. They reported their find to Alex.

“I’m coming up. Begin gathering dry twigs and sticks small enough to drop

down into that fissure. Kit, get one of the bottles of rubbing alcohol from the first aid kit.”

The boy left and was soon back.

“There may be another opening,” Alex said. “I’d have thought the ruckus I made down there would have stirred them into a frenzy and some would have used the escape hatch.”

“It’s winter, here,” Kit said. “Could it be they are hibernating?”

“Likely, in fact. I’d overlooked that possibility. Still deadly. If we are to get into that opening we discovered down on the ledge, we have to make sure the snakes have been rendered inactive or are well on their way to snake heaven.”

Kit realized he was being of no real help. He managed to get his laptop out of his backpack and soon had it up and running. He searched for Brazilian snakes and confirmed to his satisfaction that most did hibernate in winter. The sole exception to that were certain poisonous species that lived in the *Caatinga*. They hibernated during the dry seasons whenever they might arrive. *Not* what he had hoped to learn.

“They *are* probably poisonous and probably are *not* hibernating right now,” he said passing his findings on to the others.

Alex covered most of the opening with a flat rock and placed another one within easy reach to cover the rest of it in case the slimy, writhing, inhabitants tried to exit. He then began dipping the smallest sticks into the alcohol. He lit them with a lighter and dropped them into the fissure. The process continued until dozens of burning twigs and sticks had been deposited. A thin wisp of white smoke began wafting out of the hole. Alex explained.

“That half inch round hole down there is probably a drainage hole bored by LaPique to tap the fissure so water would not accumulate inside and destroy whatever he placed in there. Now, air is entering down there and feeding the flames with an updraft. The heat causes the smoke to rise. I want most of it to remain down there to daze the snakes. There’s nothing harder to suffocate than a reptile – especially a snake. We’ll keep feeding the fire for another half hour. Then I’ll don some long leather gloves and go take a look in our hole. Whatever may be there should be within an easy arm’s reach.”

“How could LaPique have stocked that place with snakes that lived for two hundred years?” Kit asked.

“Actually, this is an ideal place for snakes. If he hadn’t started the nest, they would have found it eventually. It remains cool and damp. It is situated so as to remain unmolested by large animals and hawks, and the stray mice and ground squirrels that frequently drop in, become supper.”

“That guy was ingenious,” Kit said.

“I believe we agreed on that some time back,” David said.

Thirty minutes later, as planned, Alex donned the leather and descended the rope. He removed a large, plastic, zip bag from his jacket pocket and held it

between his lips. He unbuttoned his holster ready to protect himself. Cautiously and slowly he worked the backpack out of the opening. He figured the bottom of it would be covered in venom as the snakes fought to find an escape route. He set it aside and lit the area deep into the opening. He had expected to find another leather pouch. It was there atop a small, flat rock. It was covered by nearly lifeless bodies of snakes, but it was there. He pushed the groggy snakes away with the handle of his pick and pulled the pouch forward. It, too, was covered in venom.

He slipped it into the zip bag and closed it avoiding contact with the potentially deadly foam. He tied his backpack to the end of the rope and took time to lift the square stone back into place, securing the safety of the nest for a few more hundred years.

Up top, he removed the stones, which he had laid across the opening. He cautioned the others about the venom and suggested that they rinse off the affected surfaces in the river. Kit and David volunteered to take care of that. They slipped into thick, rubber gloves and left for the river. Alex and Connie moved on with the equipment to the next sinkhole.

Satisfied the pouch and backpack were adequately flushed Kit and David returned to where the others sat on the ground above the middle sinkhole.

“Sittin’ down on the job are you?” Kit said smiling.

“Just hoping to regain some of the energy so consistently displayed by our youthful leader,” Connie offered.

“Let’s look inside the pouch, okay?” Kit said not waiting for responses.

“Another key. Same size and style as the first one. A different set of grooves in the blade – the part that has to match the groove in the lock.”

“So, that’s two keys,” David said. “Ready to try for three?”

The others stood. Alex assessed the situation.

“No nearby tree so will need to secure our climbing rope to some stakes. We’ll need the sledgehammer from the helicopter.”

“I’ll volunteer,” Kit said. “Anything else?”

“A coil of the half inch rope. If there is anything else I’m sure you will eagerly volunteer to go back and get it for us.”

Kit grinned. He felt the disparate pattern of the key blades was a good sign and he was ready to get on with things. He wondered about Carlos and where he might be. By ship it would take him days to arrive there. Still, he stole frequent glances up and down the river.

By the time he returned the others had a half dozen stakes cut and laid in a line several feet apart.

“What’s with all the stakes?” he asked.

“The soil is too loose to chance having just one hold our weight. We will run strands of the thinner rope from the stakes to the upper the end of the climbing rope. That way no one stake will ever have to hold more than forty or so

pounds.”

“Very clever. Glad you’re along.”

That accomplished Alex was again the first over the side. It was decided that he would look things over first in case the others would not be needed. He first examined the surfaces of the pointed rock hoping to find a similar square opening. He did not.

“I find absolutely nothing that looks promising down here, guys. Not on either side of the rock point.”

“What about that boulder behind you to the south?” Kit asked.

Alex approached it and gave it a halfhearted shove – akin to kicking the tire of new car.

“Just a boulder, it seems.”

“But there aren’t all that many big, free setting, boulders in this area,” Kit said. “Seems odd it’s just sitting there. If it had rolled off the edge up here don’t you suppose it would have bounced on over the edge or damaged the ledge in some way?”

“All good points,” Alex said. “Any ideas?”

“Move it?” Kit said with a giggle. “We’ll supervise from up here.”

“I estimate it weighs half a ton, minimum, and I use primitive, American, weights so as to not confuse you.”

“And I appreciate that. What’s *your* suggestion?”

“We need an expanding car jack. Stop the next passing auto and see if they’ll loan us theirs.”

“Why not just use the one attached to the rear left skid on the helicopter?” Kit asked smugly.

“That’s right. An unusual piece of equipment except on rescue helicopters. I remember now that it’s there. Okay. It looks heavy duty and likely weighs seventy five pounds. Probably David and Connie this trip. I haven’t had a good conversation with you in a long time. It should work out well.”

Kit took him at his word, and moved to sit cross-legged at the edge of the cliff. Alex sat, back against the boulder. They could see each other’s heads.

“LaPique designed all of this to be a life changing experience for his sons, didn’t he?”

“Life changing or life-ending,” Alex said.

“I’ve wondered about that. What kind of a personal philosophy would drive a man to make *that* the choice for his own flesh and blood?”

“One who clearly didn’t believe life was worth pursuing if you were without quick wits, wisdom, and drive.”

“Interesting. Pretty much what I’ve been thinking. Odd, though, that he seemed to feel perfectly at ease making that life or death decision for his sons. Succeed and be wealthy. Fail and be dead.”

“It’s been a part of many cultures down through time. Still is in some, of

which I'm sure you're aware."

Kit nodded having read enough social anthropology to identify the primitive cultures by their coming of age rituals if not by name.

"Do you suppose he loved his sons?" Kit asked.

"If he didn't he sure went to a lot of trouble to prove *something*."

"I guess *that's* right! Probably love of a kind, then."

"At least he probably thought he was doing right by them," Alex said modifying somewhat the idea Kit had voiced. It sucked the positive, nurturing, emotion from the act replacing it with a matter of fact opinion.

"He's a prime example of the Godfather mentality."

"Explain," Alex said interested but unsure of the specific connection.

"Cares for his own family in all ways possible and genuinely grieves at their loss, but feels no remorse about harming those outsiders who oppose him. The philosophy seems to be rampant in the world today. I suppose it harkens back to the cave man – 'those in my cave, good – those in other caves, bad'. It's a sense of family gone amok. You'd have thought we'd have progressed beyond that during the last three million years since Lucy started it all."

"You're referring to what anthropologists – and the rest of the scientific community – believe was the female from which all subsequent human, nucleic, genetic material came to be."

"Yup. That's the one. 3.18 million years ago to be more exact – as if that really *is* exact."

"Well, I agree, it seems we're still out there trying to kill off all those we see as a threat to our own ways," Alex said, nodding.

"And there is a layer of self-imposed ignorance involved. We don't want to try to understand or become acquainted with those we initially perceive as threatening. If we'd just take time to do that, most conflicts could be avoided."

The philosophic foray was aborted as Connie and David returned. They had strapped the jack across two sturdy freshly cut saplings and drug it along behind them.

"Just too cumbersome to carry," Connie explained.

"And, boys just love to play with their hatchets," Kit kidded.

"Oh, is *that* what boys are calling them these days," Connie said.

Kit would not be bested.

"If I had meant penis, I would have said penis. Unlike some, I have no problems about using anatomically correct labels."

"Nor displaying the anatomical parts themselves," Alex called up, having kibitzed on the playful banter.

"We can use the rest of that coil of thin rope to lower it," Connie said, moving on.

"Let's get it down here. Tie the rope in the middle somewhere so it will be easy to balance on its side as we slide it in between the stone wall at the rear of

the ledge and the boulder.”

“We can tie it off up here to one of the stakes when you tell us it’s at the right height,” Connie suggested.

“Good plan. Let’s have it.”

The slow, careful, descent went without a hitch. Once it was tied to the stake, Connie hand-under-handed himself down onto the ledge. They soon realized a third set of hands was going to be needed. David made his way down to join them. He turned on the hat cam so Kit wouldn’t feel left out.

“Connie and I will hold it stable here while you turn the crank to open it up,” Alex said.

“Are you guys taking *no* precautions, down there,” Kit said. “Remember LaPique, King of Booby Traps?”

“Good point,” Alex said.

David had a thought.

“Most likely nothing can happen until the boulder is actually moved from where it sits – if this boulder is even a part of the treasure hunt. Let’s ease the jack into place and crank it just enough to get it firmly wedged between the wall and the boulder. Then, we can bind a long sick to the crank handle and do the actual cranking from some distance away.”

“We’re going to feel foolish when all we find underneath is some low profile lizard sticking its tongue out at us,” Connie said.

“You want to stand right here and turn that crank?” Alex asked his tone not entirely free from irritation.

“My. The big man is sounding *cranky*,” Came Kit’s comment from up above.

“Occupy your brain by finding us a ten foot sapling,” Alex said. “If you can’t work an ax with one arm just chew through it with that big mouth of yours.”

“Woo! Cranky on its way to *irritable*. I’ll get it one way or the other.”

By the time the jack was snugged into place Kit was lowering the stick.

“Toss down the ball of twine.”

Soon the stick was secured to the crank.

“Wrong angle, here,” Alex said. “We need to be working the end of the stick from higher up. David. Up on my shoulders. That should be sufficient.”

With Connie’s assistance, the arrangement was managed. After a few attempts David got the hang of it. Connie moved to a spot behind them and clear of the boulder.

David turned the crank. It was a laborious and less than smooth undertaking. Finally, after many minutes of stops and starts, jerks and Sunday school approved expletives, the boulder slid, perhaps a half inch. David turned some more. The boulder slid some more. Five minutes into the process it rolled over the edge, crashing onto the floor of the sinkhole.

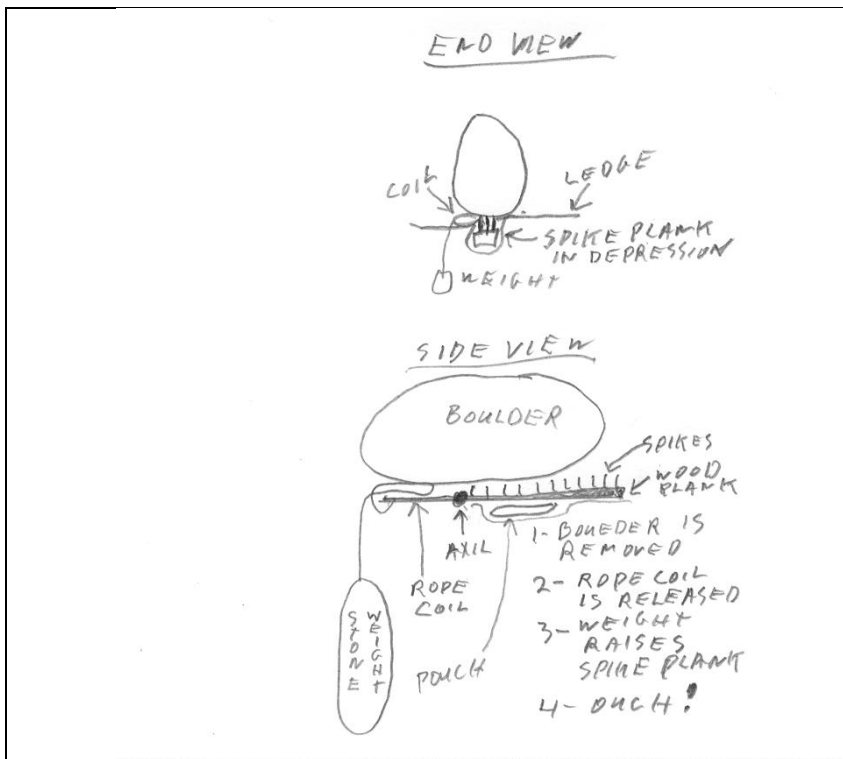
At that instant a thick plank eight inches wide and four feet tall – a little

less than the length of the boulder – swung up and stood erect. It was fitted with dozens of narrow, six inch, spikes. It had been flung into place with a great deal of power – certainly enough to have rammed those spikes deep into anyone standing just behind where the boulder had been sitting. A leather pouch, larger than the others, lay in a shallow indentation that had been chiseled into the ledge under where the boulder sat.

“Got a pouch here, Kit,” David called as he slid to the ground from the big man’s shoulders.

Alex examined the spike board.

“Another ingenious gadget here,” he said. “The old boy returned to his rope and weight arrangement. A well, waxed, rope is threaded through a crack that runs all the way through to the underside of this protruding ledge. The bottom end was fastened to a very heavy rock weight which had been pulled up close to the underside of the ledge. The section of the rope closest to the rock weight was looped and laid under the boulder which kept the weight from falling until the boulder



David’s Rendering of The Booby Trapped Boulder

was removed. The other end of the rope was fastened to the bottom of

the spike board. The board swings on an axel in a hole which had been drilled long ways through the board's width up a foot from the lower end. When the boulder was moved, the rope was freed; the weight fell and pulled the spike board into an upright position with a huge amount of force."

"I don't hear a chorus of thank you's for my insistence on caution down there," Kit said.

"That's right. You don't," Alex called back.

"Dumbfounded and speechless in my presence, no doubt," Kit said giggling to himself.

The others let it go, truly grateful for how things had turned out.

"Well, let's see the pouch," Kit said impatiently, scooting back away from the edge where he could support his back against one of the stakes.

They climbed back up onto the meadow. David handed the pouch to Kit and took a seat beside him. The others moved behind so they could also see the unveiling.

"Larger. Heavier. Thicker," Kit said.

David handed him an opened pocket knife. Kit slit the wax seal.

"Like a box of boxes. There's a smaller pouch inside."

"Perhaps extra protection against the weather," David said. It didn't have the shelter from the elements the others had.

Kit carefully opened the second.

"A third key," he announced even before he removed it. "And a distinctive, third, groove pattern on the blade. Do you suppose we have to discover which key fits and if we insert the wrong one the place goes up in smoke?"

"Or perhaps there are three doors we have to get through, each needing its own key," David said adding an option.

"Or you're going to find a kite with a note signed Ben, instructing you to go find a thunderstorm," Alex said.

The other's turned and looked at him. He responded as if taken aback by their reaction.

"What? I don't get a chance at the punch lines once in a while?"

"So long as you don't desert us you can seize, commandeer, confiscate, or hijack a punch line any time you want it," Kit said.

"Let's move on to big fish number three," David said. We're about to lose daylight."

As they stopped at the edge and looked down into the huge sinkhole Kit verbalized what they all were thinking, "Looks to be just a super-sized version of the other two."

"We have a tree close this time," Alex said pointing. "Let's get our rope hitched up. And, if you will, Kit I think it would be a good idea to have a couple or three of the butane lanterns in case we do get caught in the dark."

"I'm on my way. I've decided the upside to having taken a slug in shoulder

is that I'm really building my calves from all this legislated walking."

"And your buttocks from all your *unlegislated* sitting."

It had been Alex again. They decided two punch lines in one afternoon would be his quota.

Kit left and Alex was soon down onto the ledge.

"A whole new ballgame down here," he called up. "Better come and join me."

They soon understood. There was an entrance to a cave on the north side of the protruding V. It was big enough for a man to enter standing but no wider than would be necessary for passage. Inside, it widened to several yards and almost immediately curved back to the north. The flashlights revealed very little from the entrance. They moved inside. The walls were brown and dry; the floor more slabs of brown rock. There was no air flow in or out suggesting there was no other entrance – or exit.

"Hey! Where did you go?" Came Kit's question from up above.

"Over here, Kit," David called out. "Other side of the point. We found a cave."

"I've grown to hate caves but I still want to come down and join you."

"There is no way you can let yourself down here on that rope, Son."

"I know that! Does slightly balding Grasshopper have to be set on the right track a second time?"

"Okay. I see. Reconfigure. New options. It calls for two of us to come up there and lower you. Don't you think that will be painful?"

"With a rope under my arms, yes. With one around my waist, no."

"Around your waist, it'll likely slip right up to under your arms," Connie said. "We'll need to fashion a sling that goes between your legs."

"Let's see," Kit said. "Throbbing, reeking, pain from a rope under my arms or nut crushing, progeny denying, excruciating pain in that crotch thing? How about I just jump?"

"I promise I can fashion something that will risk not so much as one *prog*," Connie said.

"May I make a suggestion before we go to all that trouble," Alex said. "Let the three of us go into the cave and see what we have here. We may have nothing. We may need specialized equipment. Things like that."

"Yeah! That makes sense," Kit said. "You guys risk your necks first and make it safe for me. I'm due for a nap up here in the grass anyway. Dusk is upon us."

Kit wanted to be down there. He could taste being down there. But he understood that Alex was right. He didn't want to risk permanent damage to his shoulder. If he had only thought to bring a safety belt from the chopper he might have been able to create something that would allow him to lower himself down there. He lay back and thought about it while he awaited the report from below.

It was Alex first, David second, and Connie last. Around the corner the tunnel immediately descended at a sharp angle, leveling off some ten yards on. From that point it was mostly straight, varying only a little in height and width. They came upon a wooden pillar a foot in diameter, sturdy and surprisingly intact if it had, in fact, been put in place centuries earlier.

"Brazil wood," Alex said. "Extremely hard and the most resistant to decay of any wood on Earth. The country took its name from it."

The post had a single, odd, feature. Four feet up from the floor there was a metal plate, sporting a keyhole. There was no door to open. There was no wall or fence or bars to keep them from just passing around it. They didn't, however.

"What do you make of it Prof?" Alex asked.

"Looks a lot like a keyhole," he said partly as humor and partly to buy himself thinking time.

"My bottom line thought is that we have to use one of the keys here or risk disaster. Beyond that I have nothing. Search the walls and floors for booby traps, I suppose."

"Look over there where my light is focused," Connie said quivering it about some to draw attention. "A door into the side of the tunnel."

"See what's odd about it," David asked.

"No doorknob," Alex said.

"And, no *keyhole*," David added. "We're standing here with three keys and the first door we come to has no place for one."

"I suppose it brings us back to the one here in the post," Connie said.

They grew silent as they continued to examine the area.

Up above, Kit was still laying back in the grass watching the stars emerge from the slowly darkening sky. Something touched his hair startling him. A small critter of some kind he thought sitting up. Again he felt something rubbing against his hair *and*, most likely, *paws* on each shoulder.

"That's a mighty tall *little* critter," he said out loud.

Slowly he turned his head. The scraggly edges of brown fir came into view.

"Probably not a really great sign. What are you?"

He turned abruptly hoping to scare it off, whatever it was.

It was the tiniest cub bear he'd ever seen. It stood no more than a foot tall when on all fours. There was something about Kit's hair that it liked. On his knees, Kit lowered his head to put it within easy reach of the cub. It licked its little heart out. Kit reached over and touched it. It licked his arm. It rolled onto its back as if asking for a friendly tussle. Kit rubbed its tummy and chucked it under its chin.

"What a hoot this is," Kit said in his very best baby talk.

Hoot had been the wrong word. Growl! Snarl! Roar! Any of those would

have been more appropriate than hoot.

The unmistakable figure of an adult bear came rambling across the meadow, gradually picking up speed.

“Playing with a cub when mama is around is, I believe, a certified no-no.”

Ten yards from him, the bear stopped and reared up onto its hind legs. Though not huge it was terrifying! It pawed the air and growled a strangely high pitched sound. The cub ran to it and peeked back toward Kit from behind its mother’s leg. Under other circumstances it would have certainly qualified as a Kodak moment. The bear lowered itself and began lumbering toward the boy.

Kit backed up nearer and nearer to the edge of the sinkhole. He fell to the ground near the edge and slipped over the side.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!”

Though not profound they were the best expletives Kit could manage as he careened down onto the ledge. It had mostly been a free fall event tempered somewhat by a palm mincing grip, as his right hand slid down the rope bumping over the knots.

“Nothing broken. *Thank goodness!*

“Arm still in the sling. *Amazing!*

“Pants dry! *Unbelievable!*

“Palm torn to shreds. That puts me back to Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!”

He scooted back against the wall and remained sitting. With some difficulty he freed his hanky from his back pocket. Bandana – red and large. He wound the soft cloth around his hand and managed to secure it with a tongue-assisted tuck. He breathed deeply, torn between remaining right there for the rest of his life or struggling to his feet and going in search of the others.

He flipped a mental coin and stood, eyeing the edge of the cliff above. The outcome had not been in doubt. Kit’s mental coins were always double-headed. He stood and determined that he was stable on his legs. He moved around the point and into the cave.

“Anybody in here,” he called out.

“Kit. That you? How in the World?”

David rushed to meet him.

“It’s a short story that will take hours to tell once I have it properly embellished. Mini version has to do with a mother bear taking umbrage at my playful outing with her cub.”

“A remarkable feat to make it down the rope in your condition.”

“My condition was remarkably better before I slid one handed down that rope.”

He held out his bandaged hand.

“We need to go take care of that now?” David asked.

“No. We probably need to let Gertrude and Cubby finish ransacking the

goodie box before we try to set foot up there again. What's cookin' down here?"

They began walking back along the tunnel.

"We found a post with a keyhole in it. Beyond it is a door with neither knob nor keyhole."

"Have you tried the keys? Will the door push open?"

"We are contemplating options and their possible consequences."

"Look what I found out there, gentlemen," David said as they reached the others.

Alex approached.

"Looks like Kit. Smells like Kit. But how could it be Kit?" He said, more concern on his face than in his words.

"Had a little encounter with a mother bear in a funk. I chose you guys over her."

"Here's the post," David said. "There's the door. We have thought better than to pass beyond the post to examine the door in case the floor is booby trapped."

Kit looked things over.

"To begin with, Doctors Watson, this is not a solid post but one constructed of four planks so well mitered at the edges as to make that virtually impossible to discern. Secondly, its essence calls out for us to use key number two."

"You're right about the seams," Alex said after a close examination with the blade of his knife. "But how can you be so sure about the key?"

Kit shined his flashlight on a spot near the top of the post.

"Note the carving – a fully out of place, single inverted V. Note the three keys. Only one sports that inverted V on its blade."

"So why have you just been lounging about up there with the bears?" Connie asked.

"Mostly so I could gallop up on my white steed and save the day. *Sir Kitslot* most humbly at your service."

David inserted the key. It turned with some difficulty but it turned – forty five degrees to the right – and stopped. The back panel of the post dropped to the floor at an angle, forming a path of sorts to the door. As one they winced and instantly raised their arms to protect themselves.

Nothing happened.

"I suppose that marks the only safe path between here and there," Alex said.

"I imagine you're right," Kit said.

He stepped around the post and onto the plank that lay on the floor. He perused the open side of the post.

"Looky here, guys! This thing is filled with gizmos."

Kit backed up along the plank as David moved to take a look. After a few

minutes he had it figured out.

“If either of the other keys had been turned in the lock *three* of the planks in this post would have been pushed away by plungers near the top. The other keys would have turned further and tripped another of his now familiar drop weights. The chain attached to it would have activated the plungers. I assume that three of the planks are sufficiently strong to hold in place those three converging slabs of ceiling stones. But, when only one plank is left standing their weight will break it and the ceiling will come tumbling down.”

“Think opening the door is safe?” Kit asked turning on the walkway and moving in its direction. Maybe it’s time for that expanding wand of yours, Al.”

Alex handed it forward to David who reached it to Kit. He soon had it extended and was pushing gently against the edge of the door opposite the large metal hinges.

“This thing looks to be tar coated – a thin layer. He did understand about preserving things against the ravages of time.”

“That he did,” David said. “It’s almost as if he really didn’t expect his sons to be smart enough to navigate the courses he set up – preserving it for later money grubbing treasure seekers like ourselves.”

Kit winced as he gripped the wand through the bandana that covered his badly scraped palm.

“I can’t get enough *umph* behind it, guys. I’ll have to hand off the baton.”

He and David moved around each other on the floor plank. He immediately had the door creaking open. He shined his light inside.

“More tunnel in there. Smaller – lower and narrower.”

“If you think it’s safe, enter and wait,” Alex said. “I want to take the lead.”

Kit backtracked giving Alex room to walk. He entered the new tunnel. David and Alex flooded the area with light. Kit and Connie followed peeking through the opening.

“Let’s proceed cautiously, Alex said.”

Fifteen yards into the tunnel it turned sharply back to the north and then east making a hairpin curve, which set it on a course for the wall of the sinkhole – most likely, just below the ledge. They moved on through the rock surround for quite some distance.

“We must be within a meter or so of the outside wall,” Alex said as they came to a dead end – of sorts.

On the floor up against the wall was a box made of carefully hewn, narrow, rock slabs. Alex examined it.

“Four sides and a top. Well-constructed. Tight seams. Looks like LaPique, for sure.”

“What’s with the arrangement of stones along the front?” Kit asked.

David knelt to give it a closer examination.

“The front stone is shorter by three inches than the others and sits up on a

base stone that extends six inches in front on the floor. It has indentations along each outer edge.”

“Hand holds, maybe?” Kit asked.

“Interesting! Perhaps there to allow that base stone to be pulled out, thereby freeing the front facing stone to slip down and be more easily removed.”

“As if that box were only intended to keep unintelligent beings out of it – like bears, and half-witted sons perhaps,” Kit said.

“It does look like an obvious solution that most folks would figure out,” Alex said. “Could that be a ruse?”

“Look it over again and see what you think,” David suggested.

Alex went over it all again. He drove his pick into the floor around its base.

“Floor seems solid. Not sure what that tells us, quite frankly, but I see nothing suspicious. I do notice a small space between that base piece and the facing stone – they don’t actually touch. It’s as if the facing piece just floats there.”

“Try slipping your knife in between the two,” Kit said.

“Interesting, as the Prof would say. There seems to be some irregular piece of something holding the stones apart. Let me do the same at the floor where there’s a space as well. I wrote it off to an irregular floor. No, Sir. The same kind of asymmetrical surface in there, too.”

“*Asymmetrical?*” Kit said teasing. “The Brawn has suddenly sprouted a lexicon.”

“Let’s see if we can pull out that base piece so I’ll have someplace to stuff the kid,” Alex said to David.

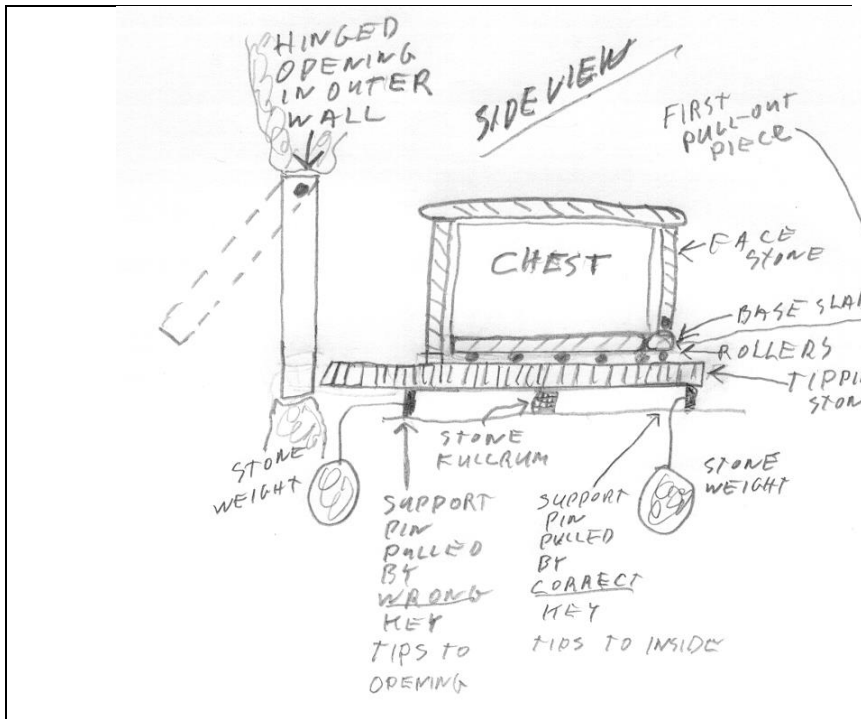
“I think I’ll defer to Connie,” David said. Looks to be a case where lots of strength will be needed where there is very little leverage.”

As the two were trading places, Alex took hold of the ends and gave a little tug to ascertain the actual degree of difficulty they might be facing. Much to his, and everyone’s surprise, the stone moved out as if rolling on ball bearings.

“I think I just missed an opportunity to look impressive,” David said. “What’s going on down there?”

Alex pulled the base slab out away from the box where it suddenly became heavy and nearly immobile. With great effort he pushed it aside. The facing piece preformed according to David’s prediction and slipped down off the rear of the notched bottom piece. As one, they all focused flashlights inside the opening.

“Look at that!” Kit said. “Dozens of little balls. What are they?”



David's Rendering of the Roller and Tilting Mechanisms

Alex picked up several and passed them around.

"Look to be twenty millimeter iron balls – ammunition – huge!" He said. "Those babies would break a few ribs or drain a skull in a hurry."

"You paint such appealing pictures, Big Al," Kit said.

"Nothing appealing about devices created to take life," he said uncharacteristically curt.

"No argument from me, Big Fella. They were used in an ingenious fashion weren't they? They formed a bed of rollers for the bottom rock plus look at the under edge of the face stone. It has a set of double grooves filled with them as well. It is what you felt and described as an irregular edge – irregular as your knife blade followed the rounded edges of the balls. The way it was designed there were rollers top and bottom for that floor piece to slide on."

"Let's move that fallen face piece out of the way and see what's behind it," David said.

They pulled it over frontward and rolled it out of the way on the growing collection of metal balls. Behind it was the chest. None of them were surprised – *relieved* would better describe the feeling.

The chest was set close against the sides, and top and bottom of the stone box. It would not be easy to budge.

"I suppose we could cut a hole in the front of the chest and remove its

contents that way,” Kit said thinking back to the Pistol Island situation.

“Yes, we could,” David said. “That would be the obvious way to attack it. I’m suspicious of the easy route.”

“It has a key lock, unlike the others that used padlocks,” Kit said continuing to examine the chest. “It looks like it just might take one of the big, iron, keys. That’s a very large hole in the lock.”

David knelt and looked.

“It could well be. Put one up beside the hole and see if it would fit.”

“I’m at a little disadvantage when it comes to reaching and actually utilizing my hands.”

He pointed to the pocket on his jacket that held them. David unzipped it and removed the two that remained.

“See any markings that might suggest the correct key – like the carving on the post back there,” Kit asked.

They looked. No such markings could be found.

“Here’s a far out possibility,” Kit said. “Look at the shape of the entire lock assembly – the face plate – whatever it’s called.”

“Rounded on top and flat across the bottom, you mean?” David asked.

“Kit nodded and pointed to the key on the left in David’s palm.

“I see. The inverted U as you initially described it – curved on top and straight across the bottom. Do you think that’s the clue?”

“Any of you got better?”

The question was met with silence. Kit took that as a ‘no’ with some trepidation attached.

“So, who’s the lucky one that gets to insert it?”

“I think it’s my turn to take the risk,” David said and had the key into the lock before Alex could take it from him.

“It turned,” he announced to the others.

At that point the rear of the rock on which the chest sat rose several inches. The front dropped a like amount forcing the Chest to slide free down the incline, out into the room.

David was immediately more interested in the mechanism involved than the treasure. While the others began deciding how best to transport the gold cubes, he examined the gadgetry.

“Look here guys. There are two metal rods, maybe a quarter of an inch in diameter that run at slight angles from the lock and through the base of the chest. I imagine one key lifts or depresses one rod and the others do the same to the second – the bad one. When the right one was moved it triggered the weight in front that raised the rear of the stone slab. I’m sure the other rod would have triggered another weight in back that would have raised the front and slid the chest backwards. What’s back there?”

Lying on the floor, he moved his head and arms into the opening, his

miner's lamp lighting the area.

"You won't believe this, men, but if that other rod had been pressed the chest would have slid through a hinged stone flap back there and down into the sinkhole below."

Kit responded.

"I'm getting the picture of a Louie LaPique who pirated and impregnated women just so he would be able to devise these gadgets to protect his hidden loot."

It deserved and received a round of chuckles – a full out laugh, even, from Connie.

"Maybe the Prof missed his calling," Alex said, "It would be quite a contest between the two of them."

"A contest that involved pirating, gadgeting, or impregnating?" Kit asked immediately making with puppy dog eyes and feigning helplessness, his hand to his shoulder in fear of retaliation.

"So, how do we get this stuff out of here?" Kit asked.

"The chest seems to be in excellent condition," Alex said. "I imagine if we can keep it in that shape as we move it to the opening we can take it out by helicopter."

He paused and looked at Kit.

"You want to take another ride?"

"I didn't want to take the *first* ride if you'll remember."

"I could fire a few random shots to make it seem like old times," He said then immediately added, "That was in bad taste. Sorry, Kit."

"I fashioned a device that will help us move things like this," David said. "So long as there are chests we will probably be up against this dilemma. It's in the flat package back in the helicopter, though."

"I'll volunteer Connie to go get it," Kit said. "And, say hi to Gertrude and Cubby for me while you're up there. Cubby seems to like hair conditioner, by the way."

"I thought you said the Brazilian Bears are shy."

"Perhaps she was just being amorous. I've been told I'm irresistible."

"Bearly," David said.

They moved back out onto the ledge. Alex climbed the rope to look around.

"No bear up here. Wonder if there ever really was."

He went on up into the meadow. Connie followed.

"Bring some goodies down," Kit said.

He figured he couldn't lose. If the bears had devoured the food it proved they had been there. If it was intact then at least he'd get something to eat.

"You win," Alex called back. "The box has been torn asunder."

"Wow! An *Asymmetrical* and an *Asunder* both in the same evening."

“Used in the same sentence that might be, ‘The angry man tore the boy asunder, asymmetrically,’” Alex said.

Fifteen minutes later, back at the chest, they were seeing David’s invention for the first time. David explained.

“While Kit was sleeping I roamed the hotel grounds. I noticed the maintenance department had thrown out a number of old mop buckets. It suddenly came to mind that the mop wringing rollers would be perfect for moving heavy objects like the chests we keep encountering. I befriended a fellow in the shop, and asked if he could make two metal end plates with holes to receive the axils which ran through the center of the metal rollers. He obliged. A few holes and cotter pins later and this is what we have – two sets of six rollers held together along the sides by metal plates. We roll the chest up on top and away we go. As it rolls off the first gizmo it rolls onto the second one. Then we place the first up front to catch it when it has rolled free of the other one and so on up to the front of the cave.”

“Harkens back to the pyramid builders, perhaps,” Kit said.

“I didn’t know the old Egyptians used mop buckets,” Connie said, venturing into the realm of the absurd, which he had often enjoyed as it flowed so easily between Kit and David.

“Very good!” Kit said. “It deserves a manly slap to the back but I’m back slapping challenged right now.”

The chest was soon aboard the first of the two roller laden gizmos. In no time the four of them had it waiting at the entrance.

“We just get good at it and we’re finished,” Kit said. “Hardly seems fair. I’m not going to be able to lasso the drag rope this time, Connie.”

“I think I can get in close enough to swing it in. I can sway the helicopter back and forth creating a pretty wide swing distance on the rope. David, you come with me to operate the winch. Kit and Alex can catch the rope and affix it.”

Connie and David left. Alex began fashioning a sling from the rope he carried. They laid it flat and rolled the chest onto it. By the time the helicopter arrived they were ready to receive the rope.

It took several attempts to snag it but eventually they succeeded. Alex secured it to the sling and gave David the high sign. The winch began turning and the chest rose from the ledge up into the helicopter.

“Now,” Alex asked, “How are we going to get you up that rope?”

“It appears that the heavens have provided the answer,” Kit said pointing up at the still hovering helicopter.

A harness seat was being lowered on the end of a rope. Alex held it in place as Kit worked his way into it. He was soon airborne and into the copter. Connie set down back twenty yards from the cave opening just below.

By then, Alex had retrieved the roller-gizmos and the climbing rope. David came to help heft the backpacks – those the bears had not torn asunder,

asymmetrically!

“You want to fly in the darkness, again?” David asked Connie.

“Why not. I’m becoming addicted to real beds.”

On the way back to *Juazeiro do norte*, Kit regaled them with his bear encounter – not to be confused with his several recent poolside *bare* encounters.

“No sign of Carlos,” Kit said at last, clearly relieved. “Suppose he’s given up?”

“Not if he has his great, great, etc, etc, grandpappy’s tenacity,” David said.

The others agreed with nods.

“Do you suppose he knows who we are, specifically I mean? If he does he could come after us anywhere, any time.”

“Your bedtime stories are not comforting, tonight, Kit.”

“I know. But I figured as long as I was being discomfited by the thoughts, I really should share the joy.”

“We thank you for your generosity, I suppose,” David said.

“I wonder if either of the LaPiques ever really experience – experienced – joy,” Kit said. “Merriam-Webster’s tenth edition defines joy as *the emotion evoked by wellbeing, success, or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires*. That means of course that there is no *one* definition of joy. Before arriving at a useful meaning one must first adequately define those other terms; what does one consider to be a feeling of wellbeing? How does one define success and good fortune?

“According to my definition of joy neither of them could have ever experienced it. To me *wellbeing* includes being happy with myself and that requires that I am regularly doing things to improve the planet and the lives of those with whom I come in contact. I doubt if that would be part of a LaPique’s definition. Then there is *success*. Being able to make positive differences and to achieve socially positive goals make me feel successful. Gathering all this wealth for the kids marks me as very successful, at least in my mind. *Good fortune*, for me, refers to having been born into a loving, caring, family that helps me learn how to balance my needs with the needs of others, and living in a generally safe and growth fostering country where my joy can develop and exist.

“For Louie I assume wellbeing meant having lived through another day, having booty to live on, and a woman in his bed at night. Success undoubtedly meant terrifying others so they would not attempt to accost him, and taking whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. Good fortune probably meant coming upon a defenseless ship filled with riches or escaping the cannon fire from a French Frigate by sailing into the fortuitous patch of fog.

“You see how *Kitjoy* is very different from *Louiejoy* or *Carlosjoy*? The use of the word becomes meaningless without all that additional information. I suppose the two of them may have found joy according to the ways they define the supporting elements.”

“Have you ever looked into my copy of S.I. Hiakowa’s book, *Language and Thought in Action*? It is one of the most meaningful and useful books I’ve ever read. I’m sure it is long gone from general circulation. He was an outstanding General Semanticist. He expanded on the idea that few if any words have identical meanings between people. In other words – no pun intended – those meanings held by the person with whom you are talking must be assumed to be at least a shade different from your meaning. We each bring our own experiences and emotions and level of knowledge and intelligence to every word we use. No two sets of such things can ever be the same for any two people. The bottom line for clear communication is therefore to meticulously clarify what each party means by the crucial words that are being used.”

Kit extended the concept well beyond David’s intention.

“And that, of course, theoretically goes on forever as each one also defines the words he is using in his defining of the words and on into infinity.”

“Theoretically, perhaps, but not pragmatically out in the real world.”

“I’ll have to dig it up, then. I’m sure the Harvard library will have it. Google Books may have it as well.”

“Do Connie and I get *credit* for attending that course just presented or do we have to live with the fact that we merely *audited* it?” Alex said.

“Take the credit,” Kit said, “Of course we really need to be sure we understand what you mean by ‘credit’ and ‘get’ and ‘just’. Hmmmm!”

It was *just* after midnight when they finally arrived at the hotel.

“Order in, go out, or turn in?” David asked as they removed their filthy clothes.

“Shower first regardless of the other choices. Help me into my giant condom – no remarks! The one AI provided for my arm and shoulder.”

“And now you need to be careful of that right palm as well. Think you can manage?”

“If not I’ll have you call a maid for me.”

“Call her what?”

“Eager to please!”

“Funny!”

“Seriously, I can handle this. I may need your help to reach the small of my back. I remember wondering when I was little why God didn’t want me to touch the small of my back.”

David shook his head.

“I well remember. You went on about it for days. Yell if you need assistance. If it’s *order in* I can take care of that while you shower.”

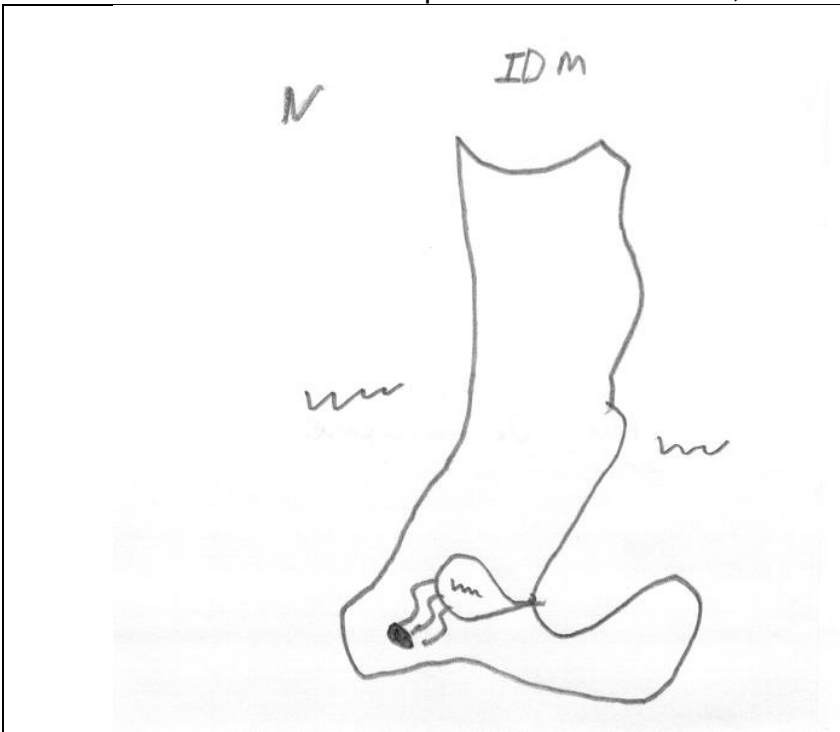
“I’m pooped. Let’s do that. A huge steak, baked potato, veggies of the chef’s choice. I’ve had a hankerin’ for a huge raspberry shake all day. That, too, then, if they make them.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

With the meal out of the way the choice for David was between looking at the next map or turning in. It was no contest. He went to bed. Kit soon followed. Although he would not claim there was a meaningful *language* barrier in the late night X-rated Portuguese film, he was tired and just couldn't get up for it. (Now, now!)

* * *

The next morning David and Kit got down to work on the map.
"Looks like a boot shaped island for starters," Kit said.



Map of Ile De LaPique

"The black dot is in evidence near the heel," David added. "There are several other features. Ideas?"

"That larger, open, oval is likely either a bay or an inland lake – see the wave indicator. It may be fed by three streams – the squiggly lines between the dot and the lake."

"If that's the case," David said, "The area to the west down there is higher than that to the east – the water flowing into the lake."

"And then probably into the ocean via that thin line – the outlet stream."

"And if the lake is being fed by three streams it seems reasonable that that single outlet probably is either considerably wider or deeper or flows at a far greater rate than those streams to the west," David said thinking beyond the map

itself.

“Let’s see what the web has to tell us. Let’s go for form recognition first. . . . Ah! It suggests Italy with the image reversed. Perhaps I will need to be a bit more precise. . . . Nothing useful in Brazil.”

“The letters at the top right.” David said. “It’s the first time we’ve encountered clue letters. *IDM. Plug* that in somewhere and see if anything pops up.”

“Nada. Let’s think about those letters, though. If it represents a *place*, which I imagine is a pretty good guess, then there are three words in its name or in its description. If it’s an island then the ‘I’ could represent isle – what’s that in Portuguese?”

“It seemed to be *console* down at Pistol Island. But I believe another more common term is *Ilha*.”

“Okay. Let’s go with *Ilha*. The form is often *Isle of Something*. The word, *of*, would be either *de* or *do* I believe. And that fits the letter pattern. Let me find that list of Brazilian islands. . . . Here we are. Scrolling down the list there must be a hundred *Ilha de* and *Ilha do* places. Last word begins with an ‘M’. How about *Ilha de Marijo*? No others with an ‘M’.”

“Okay then, where is it?”

“It seems to be the entire State of *Para* up north between the mouth of the *Amazon* to the west and *Toeantins River* to the east. That may actually be a long narrow bay area. It’s not clear where the river actually begins. There is a west-east flowing river below it making the area into an island. It’s huge and in no way resembles a boot.”

“Pull up a map and go boot hunting in the islands off its shores.”

“Most of them are over in the extended mouth of the *Amazon*. At first glance none seems to be the right shape. Let me cruise up and down the east side for a minute. Hey! Look here. Where the long narrow bay, which separates *Marajo* from the land on the west, meets that little river to the south. Would you believe this, *Île De LaPique* – but that’s the wrong spelling and capitalization.”

“That’s because it’s French not Portuguese,” David said. “See if you can find any history. This is suddenly becoming *very* interesting. How far from here to there?”

“So many questions. So little computer,” Kit said looking up and smiling at David who had stood and begun to pace.”

“A little less than eight hundred miles as the crow – or in our case, the Goose – flies. The only sizeable city in the area is *Belem* which is just across that long narrow bay to the east. You call Connie and I’ll get after that history.”

“Connie. We’re off to *Belem* – a city way up north. Using a boat once we get there might be less conspicuous than a helicopter. Our destination is only about – hold on a second. Kit, how far from *Belem* to the island?”

“About a hundred miles, give or take a few.”

"About a hundred miles, Kit says. See if you can arrange something big enough for us to use as home for a few days but small enough to remain inconspicuous."

"That island have a name?" Connie asked.

"You'll never guess in a million years."

"Well, in that case I might as well just toss out some wild speculation. How about *LaPique Island*?"

"As close as an English speaking Greek, translating Portuguese, can get when it's actually in French."

"Ah. You mean *Île De LaPique*."

"Showoff!"

"ASAP, I assume."

"Right."

"Nine o'clock. Put us in there by about eleven or a little after. I'll get the Goose ready and have Alex tend to the boat rental. Hotel?"

"No, I have a feeling we'll need to just stay close to the boat. Speed and maneuverability might be nice."

"Consider it done."

"I always do once I place something in your hands."

* * *

There was a small cafe in the airport at Belem that served up a hearty lunch. Kit was getting back to being his old self – he ordered and devoured two number fives from the menu. Neither of the waitresses was familiar with the LaPique Island. That seemed odd, they thought.

At noon they were standing on the wooden dock surveying the boat Alex had rented. It had an oversized, gasoline powered, outboard motor, set onto the rear of a fifteen foot, shallow keel runabout. Its seven foot width and stack of foam mattresses would provide places to rest when that was needed. Alex explained that its pug nose front would allow quick turns and facilitate maneuvering if that became an issue. It had a slender mast rising from floor supports three quarters forward with a single square sail that could be flipped into place on a moment's notice, should a quiet approach be required. A barrel of reserve fuel sat in the rear, and beside it, something inside a black plastic trash bag.

"What's in the ubiquitous black bag?" Kit asked.

"A spare battery. Better to be over prepared."

"I'd say you done good – again," David said patting the big man on his back."

"Let's get on with it," Kit said jumping aboard. "I got stuff about the island to share with you."

They were soon on there way south.

"Kit," Alex said. "Stick a finger down into the water every fifteen minutes and taste it. We need to know when the salt water of the ocean gives way to the fresh water of the river."

Without questioning the request Kit leaned far over the side and dutifully did as he had been instructed.

"Salty, but I'm interested in why you need that information. Something to do with the boat's buoyancy I assume?"

"No. Actually I had a bet with Connie that I could get you taste that filthy river water. I win!"

Connie handed over a bill, the size of which would not be made public.

"If I die of some rare tropical disease it will be on your conscience, Big Man,"

"Oh, it won't be of a *rare* disease, I assure you."

"Funny."

"Actually, few germs can survive in the salt water. I'd not have asked it of you further inland."

"Funny *and* compassionate. I'll accept both of those I guess. Now, do you guys want to hear about the island or not?"

He took their silence to mean yes.

"It served LaPique as his safe place when being chased or when he felt he might soon have to defend himself. The area around *Joao Pessoa* was his vacation land. *This* island was his fortress. It's basically a large rock jutting more or less straight out of the water well away from other islands. It's about a mile long. There is a single low area across the toe of the boot with several spring fed streams running from the higher land in the west into a fresh water lake. It is connected to the sea by a long, narrow, deep channel that was very little wider than his ship required for passage. It empties into the ocean between two high rock cliffs both of which were fortified with canons back in his day. The sheer faces of the rock around the island make that southern area the only accessible means of getting men onto it.

"In one report it tells of how, when being pursued at night by a naval ship of unknown country, he entered the island and then turned his ship sideways just inside the lake. The cannons on the cliffs remained silent until the pursuing ship entered that narrow stream. He opened the eighteen canon ports on the side of his ship facing the entrance. When the ship sailed to within thirty meters – silhouetted against the moon laying low between the cliffs, he blew it out of the water and saw to it there was but one survivor who he later put to shore up in the Antilles to spread the story of LaPique's impenetrable island and how he dealt with intruders. The man had been castrated as proof of LaPique's ruthlessness."

"As a reward for his men – after successfully defending the island – he would bring in a boatload of women for them to use. He was not particular whether or not they were professional whores – he'd conscript any female

walking the docks."

"Very interesting stuff, Kit," David said. "You found that all in one place?"

"Oh no. Bits and pieces from dozens of sites. I've written it out and footnoted the sites. It's something Father A doesn't have in his collection of material. Apparently LaPique also had a hideout closer to the Antilles in Argentina – a private cove in *Lake Marocaibo*. That lake is huge and offered less natural protection. I suppose it was his emergency place of safety – much closer to his typical area of operation."

At 2:45 Kit sighted the island. By 3:00 they had sailed its length and reached the long, narrow, entrance to the lake. On each side, steep, rock walls rose to overhanging cliffs fifty feet above.

"Not a good sign," Alex said pointing.

"Smoke!" Kit said. "The island is said to be deserted – it has no life sustaining plants or game. Who would choose to be here?"

"Who indeed," David said.

"Carlos?" Kit asked, hoping deep down that the others would not agree.

"It's the only *who* I can think of," David said.

Connie cut the engine. Alex suggested an initial strategy.

"There is a small inlet – a niche – just to the left of the entrance into the channel from the river. I suggest we pull in there and weigh anchor. Then, one or more of us can scale that cliff and get a look down into the valley and see what's really going on in there."

David nodded. The others agreed.

The sail was released.

"Dark brown? A *dark brown* sail?" Kit asked, puzzled.

"White would be a dead giveaway," Alex explained. The brown blends in with the forest and rock outcroppings."

"You're always on top of things, big guy. Good practice, I suppose, for scaling that cliff."

"Actually it may not be as difficult as we thought.

Again he pointed. Hidden from the view they had out in the river, was a mostly natural set of steps – steep but useable. They hefted their backpacks and stepped up onto the ledge against which the boat had been secured.

"You really want to try this, Kit," David asked pointing up the mostly vertical set of irregular block steps.

"If I find that I can't make it, coming back down should be fairly easy. I want to try it. My arm and shoulder are actually quite useable. It just hurts like hell to do it."

Alex led the way followed by Kit, David, and finally Connie. The big man set an easy pace in deference to Kit. Consequently, the ten minute climb took twenty.

Near the top Alex motioned the others to remain there while he went on

and scouted the top, thinking there should be a lookout stationed there. It was empty. He signaled them to join him.

The narrow, flat, area on top offered a commanding view of the valley. There was a large ship in the lake; it was clearly the one that belonged to Carlos, masts up with the sails wrapped firmly to the spars. It was not prepared to go anywhere.

"Lots of men down there," Kit said surveying the area through his binoculars, "And a few females wearing virtually nothing."

"Notice how the boy doesn't comment on the male's attire," Alex said to the others.

"Funny," Kit said. "Everybody's out to get the poor, injured, kid."

He moved on.

"They seem to just be there. I mean no real activity of any kind."

"Perhaps they are waiting for us," David said.

"That's a chilling thought," Kit came back. "They skipped the Three Fish place in order to set an ambush for us here?"

"An interesting extension of my comment," David said.

"No one seems to be guarding the entrance, however," Alex said, his attention having been directed straight below them to the inside of the passage. "How many men do you estimate?"

"I counted seventeen and I assume there may be others out of sight in tents and down inside the ship," Kit said. "What is that huge black sale across the rear end of the boat?"

"I just imagine it is the means by which the ship appears to disappear," David said.

"Huh?"

"We are observing it from an angle in the daylight. If we were looking straight from the rear at night what would we see?"

"Just that blackness. I see. He raises the sail and becomes invisible in the black of night. I suppose he has a similar gadget up front for his frontal assaults out of nowhere."

The conjecture session was interrupted by a voice from behind them.

"I'll ask you gentlemen to raise your hands, turn around slowly, and . . .

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I'll ask you gentlemen to raise your hands, turn around slowly, and . . . give old Marc with a 'C' a big round of hugs."

It was Kit who responded.

"Marc! You scared us silly. I don't understand. How did you get here? *Why* did you get here?"

"I finished my semester exams and have three weeks off. I asked myself who would I like to spend it with and guess who came to mind?"

"How did you find us?"

"Father Angelico – well, actually his secretary – looked on his desk calendar and it was all laid out. My buddies' father flew me to *Belem*. A classmate's father runs a marina there and he lent me a little boat. I've been on your tail for the past hour. Just couldn't keep up with your bigger engine."

"You could have called," Kit said. "I mean we're happy to see you but you really scared the hell out of us. Carlos LaPique is just over there with his boat and crew. I was sure one of his men had found us up here."

"Oh, my. I guess I hadn't counted on anything like that. I'm really sorry. I can leave if that would be best."

"We won't hear of it," David said. "Glad to have you aboard, so to speak."

Once the situation had been clarified, Alex and Connie jumpstarted their hearts and returned to the surveillance of the valley.

"I'm convinced they are waiting for us," Alex said. "Nothing about that situation qualifies as a treasure hunt."

"Interesting," David said. "Perhaps they *don't* have the actual maps that we have. Maybe they just have a list of the sites. It seems reasonable that Louie might have made such a list. He may have left it with his favorite woman for safe keeping. Somehow, at least, it seems to have worked its way to Carlos."

"Their random behavior at the monument mound might tend to support that idea," Kit said thinking back.

"It seems that list must have placed the sites in the same order as we are experiencing them," David said.

"Thanks to Marc we may also have found our leak," Kit said. "Somebody

following our progress from Father A's calendar."

"His secretary?" Marc asked.

"I doubt that but it wouldn't be inconceivable that somebody else could get access to his study. That's probably not a solid lead but I'll give him a ring and alert him to take us off his sheet."

David turned back to the problem at hand.

"Well, I suppose if they are just waiting for us to get here we will have to disappoint them," he said. "Alex, figure a way for us to get to that far hill where the dot is on the map – without being detected, although I suppose that was implied."

Kit called Father A and explained their suspicion.

"Stealing from a priest's calendar? A hard topic to work into a sermon, I'm afraid. I doubt if my sermons ever flush out many sinners anyway. Parishioners who regularly attend Mass are not the ones needed to be preached to. It's an innate flaw in the system. I'll remove all mention from obvious places. There are so many folks in and out of here every day I wouldn't know where to begin a suspect list."

"Probably just deleting the references is all we need. I hope that doesn't put you in any personal danger."

"I'm a big boy, Kit. You just keep your mind on your business."

With that, the conversation ended.

"What happened to your arm – the sling and all?" Marc asked at last.

"Got shot. Doing fine. Just think twice if Connie offers you a free ride clinging to a rope under a helicopter during the heat of battle."

Marc was not satisfied but let it go.

"I have a plan," Alex said.

He knelt and began drawing in the dust with a stick.

"This is the southern part of the Island – we are here, the lake, the three streams behind it, and the dot. The cliff we're on continues as a very narrow ridge around the bottom of the boot and then turns north up the heel where it abruptly becomes much higher. If we follow this ridge west and then descend behind the area of the dot, we will bypass their camp."

"Day or night?" Kit asked.

"I think if we move slowly and cautiously we should be able to travel the ridge during the day. It is way above their usual line of sight. Then, down the hill and find the dot about dusk when we'll still be able to see quite well close up but Carlos and his buddies won't be able to see us from a distance. Flashlights will be out of the question, of course."

"So, what's the next move?" Kit asked directing the question to Alex.

"We need to get supplies up here from the boat and let's bring the sail along with us. Maybe we can give the old boy a taste of his own medicine. Kit you stay up here and keep an eye on them."

"Better test the cell phones," Marc said. "I really did try to reach Kit but got nothing. It happens all over Brazil – lots of dead pockets as you move inland from the east coast."

"Somehow I just reached Father A."

"It's a fickle system. That's all I can say."

"Okay, then. Give me a ring."

Marc punched the buttons. Kit's phone rang.

"Lawrence Brother's Pizzeria. Anchovy and Jalapeño combo special. Comes with a pre-paid burial plan."

Marc turned to the others.

"Must not be getting through. I got somebody at the crazy house down in Sao Paulo."

"You do fit in quite well with this crew," David said putting a hand on Marc's shoulder. "And, I'm not at all sure that speaks to your over-all stability, however."

The four left and Kit bellied down to continue his surveillance. He was pleased that his shoulder handled the weight from his elbow propped against the ground.

A half hour passed. Still no movement of any significance to report from the valley. He heard the others coming up the steps – at least he hoped that's who it was.

It was. With a degree of succinctness not characteristic of Kit, he made his non-report as he stood to greet them.

"Nada!"

"Let's be on our way, then," Alex said. He led; the boys followed, shouldering the sail between them; and finally David and Connie bringing up the rear. Connie was carrying two rifles slung from his shoulders and cartridge belts crisscrossed over his chest.

"You look more like a pirate than any of those pirates down there," Kit said.

They were only a few degrees south of the equator and the huge, afternoon, sun was showing no mercy. Alex insisted that they all wear caps and periodically douse their hair with water. Every half hour they stopped for a drink.

At one point the footing was unstable and a section of rock broke loose and tumbled down the slope in the direction of the camp. Two men from below grabbed rifles and moved in the direction of the ruckus.

"Down, guys," Alex said. "I doubt if they can climb the face of the cliff here but let's just wait and see. At any rate we don't want them to know we are here."

They knelt and bent low. Alex found a position from which he could keep the men in view. Ten minutes passed before he spoke again.

"One of them is getting too close to us. Marc, let's get our feet against that little boulder and see if we can send it over the side. I hope they will

interpret it as a natural phenomenon and lose interest in favor of their safety."

The boulder was sent tumbling. The men were sent scurrying. The subterfuge had worked. They returned to camp and their interest returned to playing with the women.

Alex waited a few more minutes before moving out. The uneven, jagged, terrain made the going very slow. Every step had to be selected for stability. His estimate of the time it would take to reach the western ridge had been accurate.

They stopped to eat at seven. The sun was sinking behind them in the west. By the time they were finished, the shadow of the cliff had crawled nearly to the edge of the lake. The humidity which had been held at bay by the heat of the sun, washed over them like an invisible mist.

"Shirt shedding time," Kit said. "I'll need some help here."

Marc assisted and then followed Kit's lead. Alex broke out a can of insect repellent and they soon all smelled like hazardous volatile organics. It was a trade off they were willing to make – the short term hazard for the mosquito and fly free evening.

"So, now that we're here, how do we begin?" Kit asked turning to Alex.

"Does the dot have any special characteristics?"

"It looked more oval – northwest to southeast. Not sure if that was intentional or even meant to be meaningful. The dot placement has often just been an approximation of position. Frankly, I'm up in the air. Maybe have to see something before we will understand."

Kit indicated his rear pants pocket and Alex removed the map and studied it.

"Looks to be between where we are and the terraces that lead down to the head of those streams that run into the lake. I agree with you. We just need to get down there and see what's to be found."

"We need to wait on the sun to set, of course," Kit said.

Alex nodded.

"Those are not nice men down there are they?" Marc said as he helped David put things away after the meal.

Kit nodded and added his own question.

"I have to wonder how they came to be that way. It would make an interesting book. Trace the lives of a dozen pirates back to their beginnings and see what forces impinged on them to mold their lives in that direction."

"They would certainly seem to have at least one thing in common," David said. "A lack of concern for other people's property or lives."

"Back to the always socially destructive thing about being fully selfish," Kit said with a nod.

"Probably grew up in situations where nobody recognized another person's right to have and hold what was rightfully theirs," Marc added.

"I suppose if you grew up that way – where others took your stuff when

they wanted it – you would learn to do the same," Kit said.

"If you thought you were powerful enough to get by with it," David added.

"Powerful enough or sneaky enough," Kit said amending his uncle's statement.

David nodded.

"Do they have no sense of right and wrong?" Marc asked.

David fielded the question.

"Not in a socially positive way. I imagine they believe 'right' means taking the possessions of those who are weaker. Wrong would mean having others take their things."

"But isn't it a normal human trait to try to get what you want or need?" Marc asked.

"An interesting use of three words, Marc – *normal*, *want*, and *need*. Watching children interact with other children – prior to age five – I suppose an observer of human nature would come to that conclusion. 'I want it so I'll take it if I can.'

"About then the process of socialization takes off big time. Most of us begin to see that if we want to have positive human contact – friendship – we have to temper some of our innate desires. In order to keep what we have we have to demonstrate to others that we won't try to take theirs. It becomes a positive standoff of a kind. Most social orders have acceptable means for obtaining the things one wants without disrupting relationships the way stealing does. When a person steps outside those sanctioned methods they are ostracized, punished, or excluded in some way. Honest work for reasonable pay is the typically approved method."

"People steal in virtually every society I've ever heard of," Marc said leaving it an open ended idea clearly meant to draw David's reaction.

"Some people never seem to become fully socialized – never accept the constraints or the give and take of the larger social group. Sometimes it's the result of their upbringing. Many times it seems to be a defect in the brain structure or in its chemistry."

"I think there is a difference between stealing for want and stealing for need," Kit said. "If you or your child is hungry and you have no other means open to you, I can sanction stealing, I suppose – like after a natural disaster – but that could never be for more than the very short term."

"There is a term in an Indian dialect, which it used by the poorest people in India," David said. "It translates as, 'taking only what God wants me to have'. It represents a concept that is generally accepted throughout that culture – by both the have's and the have-not's. It refers just to the necessities of life and the activity is seen more as an irritation by those whose things are pilfered than it is an illegal act."

"Sort of a self-initiated relief program," Kit said putting it into perspective.

David nodded.

"I suppose I can see how the pirates may have come to disrespect other people's property," Marc said, "But life? How can one not treasure all human life?"

The question probably revealed more about Marc and those who raised him than anything else. It was impossible for him to comprehend how others couldn't understand that all human life was precious. The men in the valley would have been dumbfounded by his take and, instead, would have said, 'No life is important enough to be spared if it stands between me and what I want'. For them, life only had value so long as one could protect it.

David continued.

"Many folks grow up in situations that teach them you only have the right to your things – including your life – so long as you are able to defend them. Look at the slums and inner cities in our country. It devalues everyone's life, probably including your own. *Disvalues* would be a more accurately descriptive term, I suppose."

"They really live outside the family of man, don't they?" Marc said. "By that I mean they feel no connectedness with others – no sense of trust or mutual responsibility for the welfare and wellbeing of others – no sense of joy from being a part of it all."

"And," Kit said further developing the concept, "They fail to understand that life can never really be safe for *them* until *everybody* has their basic needs met. I read somewhere that since living with poorly adjusted and poorly socialized people always makes everybody's life unpleasant, it behoove even the most selfish, self-centered person to work to help maintain everyone's level of adjustment and wellbeing. Otherwise, chaos and havoc reign and you can never feel safe or content or relaxed in that sort of situation."

"That is a *profound* concept," David agreed. "It is incomprehensible to me how such a vast proportion of people on this earth don't understand it."

"It's part of the *out of mind, out of sight* notion, I think," Kit said. "People focus on the *reaction* rather than going for the *pre-action*. I mean there is another old adage that folks continue to ignore generation after generation: '*An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*' Our prisons are filled with all those pounds of cures – which, of course is not really *cure* but merely exclusion with no genuine attempt at personal skill building to prevent additional trespasses against the rest of us on down the road. Our government continues to cut spending on preventative programs and increase spending on prison construction. How absolutely insane and shortsighted can a supposedly enlightened country be?"

Alex had an observation.

"And, you haven't yet touched on the death penalty you Americans continue to irrationally cling to in the face of international outrage."

"What you're implying is that even our government displays and models the sense that life is not precious," Kit said providing his own interpretation to Alex's comment.

Alex did not respond. The boy had taken it further – to the crux – than he had felt comfortable doing.

No great problems had been resolved but concerns and even outrage had been rekindled – two things David and Kit treasured and understood had to be maintained and frequently revisited if the world was to move toward fostering a truly human-friendly environment.

"Is it dark enough yet?" Kit asked.

"Yes. Depending on the moon later, we should be fine for a while." He turned to the others. "*Quiet* is essential. Low voices only. On the way down the slope make sure every step is on a secure footing before transferring your weight. We don't dare be found out. We can't possibly match them in firepower if they locate us."

Kit turned to Marc.

"Looks like this could turn really ugly fast. We won't think less of you if you go back right now."

"The biggest danger I've ever had to face was as a third grader when Fat Lisa got me down on the playground and kissed me. Well, that encounter with the bear in the snake infested grassland might come close. No! It was definitely Fat Lisa! I'm in. And besides, I need to do something to help earn that graduate degree you laid on me back at *Baía Obstruída*."

Alex was ready to get on with things.

"There appear to be three access routes down to that terrace just above the source of the streams," he said, pointing. "That will be our first stop. Pair up any way you want so long as Marc goes with Connie and Kit with David."

"He's a comedian," Kit said rolling his eyes in Marc's direction. "Let's go!"

As they neared the bottom the descent eased into a forty five degree angle and became fairly simple to navigate. They kept each other in sight with no problem. Upon arriving at the terrace it became clear that the black oval dot probably designated a small oval cemetery ringed in a low stone wall about a foot high. It extended twenty five feet from end to end and ten feet front to back across the center. The streams began as artesian springs another twenty feet straight down the steep slope below them.

There were six grave markers, each a low, white, stone monument with a name chiseled deeply into each: Carmen, Carlos, Pedro, Juan, Manney, and Roi. They were two feet tall and half that wide – perhaps six inches thick. They stood at the rear of the weed infested plot.

"No slumps," Kit said sharing his initial puzzlement as he walked the area. "In other really old graveyards that I've seen the ground slumps above where the wooden caskets or bodies lay – rotted away."

"Interesting. You're thinking this may not be a legitimate cemetery plot?" David asked.

"I'm contemplating the possibility, not jumping to conclusions."

"This is what we seem to have," David said. "At the point of the dot on the map – an oval dot – we find an oval cemetery plot and in it six grave markers offering names only. It sets on a narrow terrace twenty feet below the cliffs and twenty feet above the springs that feed the streams."

"Look here on the backs of the stones," Connie said. "I assume they are the numbers one through six in Portuguese – pretty similar to Spanish."

The others moved to look.

"No apparent order," Marc said. "*Um to seis*, alright but scattered randomly among the stones. No left to right or right to left sequence."

"And another thing," David said. "All Latin type names except for *Roi* – that *isn't* Portuguese is it, Marc?"

"No. As you know, I'm sure, *Roi* is French for *Rei*, that is, for *King*."

"You linguists are making my head spin," Kit said reading the numbers from left to right as he faced the back sides of the stones. "*Um, dois, sies, cinco, quatro, tres*. Why numbers if not signifying order or magnitude?"

"Nothing has ruled out *magnitude*," David said. "That's actually an interesting way to go."

"I assume six – *sies* – would be the largest magnitude of the choices presented," Marc said.

"Six whats?" Kit asked.

"Six maps, maybe?" Alex suggested. "Isn't this the *sixth* map?"

"Let's see," Kit began counting. "It all began back at the huge, underwater, cave with the slit in the side, but we really didn't have a map for that. It was just left over from June."

He began listing the recent sites.

"First, there was the praying mantis map where the ceiling in the cave was rigged to bury us. Second, there was the monument at the Cross of the Fish where we met Marc. Third, Pistol Island where we escaped the crossbow loaded with harpoon points. Fourth, was the Two Feathers cave and the gas explosion. Fifth, the Three Stranded Fish sinkholes. I guess that does make this number six."

"Six and King on the same stone makes it stand out from the others as important," Marc said.

Kit turned to David.

"In that epistle Louis wrote to his eldest son, did he not refer to himself as the King of the Pirates?"

"He did and the reference was repeated several places in the information you've been able to assemble."

"So, it will be this grave that we concentrate on, then?" Alex said stepping

back to inspect that part of the area more closely. It had been a question which suggested the conclusion.

"Another, deep, hole in the ground like at Pistol Island?" Kit asked tentatively.

"The first possibility that comes to mind, I suppose," David said. "I'm still just a bit concerned about why there are six stones. I suppose some or all could have been booby trapped. It seems to be his M.O. as they say in crime dramas. I'm still uncomfortable about it."

"May I suggest, then, that we begin by carefully removing the debris and grass from around each head stone and see if we find anything," Alex said.

"Like what?" Kit asked.

"Like, *know it when you see it*," he said.

"That's no help for us amateurs."

"Okay, then. Yes. Wires, chains, iron rods or plates, other stones that appear to have been placed there purposefully yet unnecessarily."

"Now *that* helps. Let's do it."

They each took a stone leaving *Rio # Seis* for later.

"I got a rod, here," Connie said.

"I got a rod, too," David said, "In front of the marker."

"Ditto," said Marc.

"Me, too, said Kit.

"I can make it unanimous," Alex said. "Carefully expose them. Follow them. See where they go."

With great care and patience they laid open the ground above their finds. It turned out to be a single rod running in front of all three stones to the left as they were faced from the front. The two to the right of the *Rio # Seis* also shared one. Again, LaPique had coated them in heavy, hard, tar.

"The one over here seems to run through loops formed in other iron rods – one near each edge of the stone marker," Connie offered. "Those come up from below and are bent – looped – around the horizontal bar that lies near the surface.

"Got it here, also," David reported. "A looped iron rod heading down into the ground. The surface rod has been inserted through those eyes that were made by bending the ends of those vertical rods."

Connie had a further finding.

"I think we'll find a set of two of those looped jobbies for each stone – set about two feet apart, edge to edge of the marker. Could be hinges of some sort, I suppose."

"Like a trap door, maybe," Kit said. "Put too much weight on the ground above it and it opens up into some terrible, horror filled, pit right out of a boy's worst nightmare."

"My nightmare pit was filled with snakes," Marc said turning to Kit with a

shiver.

"Mine was filled with alligators and floating, severed, screaming, heads," Kit said.

"I think yours beat mine," Marc said. "That must have been terribly frightening!"

"When boyhood memory time is over we need to get on with things," Alex said playfully.

It was David who actually got on with things.

"We've been walking all over this area," he said, "And nothing has given way. If we are indeed speaking of a trapdoor, I believe it has to work some other way. A push on the stones, cutting through wires as we begin digging, something like that."

"Grasshopper have interesting take," Kit said. "Consider, please, the opposite of *too much* weight?"

"Interesting," David said. "And, the best possible solution we have up to this moment. Let's think how such a gizmo could be configured."

He took out his pad and began to sketch.

"Let's begin with two assumptions. One, that there is a trapdoor and two, that at least one end of something is hinged from those bars and loops we found.

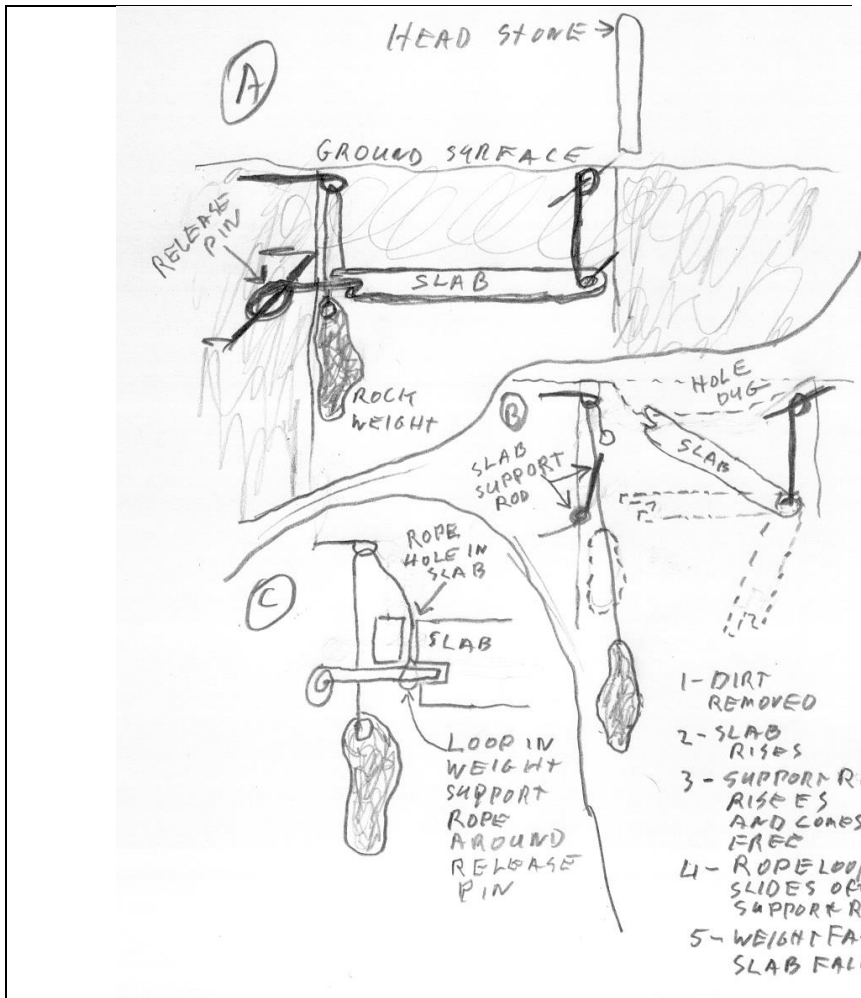
"Think of those looped rods as actually being flat bottomed and U-shaped, with the bottom of the U supporting something underground – let's say one end of the trap door thing – a rock slab if he uses the material he's used in the past or perhaps a thick iron, rust proofed, plate. That's unimportant at this point. The upper ends of the U's loop around the rods we found – the anchors.

"Then – probably at the foot of the grave, opposite end from the hinge – will be something that will *rise* as the weight lessens – as the dirt is dug away for example. After that rises a few inches it has to trip something, which in turn, releases that base plate or stone slab so it can swing down and away opening a hole into which the digger would fall. It may be a deep pit or a pit set up with long spikes on which a body would be impaled – something like that. Again, not immediately important.

"Might be to the guy who's falling," Kit quipped.

Marc shivered.

David continued.



David's sketch of the grave booby trap

"That release mechanism could work like this. The base plate or stone could be held in place by a pin – a *sizeable rod*, probably to hold the weight all these years – which extends from a secure base out in front of the base plate beyond the front of the grave hole. That pin is also looped on the end away from the plate and supported underneath so it remains a solid support so long as the plate stays in place. But, when that end of the plate rises, the hinged pin rises with it, eventually flipping up and out of the way. That also releases the chains or ropes which support the weight stone that raised the plate. Once released, the plate then falls, opening the trap door."

He showed them his drawing.

Kit had to reiterate the sequence.

"So, as the weight of the dirt that kept the base slab and weight of the

stone weight in place is reduced by digging away the dirt, the foot of the plate rises tripping a rod that releases the lift weights so the plate is free to fall – swing down actually on the hinges we found near the headstones."

"Will that happen on *Rio # Seis*?" Marc asked.

"Let's dig to see if there is a rod buried in the ground near that headstone," Alex suggested. Marc helped him.

It was soon established that there was no rod.

"Al, do you see any reason not to begin digging on site six?"

"No, but let's use great caution just the same. Also, I want us to erect the sail between us and the valley. It will maintain our privacy and allow us more freedom of movement back here behind it."

The sail fit well between two trees and was soon secured.

Alex and Connie both traveled with foxhole shovels. The four of them took turns digging. Kit reluctantly watched from the sidelines. Once they had dug a foot into the ground, it was no longer possible to dig without getting down into the hole.

"Those in the hole digging will wear ropes around the waist – other end fastened to a tree trunk up here," Alex said. "Maintain very little slack in those lines so if you fall you won't fall far."

That adjustment made, Connie and Marc resumed digging.

After six feet and three hours of labor they still had not come across anything.

"Let's go a bit further before we try to reconfigure things," David said.

"Probably aren't going to be able to do that," Marc said. "I just struck bed rock.

"Me, too," Connie reported.

"How about extending the hole front and back," Kit suggested.

"Good idea," David said, "However, before we do that, let's clean off that rock base you're standing on. If my conceptualization that the other grave sites are built over a pit of some kind there really cannot be bed rock in the immediate area. My idea may have been erroneous of course."

They meticulously removed most of the dirt.

"May have found one of your bingo's David," Connie said.

"Actually the *bingos* are mine," Kit offered being humorously territorial about the term.

"Either way, there's a big old iron ring bolted through this slab of stone. It's centered from both directions."

They stood aside so those up above could see. David motioned Marc out so he could enter.

"Alex, we need a gizmo to lift this thing. It's going to be really heavy, I'm sure."

"Not a problem. I have the set of four pulleys we've used before. Actually,

I failed to return them down on Pistol Island. They are small but sturdy and should do the job. We have a sizeable, overhanging, tree here. Take us ten minutes to rig it. Kit, a coil of three quarter inch rope."

"Got it right here. I remember how to thread it through the pulleys. A little help holding, here, Marc."

Presently, Alex and Connie were pulling on the rope and the stone slab was slowly rising. The most difficult part of the process was moving it aside once it was up above ground level. That done they returned their attention to the hole.

"No reason we can't use a single flashlight down inside the hole," Alex said. "Let me get down there and take a look."

He surveyed the area from above before entering.

"There is a small ledge at each end, which the slab rested on. Between them is a continuation of the hole complete with a bingo, Kit."

"A chest?" Kit asked leaning over the edge.

"One and a half I'd say. Looks like the old boy is giving us another ribbing – is that the proper idiom?"

He stepped aside and shined his light so Kit and the others could see.

"Yuck!" Marc said shuddering. "A skeleton?"

"Looks to be two, in fact. LaPique's reward for loyal back breaking work, I assume."

"You'd think his crew would have got wise to the fact that those who went to help him bury treasure were never seen again," Kit said.

"He probably wasn't the kind you could say no to when he called your name," David said.

"We can use the pulley arrangement to lift out the chest. It's bigger than the others. Moving the contents out of here may pose a challenging problem."

"Everybody set your heads to work on that problem," David said. "First things first. Let's get that chest out. I assume it's in tact, considering your observation," he continued, directing his remark to Alex."

"Looks to be. This entire box has been coated with tar – hard drying tar like a plastic envelope."

"Tar pits have served anthropologists well, remember," Kit said. "One of the best natural preservatives there is."

The chest sat on a rock slab which rested on a bed of gravel, probably there to hold excess water. David assumed there was a drain somewhere below.

"For safety sake, Connie, fashion another rope net to hold the chest," David said. "We can pry up one end and then the other so you can slip ropes under it. I just don't want to risk having it break up in mid-air."

They all agreed it was a good precaution to take. Working in such close quarters made it no easy undertaking.

Half an hour later the chest was resting up on the ground to the north of the hole.

"What time is it," David asked.

"Eleven thirty five," Kit said.

"We've accomplished quite a bit in four and a half hours. Now, strategies for moving the treasure from here to our boat?"

"We call on Tommy Powers to come and fly it back to the boat," Kit said. "Maybe first we need to open the chest and see what we have."

David nodded at Alex and he cut the lock, freed the lid, and, with great caution and Connie's help, opened it.

"A mixture of gold coins and jewelry."

"There is that one portion of the cliff up there that overhangs this area by a few feet," Alex said pointing. "We could rig a hoist and take it out a bucket at a time. Connie and I each carry a collapsible canvas pail."

"It will be a long, tedious task that way," David said. "Any other ideas short of Superman or Tinkerbelle?"

The boys giggled. No better ideas surfaced.

"Let's go with the buckets then."

"A problem, guys," Kit said. "What do we dump the stuff into once we get it up there?"

Alex had the answer.

"We scoop out one of the natural, shallow, holes up there and pile it neatly inside. When it's all topside, we bring up the chest and reload it."

"Why not just hoist the loaded chest up and be done with it" Marc asked.

"Too heavy for what I imagine we can rig up there. Can't chance bringing down that ledge and having the chest fall and break."

"Okay, then. Let's get at it," David said. "How full dare we fill the buckets?"

"Supported in one of Connie's macramé thingys we can fill them completely – two gallons," Alex said.

"If we move the chest off the rope sling, we already have our 'macramé thingy', Connie said.

"Okay. How about David, Connie, and Kit, you work on that," Alex said. "Marc you and your strong young back come with me and we'll set up the hoist arrangement upstairs. We'll need a coil of the half inch rope. I'll take the pulleys. Careful now. Watch every single step on the way up."

Marc nodded clearly pleased Alex chose him to help. He slipped back into his shirt as the evening air had chilled and the breeze was more evident up above.

Using a log, a boulder, and several sizeable stones the device was rigged with the rope Kit had strung through the maze of pulleys. Both ends of the rope were then lowered over the side.

Below, they had the first bucket loaded. Connie tied the bucket to one end of the rope and they began pulling on the other. It took little effort. Kit estimated

it would take nine buckets.

It took nine buckets.

A single gold piece fell from the final load. Kit picked it up and spoke to his uncle in low tones.

"Marc can probably use it for books, you know."

David nodded and pulled his nephew close. It said, 'You have such a generous heart and I love you for that'.

Kit responded with an arm around his uncle's waist. It meant, 'I love you, too, and I'm glad we are having this life to share together.'

They looked around the grave site.

"I'd sure like to get a look inside one of those other graves," David said, "But we can't take the risk."

Kit nodded saying:

"Maybe, if the pirates discover the one we've dug up they will begin digging at the others. If your idea is correct it should work to even the odds a bit, I'd think."

Finally, the backpacks, the empty chest, and the sail had all been hoisted up to the top of the cliff.

Kit found the climb extremely taxing – and more painful than he would let on. He met the two on top with a big smile and was surprised at how that, in and of itself, seemed to ease the hurt.

The problem of transporting the chest remained. It was far too heavy for them to carry no matter how they rigged it. They could empty out backpacks but they were not sturdy enough to handle the weight.

"What do you think of this plan?" Alex said looking down the sheer backside of the cliff toward the river. Looks to be some thirty meters top to bottom. See the three small outcroppings – there, there, and there, separated about equally top to bottom? Since we don't have strong ropes long enough to let the chest down all that way, we could let it down in steps – from ledge to ledge to ledge. We use the one thirty foot section of one inch rope David's been carrying. Then bring the boat around and pick it up at the water's edge."

"If you think we can pull it off, let's give it a try," Kit said, looking at David for agreement.

He received a series of studied nods.

"Once we get past that first ledge there's no coming back," Alex said pointing out the obvious.

Alex outlined the plan. Due to the cramped quarters on the tiny outcroppings it would be a two person operation – he and Marc. They would use anchors and carabiners as supports for themselves and the ropes. The one above would handle the ropes and pulleys, lowering the chest to the man below. He would then detach the pulley mechanism and lower himself to the next ledge where the process would be repeated.

Kit, with his experience and survival school training, would have been Alex's first choice but since he was not in shape for that, Alex opted for the agility and strength of the other youthful member of the team.

It was an all or nothing outing. The other three would make their way back to the boat the way had come and sail around the heel to meet Alex and Marc. It was a long trek to the boat and a time consuming descent down the cliff. They would all be exhausted come dawn.

Marc quickly got the knack of his assignment as the man on top. Alex moved down to be the catcher. The earlier breeze worked up into a strong, noisy, wind whipping up the river. It made the descent more difficult but worked to mask the necessary sounds of hammering the anchors in place. They spent almost an hour lowering the chest to the first ledge. Marc then slipped a rope through one of the *rings* and let himself down to meet Alex.

"Tired?" Alex asked.

"I've been tired for the past six hours," Marc said smiling.

"You can swim, I assume," Alex asked.

"I'm a very good swimmer. You?"

Alex chuckled, amused at the boy's response, which indicated he had missed the point of the question.

"What?" Marc asked; his smile broadened.

"Well, just in case anything goes wrong up here I suggest you jump into the river feet first. Can't risk a broken neck from a dive."

"Oh. I see. Yes. I can handle that. No problem."

They began the second phase. Alex lowered himself to the next shelf. It was less of a drop than the first had been. To counter the wind they attached a trailing rope to the bottom of the chest which Alex held from below as it was lowered. That kept it from swinging out of control and damaging itself against the rock cliff. It took the better part of an hour. Marc was a cautious person, thoughtful about every move he made – before making it. (He should make a good grad student!)

The chest was two thirds of the way down the cliff. They allowed no time for rest, proceeding immediately to the next outcrop.

It was becoming routine and but no faster. Finally, Alex was standing at the shoreline and the chest was on its way to him. They were both feeling a sense of relief.

A voice called out from above.

"Who's down there?"

It was not friendly in tone. They looked up and at once realized it was one of LaPique's men – with a rifle. Marc was on the ledge. The chest was hanging, still only half way down to the shore. He knew if he let it go it would break up and the treasure would be scattered into the water and become mired in the mud at the bottom of the river.

Keeping hold of the rope he was using to lower the chest he scrambled over the edge, hanging under the ledge for safety. Three shots sounded. Alex stood with his back against the rock minimizing his form as a target. He looked up helplessly watching the boy. Marc began climbing down the rope. As he did so the weight of the chest pulled him back up as it descended. Marc had a mere two meters of rope left when the chest touched the shore.

Marc turned – swirling so he was facing the river. He swung himself backwards. His feet made contact with the rock wall. He let go of the rope and with great effort propelled himself out into space and headed for the water, tumbling, uncontrollably, head over heels.

More shots were fired. Seeing what was happening – after the fact – Alex fired half a dozen rounds up in the direction of the shooter.

The sound of an explosion rang out. It had come from back at the entrance to the lake from the river. Alex had to wonder if it had been their boat. He turned back to scan the river. There was no sign of the boy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At the sound of the explosion the shooter turned and left. Alex holstered his gun and continued to scan the moonlit river for Marc.

"I'm over here in the shadow if it is I for whom you are looking."

They chuckled at the meticulous phrasing the boy used there in the heat of battle. Marc swam to where Alex stood beside the chest. The big man gave him a hand up.

"Coolest I've been in the past twenty four hours," Marc said putting on a shiver. "Now what?"

"You really did well up there, Marc – seeing to it that the chest got a soft landing and then getting yourself into the river. You performed like a seasoned professional."

"Thank you. Would that be salted or peppered?"

Again they exchanged chuckles and quick smiles.

"As I see it," Alex began, in answer to Marc's original question, "We have two alternatives. We can just wait here with the chest for the others to arrive in the boat and then get out of here. Or, we can hide the chest on the assumption the bad guys will come after us first. They know where we are now and that explosion could have been our boat."

"I really don't see any place to hide the chest here on this narrow strip of rock," Marc said looking around.

"One place. In the water."

"And down into the mud. I know that much about the waterways up here – a meter of mud on the bottom."

"How's this? Drive a couple anchors into the wall, low, right here at the ledge. Thread them with the ropes from the chest. We lower it just under the surface – the muddy water will hide it. Then tie it off and cover the ropes up here with whatever we can find – stones, sand, sticks."

"I like the idea. In light of the possibility your boat was destroyed and the fact the bad guys can be counted on to come after us eventually, we should probably get right to that."

It took less time than either had anticipated. With their backs to the wall

and feet against the chest they gradually forced it over the side and into the water. In a few minutes the ropes were well hidden.

"I'm going to suggest we enter the water and move south to meet our boat if or when it comes. We run out of shore a few meters in either direction. I really want us away from the chest. In that way, if we are located, we won't give away the position of the treasure."

"You've clearly done things like this lots of times before," Marc said.

"That's an accurate statement. Now, let's get into the river."

A hundred yards to the south they crawled out onto another narrow ledge where they had spotted a niche inset into the cliff – two meters wide and about that deep. It was a far better hiding place for them than the open ledge downstream had been.

An hour passed.

"Shall I try calling them?" Marc asked.

"If your phone isn't water logged."

"Oh. I forgot about that. I'm sure it won't work."

It didn't. Neither did the one Alex carried in his pants pocket.

Just as Marc was preparing to announce that the second hour had passed they caught sight of something in the water. It was coming their way. It made no noise and in the shadow of the cliffs its outline remained indistinct. It could have been the pirates searching for them.

Alex loosened his flashlight and his sidearm preparing for any eventuality. With a finger to his lips, he cautioned Marc to remain quiet.

A signal light blinked to life on the boat. Alex smiled at the message, "Alex wears pink tights". That would have been impossible for the pirates to fake. He responded. 'Kit gets a pass on eunuchhood'.

The craft turned in their direction becoming more distinct as it neared them. Alex kept his gun at the ready just the same. It soon came touched the shore. They stood and walked out to greet their friends.

"Where's the chest?" Kit asked looking up and down the bank.

Alex turned to Marc as if ignoring the others.

"The lad expresses no concern about our safety after our harrowing, near death experience. Just, 'where's the chest?'"

"I'm personally just too glad to see you two bickering over anything," Marc said. "That explosion. You obviously escaped it."

"Not only that, we – well, Connie – initiated it. He used a stick of TNT to blow the top of the cliff down into the entry channel. Don't know if it did enough to prevent passage but we're hopeful. At any rate we have a short term distraction underway. Now, where *is* the chest?"

Marc became the spokesman and related the decision to hide it.

"And you, of course, have a plan to retrieve it?" Kit asked.

"Not really. We were mostly into hiding it and saving our skins."

They climbed aboard the boat and moved on to where the chest hung submerged. Using an anchor inserted seven feet above the shore ledge, and calling on the pulley system once again, the chest was soon back on shore. The next task was to get it on board the boat.

"Will the mast hold the weight?" Kit asked.

"Should," Connie said.

"Whatever we do, we need to do it fast. Dawn is breaking," Kit said.

"Rig the pulleys to the mast," Alex said looking at Marc.

He was soon climbing the pole, the pulley assembly hanging from his belt. He wound the tie rope around the mast several times then tied it in place. He attached the pulley assembly and slid down.

"Good going *Monk*, I mean *Marc*," Kit joked.

As the mast took the weight, the ship tipped dramatically to starboard – shore side in that instance.

"Those of you onboard, keep your weight to the opposite side," Alex directed.

As the chest swung free, the boat tipped dangerously near the water line. Then, the boat swayed back and forth gradually stabilizing as the chest was settled onto the floor.

Kit had grown impatient.

"In the words of the famous exorcist, let's get the hell out of here."

Connie started the motor and they sped back toward Belem. Alex kept the binoculars focused to the rear.

"I suggest a hotel and about twenty four hours of sleep," Kit said. "Connie can't fly in his condition."

"I didn't realize I had a condition," Connie said.

"Exhaustion, enervation, lassitude, weariness, fatigue!"

"Oh. *That* condition. Yes. You're probably right."

"Just remembered," Marc said looking back. "We left my boat back there."

"Don't worry about it. We'll pay the owner double what it's worth."

"That seems generous. Since he loaned it to me, it will be a good deal more than he was expecting to make on that non-rental. Not sure how I'll explain losing a boat to my friend, however."

"Just tell him you were fighting pirates on a boot shaped island and escaped in a rain of gunfire," Kit said.

"You forgot the part about discovering treasure," Marc said.

"Figured he might hit you up for a donation to the special friend fund if he knew."

"Good thinking. You seem to do a lot of that by the way."

Alex entered the conversation.

"That was pretty good thinking Marc did up there tonight, guys. You should have seen him lowering that chest while swinging on a rope with bullets

whizzing around. Then he must have leaped ten meters out away from the cliff on the way into the river. What do you call that move, by the way?"

"That's the, *Please, God, let me see my mama one more time*, move."

"Every guy needs one of those," David said chuckling with the others."

With a few clandestine moves and the help of several black, plastic, trash bags, the chest was covered and moved into their rental van and soon onto the plane at the airport. Alex stayed on the plane. The others found accommodations at a nearby hotel.

The boys took one room; David and Connie another. After showers they met for a meal in the hotel restaurant. It was then to bed with alarms set for three p.m.

* * *

At noon, two days later, the Big Goose touched down at *Joao Pessoa*. Marc had questions about money so freely spent, the private executive jet, and what appeared to be permanent suites at the best hotel in the city, but he did not ask. He was learning all he really needed to know about them – good people doing good things.

After lunch Kit had a question for Marc.

"How do you feel about mingling in the nude with a bevy of beautiful females?"

"I have five sisters. Growing up we had one bathroom. Such mingling is nothing new to me. Not sure where you're going with it, however."

Kit walked to the rear window in the sitting room and pointed down at the pool.

"Ah! Mingling with beautiful females who are complete strangers you mean."

"Only *that* for a few minutes, usually."

"My parents are very liberal about such things – most Brazilians are. We have vacationed on the nude beach here every summer for as far back as I can remember. A very inexpensive vacation for a family."

"Would keep the wardrobe expenses to a minimum, I'd think," Kit said.

Marc smiled.

"Uncle David," Kit called into his room. "We're going to hit the pool for an hour or so, Okay? Then we can take up on map number seven where we left off on the plane."

"Fine. I need to go over and run a few things by Father A anyway. Alex is helping Connie go over the plane with a fine tooth comb making her ready for the next leg in our adventure."

"Meet you back here about two, then."

Kit left his sling in the room having decided not to go with the sympathy approach. With Marc's help they replaced the gauze bandage with one, large, flesh colored, band aide.

"Not sure you actually qualify as 'nude' wearing that bandage," Marc said with a grin.

"This is the pool, not the beach. Partial is acceptable here."

They chuckled themselves out the door.

They were back by two o'clock. David was sitting at the table making notes. The map lay beside his papers.

"How did the sightseeing go?"

"I suppose you'd have to ask the girls," Kit quipped. "From all the attention Marc got, I felt like the ugly stepsister.

Marc turned to David.

"Perhaps you need to have that birds and bees talk with him *one* more time."

Smiling, Kit picked up the map and took a seat across the table from his uncle. Marc sat beside him. Kit spoke.

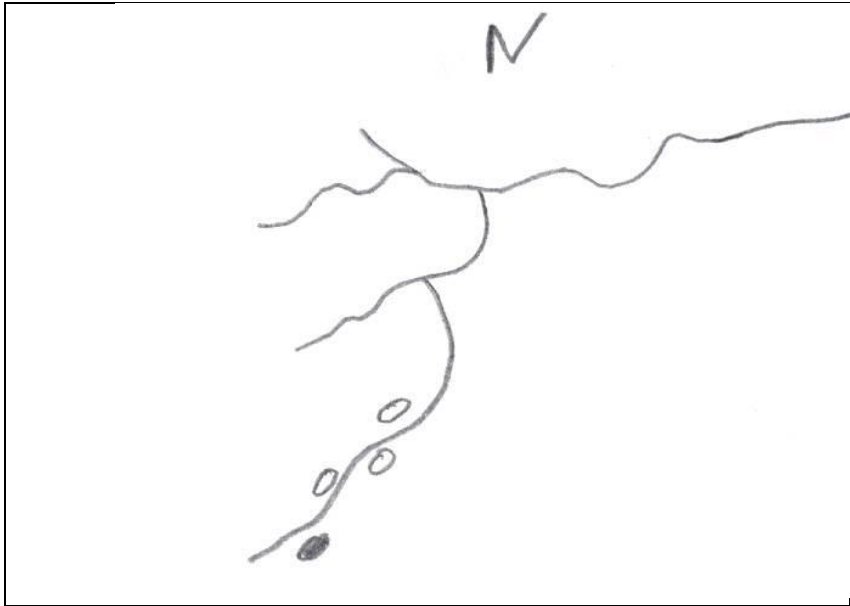
"A series of wavy lines – one, two, three, four to be specific – joined together at odd places. Then there's a series of four ovals alternating alongside the bottom line – two above and two below. The lowest one is solid while the others are open in the center."

"Down here I see the outline of a comic book rendering of a crocodile," Marc said tracing the outline with his finger.

"Perhaps he is underwater chasing a snake – that wavy line here, touching his nose," Kit said.

They both realized the exchange had merely been a distraction from the more serious business.

"I was thinking rivers," David said"



Map of the Four Eggs

"We have so many – hundreds and hundreds," Marc said.

"If LaPique took time to put them on this map they must be unique in some way," Kit said. "Their arrangement and those four ovals are the only clues. They have to be sufficient."

"How about a shape recognition with rivers as the search topic?" David suggested.

"I'll give it a try but have my doubts. If they are rivers, I doubt if they are complete so the program probably won't recognize anything."

After a few minutes at the laptop Kit had little to offer.

"This lower line was recognized at a seventy percent probability as being a complete river – the *Ind*. Problem is, I can find no river named the *Ind* in Brazil."

"I have an idea. My geography professor from college – Professor Juarez. Let me make a call or two and see if I can locate him. He knows every ant hill in the country."

It took six calls – all on Kit's phone since Marc's refused to respond to all attempts at resuscitation. He was on the line with his professor summarizing the conversation to the others.

"Get up a map of the rivers in the Amazon Basin. ... Zoom in at a point about half way across the country. ... Follow the *Amazon* to the city of *Manaus*. ... Follow the south fork. ... The *Uruca* parallels it just to the north and is the center of a relatively recently discovered, massive, natural gas depository. ... You will come upon the *Purus River* which enters from the south. Take that. ... It soon curves sharply to the south west. ... A small stream – narrow and shallow, not

short – enters from the south at about a hundred miles. That is the *Ind*. The stream probably won't be labeled because it is in all ways insignificant to any but the *Indios* who still inhabit the region. It's close to two hundred miles long."

The professor remained on the line.

"Indios?" Kit asked Marc.

"Our term for any of the *poros indigenus* – the indigenous people of the western section of the country."

"I think I have it here," Kit said. "Let me first, print it so we can mark it."

David had a question:

"Ask the professor what is known about the *Indios* in that section – down by the four ovals."

The question was relayed.

"He will email us an article about them – the *Avani*. Little is known of them; apparently anthropologists who drop in to say hi never come back. They are included under the Protection from Influence Act – outsiders are prohibited from intentionally making contact or trying to do business or convert them and such."

"Good folks to stay clear of, I suppose," David said.

Marc thanked the professor and closed his phone.

"Let's see, I assume there is an airport at Manaus," Kit said thinking out loud. . . . "Yes. We fly there and then rent a boat?"

"Sounds sound to me," David said realizing any humor that may have once been associated with that well-worn response was long gone.

Kit found and offered bits and pieces of general information.

"Surprisingly, not so hot in the shade during the day – about eighty – but can drop into the fifties and sixties at night. I also have something about the *Avani*. No footnotes so there's no way to establish its reliability. One thing jumps out at me, however. Their religion prohibits covering any part of the body for any reason. They believe coverings prohibit the Universal Spirit from moving freely among them. When they come upon someone who is clothed they kill him immediately and then sever those parts of the body that are uncovered and give them a proper, religious burial. The rest – the clothed portion – is left for the animals to feed on."

"You should be right at home, Kit," Mark said. "I've noticed you and clothing part company at every possible moment."

"Kit grinned. *Dudaphobia!* I inherited it from my uncle."

"Genetic transmission must take place in an odd way up in the States. Down here uncles have very little to do with that – except on the soap operas."

"I didn't see *you* clamoring to get dressed when we arrived back here from the pool."

Marc shrugged and dropped it as unimportant.

Kit got Connie on the phone.

"*Manaus*. East and slightly north of here about twenty two hundred miles. About six hours by Goose, I imagine. Can we fly out today?"

"Let me check my gadget here. Lighted airport – oh, looks to be a pretty nice airport, in fact. The Goose is ready to go. Take me ten minutes to file a flight plan. Can leave by six if you can get your pants on by then."

"Why is everybody suddenly so concerned about my state of dress or undress? We will need a boat similar to the last one – with room for five and maybe with a roof. It's always raining in the rain forest you know."

"Perhaps that's how it got its name," Connie said.

Kit ignored the comment and proceeded.

"Need supplies for a week. You two just bring your usual bags of tricks; they've served us well in the past. There's a slight chance we may run into some natives who are not inclined to let visitors live. Probably fewer than a hundred total but they have been around for thousands of years so must have perfected effective survival skills of *some* kind. And, bring lots of insect repellent – those natives get really nasty when they run across people wearing clothing."

David made hotel reservations. Alex arranged for a boat. Kit and Marc found some pants.

"We will arrive shortly after midnight," Connie announced as they gathered in the cabin and stowed their belongings."

Kit checked the food supply. He nodded his approval. Connie and Alex moved into the cockpit. The others strapped into chairs. The Goose was soon airborne.

"Better take in the scenery now," David suggested, for the moment sounding like a parent. "It will soon be dark."

The email from the professor had little to add to the information Kit had rounded up but did confirm the essence of his findings. The interesting addition was that the Avani held frequent purification rituals – before marriages, before births, before burials, to celebrate coming of age ceremonies, and on and on down a long list. In preparation for those ceremonies they rubbed white ash onto each other. Light skin was a sign of innate goodness. Families sought light skinned wives for their sons. Marriages were arranged and took place at twelve for the male and nine for the female – necessary since life expectancy was reportedly under forty years.

Of more interest for the treasure hunt was the probable identification of the four ovals known locally as *os quatro ovos de Harpia Harpyja* – *the four Harpy Eagle's Eggs*. The Harpy Eagle is the largest bird of prey in the world – a wing span of three meters, and it stands nearly one meter from head to tail. It regularly plucks monkeys and sloths from tree branches and has them for supper.

"Perhaps the Eagle will be more of a force to reckon with than the Avani," David said.

"It is becoming a rare species in inhabited areas. Seems its huge feathers command a premium price among tourists. Maybe we will luck out," Kit said.

"See what you can find out about those four eggs," David said.

Kit got back to work on the web.

"They are apparently natural rock outcroppings averaging about forty feet long, fifteen high and twenty wide. Fairly consistent from one to another. Ah! Here! It seems only the northern three are actually natural. The southernmost egg is manmade. The lore is that a tribe – now extinct at the hands of the Avani – was suspicious about groups of three so they went about building a fourth to appease the gods and assure themselves safety and longevity. That one sure didn't seem to work real well for them. Get this. The feud between tribes was over the dead tribe's insistence that their god wanted people to keep the top of their head covered at all times – to keep their soul's intact. The Avani's beliefs allowed them to neither do that themselves nor allow others to do it, so they methodically killed off the *hat people*."

"A burial ground," David asked.

"No mention of it. Just a gigantic undertaking. Can you imagine how many baskets of earth they had to move? It must have taken the larger part of a generation to accomplish it."

"*That* is the oval that is shaded in, correct?" Mark asked.

"Right," Kit said.

"And the dot on the map has, up to now at least, represented the location of the treasure?"

"Yes. At least in a general way, David explained. "None of the maps have ever actually spelled it out precisely. It's been a matter of using our wits to figure it out – like back at the mound where we met."

"I'm fascinated by the Avani and the Cap People," Kit said. "It is as if their relationship encapsulates mankind's age old struggle to survive amid the variations in beliefs between tribes – religions – ethnic groups – countries."

"Interesting," David said. "It does appear to be that. Both groups knew *they* were right, of course, because their spiritual leaders had told them how their god or gods wanted them to dress. There was *no* room for doubt. What was right *parochially* was right *universally*. Absolutely no room for discussion. No reason to doubt one's own belief – doubt could not conceivably be associated with your own religious philosophy."

"It persists to this very day," Kit said. "How often have we spoken of it? Today it is usually not as simple as head covering or not although there are two closely related stories about the church in which I grew up – well both Uncle David and I. Story one: In the early nineteen hundreds the church split over whether the women had to wear prayer coverings on their heads all day Sunday or just during the church service. Story two: In the nineteen thirties it split again over which way one should face in the stream when getting baptized – upstream

or downstream."

"That seems odd to me, raised a Catholic," Marc said. "Not much change in the past thousand years – at least not here. I understand there are rebel priests and congregations in the States. That really could not happen here."

"Are you suggesting that *not* having changed is a *good* thing?" Kit asked.

"Yes. The faithful need the traditions to sustain their belief. I draw great strength from knowing fifty plus generations have found the beliefs of my church to make sense and provide guidance for living good lives. Any change is like a crack in a dike. If part of it can be successfully challenged then why not all of it. It provides my basic sense of security."

"But I don't see you going out and harming others who don't share your beliefs," Kit said.

"Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord. That is not my duty. Hell awaits the nonbelievers and non-repentant."

"So, David and I will be dispatched to hell since we don't believe the way you do?"

"It has recently become a most troublesome problem for me. I have to admit that I've only known a handful of people who weren't also Catholic. I've never had to face this question up close and personal. If I am true to my faith – which is all I can be – I have to say yes, you will live out eternity in hell."

"So, any good deeds we do, or the fact that we thoughtfully go about living a helpful and compassionate, generous life, doesn't enter into the equation in any way."

"Like I said. It is becoming bothersome. *Catholics* who live that way go to heaven. *Catholics* who don't and are not repentant go to hell. That is all pretty neat, you see. But non-Catholics present a problem. I have recently talked with a priest about it. He says the position of my church is that the first requirement for entry into heaven is being a practicing, devout, Catholic. All those other qualifiers kick in *after* that."

"How do you handle the fact that the Muslims believe essentially the same, except it is the acceptance of Muslim beliefs that become that first requirement? Can a billion Muslims be that wrong?"

"Apparently. I don't know. I have never had reason to confront these issues before. I've lived my life trying to be a good Christian, which has always meant being a good Catholic. I think I have been. It was all so simple, before. There *is* one way to ease my mind completely about the spiritual future of you two."

"What's that," Kit asked.

"Convert. I'm sure Father Angelico would be pleased to officiate."

"Nice try. No thanks. You and we will just have to agree to disagree in this area, I guess."

"You are so difficult to figure out," Marc said frowning and shaking his

head.

"Here's an exercise you might want to try some time," David said not wanting to leave the boy completely up in the air. "Outline how would choose to live your life if there were no God, no spiritual realm, no heaven or hell, and state how you came to those conclusions."

"And do what with the outcome?" Marc asked.

"It will be self-evident in the end," David said.

"That's philosophy professor talk meaning I don't want to influence the outcome of your mental rumination," Kit explained as an aside.

Marc presented a faint smile, clearly unsettled in a way he had never been before. It disturbed him. That pleased Kit and David though they felt compassion for his discomfort. They were not picking on Catholics – the same premises had to be addressed by the Methodist, Shinto, Muslim, Avanti, atheists, or what have you. One's beliefs have to stand up to the *toughest* scrutiny otherwise one is clearly moving down an inappropriate philosophic path.

Marc turned the recliner and looked out the window. Kit returned to the computer desk and continued his research. David leaned back in his chair in the hope a nap would soon overtake him.

* * *

It was after one thirty when they entered their rooms; one for Connie and Alex and one, with an extra rollaway bed, for the other three.

The boys had snacked during the trip and David wasn't hungry so they opted for showers and bed. The Alarms were set for seven.

After breakfast they stopped by the wharf to check out the boat Alex had reserved. It was just as ordered. Not as fast as the last one but a bit wider and longer and had built in fuel reserve tanks. There was no sail and the flat roof with its roll-down canvas sides, would provide sufficient protection from the frequent downpours.

The boat was loaded and at eight thirty sharp Connie was piloting them out into the famous, slowly moving, *Amazon River*. They were headed upstream. The boat managed twenty knots with ease. They settled in.

It turned out to be closer to two hundred miles to the mouth of the first turn off – the *Purus*, itself a significant river with its headwaters in the mountains clear across the country near the border with Bolivia.

At six thirty Alex turned them south into the narrower tributary. The water was much clearer and flowed faster into the pug-nosed bow of their boat. Tall trees grew right down to the shore and formed a partial canopy so thick that it only offered light through a narrow strip between the never ending rows of green foliage.

The water reflected the green from the leaves.

"I assume we keep going until we find the big eggs," Alex said.

David nodded.

"Then, I'm ready for grub and some shut eye. We need to establish shifts. Who wants to steer this thing?"

"I'll take my shift," Marc offered. "Never done such a thing before, however."

"Stay to the center of the river," Alex said. "Just push the rudder stick one way or another. No doughnuts, now!"

He smiled thinking that just might make for some pretty cool fun.

They all ate. The light from above gradually dimmed. Occasionally a playful fish would fly a few inches out of the water, the droplets from its splash glistening as it gathered the few remaining beams of daylight.

"It is so beautiful, isn't it?" Kit said moving to the seat at the rear next to Marc.

Mark nodded.

"Apple?"

"Thanks."

"You okay about our conversation earlier?"

"No. But I'm coming to see I probably shouldn't be okay about it. It's very difficult to challenge your own certainties."

"Takes more guts than anything I know. Most folks just aren't strong enough to do it."

"I find that it would be very easy to just continue saying I know I'm right and leave it at that."

"It is one alternative lots of folks apparently seem to find satisfactory."

Silence overtook the boat – except for the birds, the quiet rhythm of the motor, and the crisp sounds of determined apple munching.

David and Alex took to the mattresses. Connie remained deep in thought up front.

"It's another hundred and fifty miles to the mouth of the *Ind* river," Kit offered.

"It's likely to be much smaller than this one," Marc said. "How far on the *Ind* to the big eggs?"

"I figure about a hundred miles. Since we can't find the river on actual maps I've had to estimate it from the LaPique map. That may not be to scale although the others have been very close."

"I assume accuracy was very important to navigators who sailed the open seas with no landmarks to guide them," Mark said thoughtfully.

"I'm sure that's right. Hard to know, however, if it will be accurate in length or accurate in detail. It may not be both," Kit pointed out.

"I hadn't thought of those alternatives for 'accurate'. You think of options all the time, don't you?"

Kit nodded.

"I owe that to Uncle David. He's never let me stop at the first reasonable

solution that comes to mind. He's not even content with merely finding *both* sides to an issue – he looks for as many sides as he can find."

"The two of you approach thinking differently from any people I've ever known. It's hard to picture either of you being happy making small talk at a party."

"We might be, but the others at the party just might be blown away."

"I've always had a deep need to know how things were for sure," Marc went on. "Do you know what I mean? I don't like options. I don't like possibilities beyond what I believe is true. It may be why I chose to study languages. Language is language is language. Not much chance for major changes in my lifetime. It's secure. I need answers. I get extremely anxious when any of my answers begin to falter. I find myself making excuses so I can hold onto the old ones. . . . I must sound like the dullest person you've ever met."

"No, interestingly, I grew up with dozens of yous back in my little Midwestern town. I understand you yous pretty well, I think. It's one reason I'm not going to the college there. Uncle David thinks I need to find other minds that will challenge my beliefs and help me forge more realistic, all-encompassing ones. I'm so eager to get there and hear what the others have to say I can taste it."

"I have spent my life studying and listening to find out what my church says are the proper beliefs for me to hold. You have spent your life searching for new possibilities to add into your ever changing, ever expanding beliefs."

Kit nodded. Marc continued with his thought.

"We are about as different in that way as two folks can be, I suppose."

"We are. Isn't that great? We have so much to learn from each other."

"To me it's *not* great, you understand. Don't get me wrong. I really like you. We could be best friends if we were to have time together. But I'd never want to share ideas with an eye toward change. The thought of it makes me queasy in my stomach."

Kit nodded again, understanding what he was saying but unable to understand how people could grow up so willing to wallow in possible ignorance for an entire lifetime.

"If we were to be together, would you try to convert me, Kit?"

"Convert you to what? I have few certainties. To a more open approach to possibilities, perhaps. I don't think I'd set out with purpose to do that. You're clearly a wonderful person. I'd never want to disrupt that. You probably feel sorry for me for not having any certainties to bring me comfort. I probably feel sorry for you because you are unable to honestly examine the certainties that bring you comfort. But convert you? No. People can't help but rub off on each other I suppose. We gather change without realizing it's happening."

"Okay then," Marc said smiling. "We can refer to our friendship as *Heads and Tails*."

“So long as we never try to define who is which.”

“Agreed.”

They shook an exaggerated, single, shake and returned to their own thoughts.

At one o'clock Alex's watch alarm beeped. He moved to the back of the boat where Kit had taken over steering duties. Marc had opted for a mattress several hours earlier.

“The shoulder holding up okay?” He asked taking a seat beside Kit. “I see you've given up the sling.”

“Yeah. Doing better than I anticipated, actually.”

“Not the bottom line answer I need, Son.”

“Still hurts. I can use it in a pinch. Maybe eighty percent. I've been working it out.”

“I've noticed. That's good. Muscle grows best when it thinks it's needed.”

“You just personified muscles, you know.”

He let the comment pass with a raised eyebrow.

“We should be coming upon the mouth of the *Ind* most any time now, assuming you and Marc didn't stop off to entertain any young ladies along the way.”

“No ladies. No entertainment. Steady to the course at twenty knots.”

“You figure about five hours – a hundred miles – on the *Ind* to the vicinity of the big eggs?” Alex asked.

“It's really hard to know. The map has been closely representative of distance up to here. I'm thinking it may not be from now on. If those mounds had been drawn to scale they would each be thirty miles long. As the need for detail increases the scale suffers. It could be ten miles or a hundred.”

“That's a good enough answer. As I recall the first one will be on our right and is at the water's edge.”

“It's how it is depicted, at least,” Kit said nodding. “I'm going to suggest we move right on upstream to the fourth one – the egg that is shaded on the map. It will be to our left and I assume will be covered in foliage of some kind, it being a big pile of earth.”

Connie turned in and David awakened.

“We are coming upon the *Ind's* mouth, I think,” Kit said. “See the white capped water swirling up out there. Must be signaling the entrance of water from a faster flowing stream. Now it becomes a dilemma.”

“What becomes a dilemma?” David asked.

“To shed clothes and get buried in one piece or forgo that by remaining clothed but keeping warm. The info was right. These nights get cold.”

“Let's roll down the canvases on the sides and back,” Alex said. “We can do our surveillance out through the front. It will stay much warmer in here that way – keep the heat of the engine in and shield us from any prying eyes along

the bank. I should have suggested it earlier.”

“I’m going to let you take the wheel, Alex. Seems to be a two arm operation in the swifter current.”

Once the canvases had been unrolled and tied in place David spoke to Kit.

“Why don’t you catch some shut eye,” he suggested. “Promise to wake you at the first sighting of an egg or naked native, whichever comes first.”

The turbulence subsided once they were a hundred yards up into the *Ind*. It was narrower and looked to be deeper. It flowed faster. The motor had to be stepped up a notch to maintain twenty knots against the increased flow.

“Kit says there’s really no way of telling how far upstream the eggs may be,” Alex said.

David nodded.

“I imagine the accuracy of the scale dwindles as the need for detail increases. I do hope we get to view some of the Avani.”

“From a safe distance will suit me just fine,” Alex said.

David smiled and continued.

“Most of the indigenous tribes down here use blowguns as their only weapon across distances. Spears for close combat.”

“How reassuring,” Alex said. “I brought a variety of ammunition not knowing what we might encounter. There’s an elephant gun incase T-Rex comes clamoring out of the jungle. I have clips with incendiaries for the hand guns in case we need to scare the hell out of some Indios bent on relieving us of our souls.

“Or, s-o-l-e-s, if you’re wearing shoes.”

Alex smiled acknowledging the foot covering humor.

“I have the *real* stuff, too, should we need it. All in color coded clips.”

The thought of having to protect themselves in that way shifted David into his silent mode. They sailed on for nearly an hour with out speaking.

“Egg one, I think,” Alex said pointing to get David’s attention.

He looked through the binoculars and nodded. It was about fifty yards to the right.

“Kit. Egg one,” David said shaking the boy’s good shoulder.

He sat up and unceremoniously poked Marc in the back.

“First egg, *Head or Tail*.”

Marc rolled over onto his back.

“Thank’s for the heads up, *H or T*.”

Kit nodded.

“That’s good – ‘H or T’ – Manageable yet communicative. Could even make it *Atchortee*, I suppose for complete simplicity.”

He was trying to work a rise out of David. None surfaced.

“Over there,” David said.

They were by then close enough to get a good view without binoculars. The boys lifted the canvas so they could get the whole picture. Alex reduced their speed.

“Hard to imagine how something that huge could be just sitting there so out of context from every other geological feature in the area,” Kit said.

“Super, giant, rock laying eagles,” Marc said. “My truth and I will stick by it.”

He and Kit shared a nod, a smile, and a knowing glance. It would remain a private matter between the newly birthed *Atchortee brothers*.

“Shhhhh! Alex said.

He pointed to the opposite bank where three, short, stocky, men stood, their long, blow guns pointed directly at the boat.

Thud!

Thud!

Thud!

The canvas on the left side was suddenly home to the points of three darts – then six, nine, twelve.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alex moved the throttle full open and admonished the others to stay clear of the rear canvas. There were three more hits before the boat moved out of range.

“Well, we learned one valuable thing,” Kit offered, “They are killer marksmen.”

“Perhaps another adjective would have been in better taste,” Marc said. “I’m not sure whether to be distressed by the terror I’m feeling or grateful for the rush it produced. My life has been short on such rushes.”

The others laughed.

“I’m being serious!”

“We know,” Kit said. “Otherwise it really wouldn’t be so funny.”

Marc managed a grin but it didn’t change his sincere quandary.

“Have they seen motor driven boats before, do you suppose?” Kit asked. He was open for responses from anybody and would even entertain pure speculation.

“You’d think so,” David said. “Probably very few, though, the way this area is touted as being kept so completely isolated from the twenty first century.”

“What will they do next?” Marc asked.

“Partly depends on how far we have to travel away from them before we come upon our *pseudo egg of interest*,” Alex offered.

They smiled at his humorous label and nodded all around understanding it was a question that really could not be answered even through wild speculation. Kit furnished what additional information he had found.

“Their range is not known. They are thought to stick close to several, long established, small villages – apparently a single, very large, round, hut which is shared by all villagers. There was one photograph of such a structure circa 1925. How far those hut-villages are apart is not known. They eat fruits and veggies but favor monkey roasted over an open fire in the center of their hut. The boys are circumcised on their twelfth birthday in a terrifying, coming of age, ceremony. His father stands over him with a spear. If the boy so much as offers a peep or winces in pain during the purposefully painful process his father thrusts

the spear into his son's heart. Those that survive have in effect bettered their fathers and proved their manhood. As soon as things are healed the boy is married to a younger girl of his parent's choosing. There is no divorce. During generations when there are too many females a boy will take several wives at the time he is married. Apparently a significant number of boys don't survive the coming of age ceremony. Estimates of the current total population range from fifty to a hundred and fifty."

The darts were removed from the canvas with care, the assumption being that they were poisoned – curare, most likely. Kit saved them in a plastic zip bag.

"We could be in big trouble for allowing them to shoot at us," Marc said.

His wording seemed humorous. It turned out not to be.

"The law is strict. The protected Indios have *all* rights when contact is made with outsiders. Outsiders are prohibited from mingling with or molesting them in any way. If we get killed it will be our fault not theirs."

Alex interrupted, pointing to the left shore.

"The second egg. I'm thinking we're just about at the spot we came to examine."

"Not nearly as far up river as I estimated," Kit said. "Obviously scale has been given up for detail in this last leg of the map. How far apart were they do you think?"

"Maybe ten miles," Alex said.

"So if that remains constant we could be thirty or so miles upstream from these denuded dudes who shot at us."

"All we can do is wait and see. At any rate we probably won't reach it until after daybreak."

"Easier targets, I suppose," Kit said. "I'm opting for another forty winks. Please keep me posted."

Dawn came, though it had only a modest effect on the amount of light under the canopy of trees, which at that point completely spanned the river. By eight o'clock things had improved and an eerie, shadowless, illumination had set in. At eight thirty the final egg came into view. It was more than fifty miles from where the Avani had been encountered. Alex roused all those who remained asleep.

He selected a spot next to the mound to moor the boat, pointing the craft back down stream in case a quick retreat seemed prudent.

"High boots," he said not really as a suggestion. "There are undoubtedly snakes and other low profile creatures. Everybody carry a good sized stick for defense in case you encounter something. There will be tick-like insects that fall from trees so a cap would be a good addition to your wardrobe. Other than that you're on your own. We have two machetes here. I'll use one. The other will be available as needed."

They were soon on land and headed toward the huge mound of dirt. As Kit predicted it was overgrown with a wide variety of vegetation. Had they not been specifically looking for it, they might have missed it.

"Anybody have any idea what we're looking for?" Marc asked somewhat predictably. His need for structure easily surfaced.

"Not really," David said. "Just search the area and see if something pops up that seems out of place."

"I'd feel better if we had one of us as lookout, just in case those Avani have discovered a worm hole or something that might have transported them or their cousins here," Kit said.

"I'll take watch," Connie said.

He made his way to the top of the mound. The others began circling it. They searched the ground ahead of them, took a few more steps, and then stopped to survey up and down the little hill from that new perspective.

Twice around and still nothing.

"Does it appear to you guys that this thing is much more pointed on the west than on the east end?" asked Kit.

"It does," David said.

He called up to Connie.

"What about that? From up there does one end look more pointed than the other?"

Connie looked east and then west.

"Actually it looks to be iron shaped, blunt on the east and pointed on the west."

"What are you thinking, Kit?" David asked.

"Maybe it's not the mound but something out beyond in the direction it is pointing."

"Very interesting. Grasshopper reconfigures the game."

Marc looked puzzled.

"The Grasshopper thing?" Kit asked.

Marc nodded.

"From an old American TV show, *Kung Foo*. In flashbacks, the Oriental Master would refer to the young boy in training as *Grasshopper*. Somehow it started up between my Uncle and me. We never know how things like that begin with us."

"Thank you, *Atchortee*. It all comes clear."

They bowed, slightly, toward each other, palms pressed together prayerfully at their chests.

"I think one of those ticks may have drilled into their brains already," Alex said as a forceful aside to David.

Then he turned and began cutting a path west from the point of the mound. At ten meters his machete hit something causing him to drop it and

shake his hand as if in pain.

“What is it?” Kit asked.

“Are you okay?” Marc asked.

“Not sure on either count,” He answered. “May have sprained a wrist. Nothing worse than that, I’m sure.”

By then, the boys were pulling away the tall grass with gloved hands.

“A sculpture of a chest about twice life size?”

It was a statement from Kit, the intonation clearly imbuing it with questions.

“Looks to be just that,” David said.

Alex felt it and walked around it. He rapped one place then another.

“Actually a cement casting but certainly in the shape of an oversized chest – reminiscent of those we’ve been running across.”

“Probably weighs better than seven hundred pounds if it’s solid,” Alex said.

“Four feet long, two and a half wide, and at least two feet tall,” David said continuing the description to further identify the object confronting them.

“Probably should look a bit further just to see if there may be anything else out there,” Kit said picking up the machete.

“I’ve always wanted to try using one of those things,” Marc said wrenching it from Kit. Marc knew his friend had no business trying to wield it.

Everyone understood what had just happened; no one spoke of it.

Ten minutes later the boys returned to the chest with nothing to report but grass, spiders, and lizards. Alex was tapping here and there and David had his ear to the surface listening.

“I think we’ve established it is at least partially hollow,” David said. “It may be a shell containing the treasure or some vessel that contains it.”

“Like another chest?” Kit asked.

“That’s possible.”

“Need an X-ray machine,” Marc said.

“*That* I don’t have in my backpack,” Alex said.

“How could they have carried it here, something that heavy?” Marc asked.

“A large raft could carry it,” Alex said.

“Or, it could have been built here on site,” David suggested.

Alex nodded.

“Now we have to think about how it may be booby trapped,” Kit said.

“Unless there is something underneath it, there really isn’t much room for anything, is there?” Marc said.

“That would seem to be true,” David said. “We need to think like LaPique, using only what he could have known about back in the late seventeen hundreds. No plastic explosives. No ammunition that could have remained intact through two centuries. Nothing falling from the trees above – those are probably new,

twice over, since then.”

“He might have used the trees that were here at the time knowing they would be around for several decades at least,” Marc offered.

“An interesting idea,” David said. “Nice job of getting inside the old boy’s head.”

He turned to Alex.

“How would you react to the idea of using the sledge hammer on this thing and see if we can knock off the outer shell?”

“If it were not too vigorous an attempt at first until we determine how it is constructed. I’ve been wondering if perhaps the cement facade was for the sole purpose of protecting the treasure against the ravages of the rainforest.”

“Marc and I will go back to the boat and get the tools,” Kit said. “What shall we bring?”

“The sledge, several smaller hammers, and a set of rock chisels.”

When they returned their shirts were hanging looped through their belts. They had the required equipment and reeked of bug repellent.

“It’s Big Al’s time alone with this thing, gentlemen,” Alex said. “Stand back by the egg.”

They complied knowing it was nonnegotiable.

He began with a smaller hammer, tapping on the front, right, corner. The old cement crumbled easily and fell away.

“I believe we have a wooden chest that has been cast inside the concrete likeness,” he said after a few minutes. “I also believe it is safe for you to come back. Let’s continue chipping away until we have the lid exposed down just past its lip onto the side of the chest.”

Alex worked with the larger hammer. Marc and David began with the smaller ones. The coat of tar on the chest made it easy to separate large pieces of the cement. Twenty minutes later the top was free. It was locked.

“A bit of overkill there, wouldn’t you say,” Kit said pointing at the lock.

Alex severed it and pulled it away. He did not flip up the hasp to free it for opening.

“What’s the stall here?” Kit asked impatiently.

“Caution, my boy. We have seen nothing that resembles a booby trap and yet we know by now that is a hallmark of LaPique’s operations. Let’s pause here and let David engage that *gadgorific* head of his. Any ideas?”

“Just the one I’m sure you all have also. We open the lid and something all quite deadly confronts us. It is a far larger chest than we have run across before. That could mean it holds more treasure or it could mean the extra space inside was set aside to hold a surprise. I’m voting for the latter. Beyond that the possibilities are limitless.”

“Considering the spot he chose here,” Marc said. “Out of *all* the spots he could have selected in Brazil – I’m wondering if something about the Avani will

play a part.”

“Naked treasure?” Kit said offering a witticism to make up for his lack of actual help on the chest.

That received no direct acknowledgement.

“Interesting,” David said.

“You really think naked treasure is interesting?” Kit said trying to wring at least one chuckle from his previous, dead on arrival, attempt at humor.

His offering received three thumbs down. He shrugged still thinking it had been very funny.

“There are only two processes left,” David said. “Opening the chest – which consists of flipping up the hasp and raising the lid – and then removing the treasure. At one of those steps the booby trap, if there is one, will be triggered.”

The strategy session was interrupted by a quiet, hand-cupped, call from Connie still crouched atop the mound.

“We may have company, guys. There is movement of some kind about thirty meters to the east and in ten from the river. Probably not monkeys – *they* stay upstairs. Too large for the little creatures we’ve encountered up to now, down here.”

“Naked time,” Kit said.

He and Marc stripped in a panic. The others removed their hats and shirts, then waited to see what would transpire. Connie knelt, hidden in the high grass on top of the mound. The rest moved behind it. Alex spoke.

“If it is the Avani I’ll fire several incendiary bullets in their direction. They not only show a tracer but explode, relatively harmlessly, like a roman candle upon impact. Let’s see if that doesn’t send them scampering. If it is a small group – six or fewer – Connie will use his blue clip which fires tiny darts of our own that immediately induce sleep. Larger groups will receive sleeping gas slugs. So, pull those gas masks out of your backpacks.”

They did as instructed and waited – and waited – and waited.

“It’s been fifteen minutes,” Kit said.

“No more movement,” Connie said in response.

“Connie,” Alex called. “Let’s fire several rounds of the gas into that area. If they are there, we *will* see movement. It burns the eyes as well.”

They each fired three rounds covering an arc fifty feet wide. There was no response of any kind – well numerous birds and a few monkeys from up above did express their displeasure with the disruption of their routine.

In the still air the gas did not return to attack them.

“Kit, how about you join Connie up there and add a couple more eyes?” Alex said. “I’m sure those guys can climb trees with the best of the monkeys so make it three sixty horizontal and one eighty vertical.”

Kit climbed the mound wishing he had left his boots on.

Marc took time to slip back into his.

“First we flip up the hasp,” Alex said. “I’ll tie a knife to the end of a long pole and approach it from the back of the hasp. I’ll pull it out and then turn it up on its hinge. If nothing happens we will proceed to opening the lid.”

With the knife in place he turned it, forcing the hasp bar out and free from the side of the chest. After several attempts he had it freed from the latch loop and standing up back against the lid. Nothing happened. They waited for some delayed reaction. It didn’t occur.

“Phase two,” David said. “I have a suggestion if you’re looking?”

“Let’s hear it,” Alex said.

“We cut three branches and make Y-shaped stakes. We cut them so the bottom of the V on the Y is slightly higher than the bottom of the lip on the lid. We find or cut three long, sturdy, sticks to use as pry bars. Then, we lay the poles in those Vs and place the end under the lip. Together, we lift the lid by pressing down on the rear of the pry bars.”

“That should work.”

In a few minutes the arrangement was set.

“Begin gently and slowly,” Alex cautioned.

They began. It was stuck in place.

“Rock the pry bars up and down,” David suggested. “See if we can break free from whatever has cemented it closed.”

“The tar, most likely,” Alex offered.

Gradually it became free and with patience the lid was coxed open – not fully open but the lower edge of the lip was open even with the top of the chest.

“We need to insert a phase here, I think,” Alex said. “Let’s find a four meter stick to use in pushing the lid open the rest of the way.”

Something hit the ground next to Marc.

“Scatter and belly down!” Alex called out.

Comically, Marc was immediately out of his boots, *then* on his face.

Another object landed close to the chest. Before the siege was a minute old there had been a dozen such missiles hurled in their direction.

It was Marc who spoke first.

“The missiles are hard, green, bananas. Probably not lethal.”

He picked one up and tossed it to David who was still face down in the grass.

“What can you guys see, Kit?” David called out.

“Believe it or not it’s something up there just monkeying around.”

“I assume that’s Kit Code for an attack from a family of monkeys probably unhappy by our presence in their territory,” Marc said.

“You’re good!” David said.

“I’m *relieved*, you mean!”

“Yeah. Me, too,” Kit said, inserting himself into the exchange. “And don’t worry, Unc. I’m going to put you in for combat pay – Bravery in the face of a

brutal banana barrage.”

“You guys are either amazing or insane,” Marc said. “Kit’s up there making wise cracks while you know he’s scared out of his mind. I imagine he’d have wet himself had he been wearing pants.”

“Speaking from personal experience, there, are you?” David joked.

“Could be. No one will ever know out here in this tall, moist, grass.”

The steady bombardment stopped although an occasional green projectile came there way as if to remind them they could be taken out at any moment. Alex rigged the long stick and motioned the others back to the mound. He eased the lid back, surprised at what a significant effort it took to raise a simple, wooden, lid.

Again nothing happened – not immediately, at least. Alex remained crouched twelve feet away, cautiously waiting. It all happened within five seconds – perhaps one; time has a way of extending itself in such situations.

There would later be some discussion as to whether it was a *swoosh* or a *zing* but what took place would not be disputed. A dozen small, Avani darts launched ten feet into the air – some straight up, some veering to the right, some to the left, and some to the front.

“What was that?” Kit asked, it having been a blur from his position.

“An aerial attack from inside the chest,” Marc said. “A bunch of darts spreading out in all directions.”

“Ouch!” Kit said wincing. “Anybody hit?”

“We’re all fine.”

“I know *that* but was anybody hit?”

“There he goes again with the jokes. I truly don’t understand the kid, David. I truly don’t!”

Alex approached the chest.

“Do you want to guess or just come and look, David.”

“Let me offer an idea first. The container is not deep enough to contain crossbows or even small bows like we encountered before. An explosive charge like in fireworks is out of the question – too much time has passed and there was no noise. Avani darts are air powered. I imagine that when the lid was raised it worked a piston that forced air into a bladder with connections to the dart tubes. There would have to be some way of releasing the pressure once it had been built up sufficiently in the bladder – a piece of material that could hold the pressure for a moment but not beyond a certain time or pressure level. The air was suddenly released with great force and the darts shot out. It is amazing he could engineer it to have

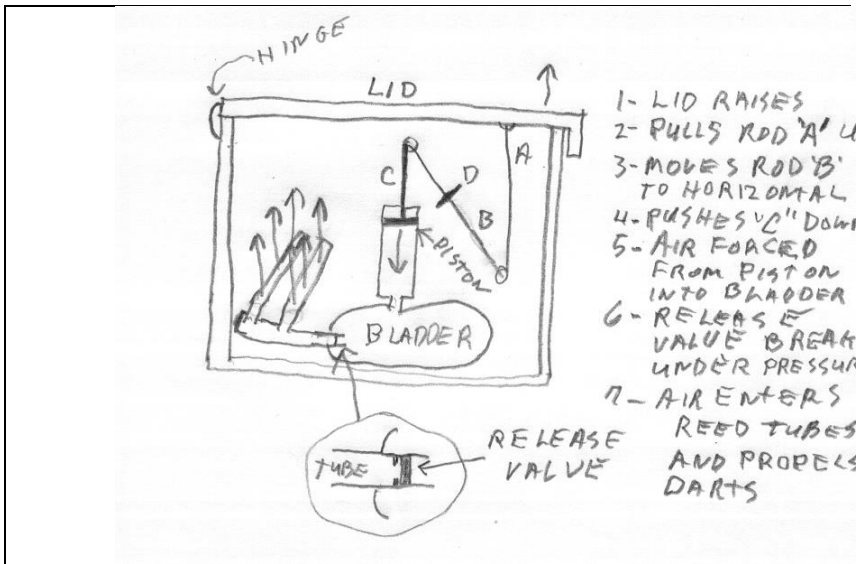
worked after all this time.”

“You have it down chapter and verse and you may be pleased to hear part of it *didn’t* actually remain intact all these years. There were to be two volleys but the second bladder cracked and would not inflate. There are still a dozen little

beauties in there patiently waiting to fly.”

David and Marc approached the chest to see what was there. David spoke.

“Bamboo that was sealed and coated in tar for tubing. Very clever,” David said. “He employed only the best craftsmen. Interesting how the chest was divided into three sections across the box. The one in the middle holds the darts and those on the ends contain the gold. Lots and lots of gold. I should have figured the compartment configuration.”



David's rendering of the Poison Dart Chest

“It's like you were LaPique in a previous life, David,” Marc said. “Like you just stood there remembering how you had designed it. I don't understand how you put things together in your head that way.”

“You heard my thinking. There are only so many ways he could configure such a gadget given the size and shape of the chest and the state of technology in his day. Actually, you provided an excellent first clue for me when you mentioned his probable use of the Avani culture in its design.”

“Next problem is to get the gold into the boat,” Alex said. “It's ten meters to the river. Your roller gadget won't work here in the tall grass and stubble.”

“Back to the sack brigade, I guess,” David said.

“Sooner the better, I think,” Connie said from the top of the mound. “A single Avani has climbed a tree about thirty meters to the east. He's just sitting there quite as can be. He appears differently from those on the river back there. He is covered in white – ash, probably.”

“He may be awaiting the arrival of more or just be waiting until his kinsmen

who are already here have us surrounded,” Kit said. “We’re probably fortunate they insist on taking time out to do the ash purification thing. It may be buying us some time.”

“Connie you join us down here. Kit you take over surveillance. Speak up anytime something seems suspicious. We’ll get this chest emptied as soon as we can.”

Alex brought the sacks from the boat. He demonstrated for Marc how full to fill them and how to tie them. They spread out along a direct line to the boat. Marc filled the sacks handing them to David who moved a few feet and handed off to Connie. Alex stowed them onboard.

Nothing about it seemed easy. Many of the coins had sharp edges that would cut flesh so Marc had to work with gloves. It made the process cumbersome and slow. The bags were heavy and tired their arms and hands. The wiry grass sprung back after being stepped on, its sharp edges cutting at exposed flesh.

It began to rain. There was nothing gentle about it. It offered a new sound to them as it splashed its way through the leaves and onto the grassy ground. It produced a din of considerable decibels.

“The first compartment is empty,” Marc announced after nearly a half hour. “I’ll trade with somebody.”

David took his place. He was not able to speed up the process. Water filled the chest. The path to the boat became slippery. With the passing of the next fifteen minutes things had slowed measurably as everybody had tired.

“A second little ashified fella up another tree out there,” Kit announced. “I could see him carrying a long blow gun – six or eight feet long I’d say.”

Alex provided some in-service training as they kept the sacks moving.

“They will raise the tubes just before firing and pause only a few seconds to take aim. At the moment they blow, their heads will move forward just enough to be noticed. That means the dart is on its way. We know they are accurate. We will have perhaps a second to step a meter to the side. So long as there are only two of them out there we can keep ourselves quite safe. They will not be used to shooting at intelligent beings. A monkey just sits there. We will confuse them with our movement. If they bring in reinforcements it will be a different situation, of course.”

“So standing is probably safer than bellying down,” Kit said wanting to make sure he understood.”

“Crouching would be best.”

“I’m about to become the world’s most accomplished *croucher-back-and-forth-mover*, then,” Kit said taking the position.

“Connie, load the red incendiary clip. If things begin to happen fire a few rounds into the tree trunks just this side of them. Have the gas slugs within easy reach – green clip.”

They made their handguns ready.

"About five more minutes and we'll either be done here or drowned," David announced.

"I'm willing to leave the rest behind if you are," Marc said.

"No change in personnel I can see out there," Kit said. "Let's give it a few more minutes."

As the adrenalin surged, David cinched up the remaining bags.

"Done!" he called out.

Alex climbed the hill and motioned Kit to the boat. A piercing chorus of high pitched shrieking voices arose from the forest around them. It had to be human though sounded séance-certified other worldly. Dozens of short bodied men, recently covered in white ash appeared among the trees, their blow guns at the ready.

Alex fired six rounds, hitting six trees. Fountains of white and red hot particles flashed, spewing across the area. The Avani scattered back out of sight. He fired six more rounds back further than the first. The shrieking subsided. Alex fired again this time hitting the trees at the points where the two original lookouts still clung to the rear of the trunks. They scrambled to the ground and disappeared into the underbrush.

With Connie in the driver's seat, the motor revved to life. Alex crawled backwards down the mound away from the trees and onto the shore. He was immediately aboard and the boat pulled away. The canvases were rolled down. The shrieking began again and a dozen of the youngest Avani warriors came on the run. From the rear Connie fired several rounds of gas slugs toward the shore. One final volley of darts flew in their direction most dropping into the water, no doubt providing heartburn to the large school of piranha lingering there.

"You realize that we both left a perfectly good pair of boots back there, don't you," Kit said.

"I got boots," Marc said lifting one foot to offer proof.

"There are also those sox and pants and shirts and backpacks and my favorite belt," Kit said. "Seems to happen to me a lot on this trip."

"Perhaps if you'd try keeping them *on* you wouldn't lose them so easily," Marc offered.

Kit smiled.

"I'm famished. Anybody else up for pork and beans."

With that the others realized they were hungry. Cans were opened and passed around. Alex kept a close eye on the shore to the south. David spoke.

"Most of the coins in this chest were freshly minted – still had sharp edges and well defined imprints. Those features didn't last long once in circulation. The gold alloy they used was soft and wore quickly. These were fresh from the mint when they were taken and should sell at the premium of all premium rates."

"That's great!" Kit said. "One more to go and then the big one if we're all

up to it.”

“I’ve been wondering,” Marc said. “Do you suppose we would have stayed the course back there if we had been getting that treasure for ourselves rather than for the kids?”

“What an interesting quandary you set up,” David said. “Let us hear your thinking about it.”

“I see several options – that I probably wouldn’t have a few weeks ago.”

He smiled sheepishly and continued.

“The strictly selfish person would have stayed, I suppose, to fill his own greedy pockets. The altruistic person would stay to assist those in need. But the run of the mill Sunday afternoon treasure seeker would have probably high-tailed it at the first appearance of an Indio. I know I wouldn’t have stuck around and risked my neck for any amount of personal treasure.”

“Covered things pretty well, I’d say,” Kit said, “Except for the Nude Spa option.”

“I don’t understand, but I’m getting used to that state the more I’m around you guys.”

“I want to start a nude spa back home and have no capital so I might have stayed the course to fund it.”

“I thought I covered that under strictly selfish.”

The others laughed. Kit had been bested. He nodded and grinned along with his colleagues. Marc had a final thought on the matter.

“I suppose there is a fourth possibility. Someone, who found himself on a boat chugging along upstream with a bunch of virtual strangers and with schools of piranha swimming below, might suddenly realize that he had no real choice but to stay the course.”

“Sounds a tad autobiographical,” Kit said.

“If you mean did I have any second thoughts when that first of flight of poison darts hit the boat, I just may have. I mean if my mother had any idea what I was doing she’d turn over in her grave well before she died.”

“The boy has caught the *absurd-itis* from us,” Kit said looking around, mostly at David.

“Shall we tell him there is no cure?” David said through an inflated whisper.

“No. Let’s let him live out his days in unfounded hope.”

“Father Angelico warned me about you, did I mention that?”

“What could there *possibly* be to warn you about?” Kit said.

“I think his exact words were, ‘Guard your soul and open your mind, and you will undoubtedly reap grand rewards from your association with them’.”

“He said that, really?”

Marc nodded.

“I asked him how it was possible to do both – guard my soul and open my

mind. He shook his head and said, 'It may *not* be possible. Very likely you may have some significant choices to make.'

"I can't imagine you taking that risk. No offence but from how you have described yourself, I really can't," Kit said.

"I have to assume that my desire for the truth overwhelmed my desire for certainty – I imagine that's how you would configure it."

"You have listened well," David said. "You do understand that we aren't about dashing other people's belief systems."

"Not as a primary goal – I understand that – but I'm sure it happens as collateral damage sometimes – collateral to the new ways of thinking and configuring things that you model. I'm cool with what's going on. If I end up a quivering mass of mind blown flesh, lying in a corner, fetus position, I have no doubt that you will care for me."

He flashed a smile. Whether it was in response to the humor he saw in his statement or to conceal the hint of a genuine fear would not be shared.

It was noon a day later when they made dock at Manaus. The boys had scrambled into pants at the last possible moment, the men having privately established a pool among them as to when they would recall their state of undress. Alex won. At the hotel it was immediately into the showers – flesh grating, hair tearing, washcloth scrubbing, showers – as they attempted to regain some connection with civilization.

"I only hope I look as great as I feel," Kit said toweling his hair. "Look, I'm using both arms. The pain is well within tolerable limits. The biggest difference may be that the pungent aroma of insect repellent is gone. It did have a secondary benefit, however. It masked how bad we stunk."

"Elegant as usual, that Harvard bound nephew of mine."

Marc entered the sitting room his towel draped around his neck.

"Smell that?" he said. "No insect repellent."

David and Kit broke into laughter.

"What?"

"David explained as Kit continued to roll the floor in convulsive laughter."

"Almost Kit's exact words about the repellent. He did have an addition, however."

"Probably about how it *did* work to mask our stink."

Kit started up all over again. It was infectious. The towels came in handy to wipe away the tears.

"Let's dress and go feast on some real food," David suggested, figuring the promise of sustenance might break the cycle of laughter.

It did.

As the food arrived, Marc crossed himself.

"Hope that didn't offend you. It's what I do."

"Number one, Uncle David and I don't allow ourselves to be offended.

Number two, we all have our rituals. I for one typically check my placket before leaving the house.”

Marc addressed David.

“It is reassuring to hear that he typically *wears* a placket when he leaves the house.”

It was good for chuckles all around.

On the trip back from the four eggs they had mostly avoided the new map. They were tired – physically and mentally. Without mention, they had collectively given themselves a short vacation.

“I suppose it’s time to hit the map,” Kit said as they left the restaurant.

“You with us on this one, Marc?” David asked. “You have no obligation, you understand.”

“I have become addicted to the Kitavid.”

“I get it,” Kit said grinning. Like a conjunction of Kit and David.”

Marc turned to David.

“Your Grasshopper most observant, Ancient Master. Next lesson, split infinitives.”

Kit then turned to David.

“His condition is progressing faster than we predicted. Is it time for quarantine?”

“*From* us, most likely. Marc seems to be holding his own just fine.”

“I’m coming to see that my family is pretty dull and humorless. My parents have to work hard to support all of us. I guess jokes just slid through the *wisecracks*, so to speak.”

“Terrible!” Kit said referring to the almost pun. “I loved it.”

It reminded David.

“What was that word you were tossing back and forth on the boat – *Atchortee*, was it?”

“Marc, you want to handle this one?”

“Sure. Kit and I have had numerous private talks about beliefs and such, and we came to the conclusion that we are like heads and tails in that area. *Heads or tails* became *H or T* which gave rise to the word *Atchortee*.”

“I see. Well, if ancient master may interject. . . .”

“Are grown men allowed to do that in public, Sir?” Marc said interrupting.

When the chuckles subsided, David began again.

“If I may *interject*, they who are able to view the coin from the edge, rather than from the sides, often find most superficial differences disappear.”

“So, the man has had at least *two* previous lives,” Marc said.

“What?” Kit asked puzzled.

“Well, I’ve already determined he was LaPique in one of them. Now I find he was also Confucius.”

They smiled. Kit wouldn’t let it go.

“And we must remember that *Confucius* is the root word from which comes *confusion*.”

Kit may have met his match as Marc offered:

“And tell me again how the word *absurd* derived from *professor david and nephew kit lawrence*?”

It was three when they got down to work on the map back in the hotel. Kit had the first observation – one that no one but Kit could possibly concoct.

“It is so obvious.”

David winked at Marc, whose smile was already breaking in anticipation.

“This is a transparent view through a female from the front. At the bottom the uterus. Above and to each side the ovaries. The black speck the navel. And two circles at the top the nipples.”

“You left out the curve at the left,” Marc pointed out.

“That is the outline of her soft yet firm, exquisitely proportioned, posterior.”

Marc looked at David.

“I assume the line between creative and crazy blurs from time to time.”

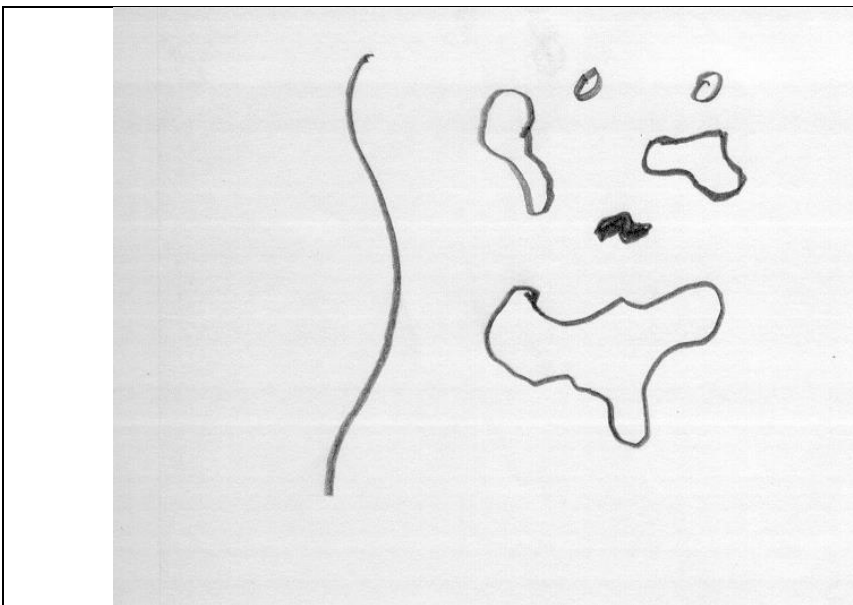
“Most observant,” David said then moved on. “I see a cluster of islands and a shoreline.”

“That was what I *used* to see, as well,” Marc said, “But now, I’m not sure I want to return to that image.”

“In a river, in a lake, out to sea?” David asked.

“One shoreline might indicate the ocean,” Marc suggested, “There being only one.”

“Let’s see what Kit can find on his magic screen.”



Map of The Disappearing Islands

A few minutes passed.

"Pretty similar in configuration to a cluster of very small islands just off *Maceio*, two hundred miles south along the coast line. Known as the *Consoles Desaparecendo*."

"That is the *Disappearing Islands*," Marc said translating.

"Some of those that get covered during high tide?" Kit asked.

"Probably. Lots of them off the coast up here. They get covered from a few inches to several meters. Mostly outcroppings of very porous rock if I remember correctly."

"Looks like another boat trip," Kit said. "Let's see how far off the coast they are. . . . About thirty miles. Have an interesting history. *Pirate* related, even. Seems the pirate ships, when being chased by the good guys, would sail south to the islands at high tide and then take a hard right, navigating the single open channel between them. The good guys, hoping to cut them off at the pass, would veer right immediately and crash into the rock islands that lay just below the surface. The right ovary is known as *Isle da Morte* – Isle of Death. It apparently took out hundreds of ships down through history. There is a natural harbor in a cove on the northwest coast of the large, southern island. It was frequented by pirate ships during the seventeen seventies and eighties. There was a floating bar and house of prostitution moored there permanently."

"Sounds like reasonable territory for a treasure hunt," David said.

"We have to stop at *Maceio*," Marc urged. "They make the worlds longest raspberry twisters. You buy them by the meter – up to ten meters long. They make licorice as well but it's the raspberry that is the best. The chocolate covered Marshmallow Puffs run a close third, I suppose – huge, with a thick, hard, coating. I'm making myself drool."

Kit's phone rang. It was Father Angelico.

"Two things, Kit. First, the ship of Carlos LaPique has been spotted holding to, out to sea just north of here. I think that's seaman talk for anchored. Second, I found the leak. The boy who delivers groceries to the nuns who live next door seems to be a nephew of Carlos and he has been providing the information. I staked out my office – as they say on the *Dragnet* reruns – from the rear of the confessional. I had penciled in some misleading information. He copied it down and when he stood to leave I burst out of the confessional and confronted him. He admitted to what he had been doing. Then the confessional was properly occupied for the next half hour."

"Thank you. Do you suppose he was able to put one and one together from various notes on your calendar and make *us* as the treasure hunters?"

"I wouldn't doubt it. The boy is a good student and plans on college."

“We will be leaving shortly for location number eight – the *Consoles Desaparecendo*.”

“Can you hold a minute, please, Kit. A call on my other line.”

.....

“I’m back. Bad news I’m afraid. Somebody answering LaPique’s description was just seen entering your hotel. He had half a half dozen men with him.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A look of terror spread across Kit's face. He poked a number into the phone and closed the laptop putting it under his arm.

"LaPique was just spotted entering this hotel," he said turning to David. "I'm calling Big Al. . . . Al. LaPique may be on his way up here in the elevator. Let us into your suite through our adjoining door."

They gathered backpacks and the few other things they could as they moved across the room, then exited into the suite next door. Connie locked the double doors behind them.

"For all we know they may know about you two and this suite as well," Kit said addressing Connie. "Where's Al?"

"Immediately after your call he left to take care of some details. It involved glue, wire cutters, a can of something, and several screwdrivers. He said for us to take the back stairs down to the parking level, get into our rental, and meet him at the exit to the street. Said he'd need five minutes."

They followed the instructions without question. Six minutes later Marc pushed the back door open and Alex entered on the trot. Connie immediately had them heading south.

"Do we dare ask what you were up to?" Kit asked.

"Asking's free."

"You know what I mean!"

"That ounce of prevention thing. I glued the elevator doors closed on our floor *and* the ones above and below. Then I entered the control panel and short circuited the elevator. As a final precaution I hard-foamed the interior of the panel so it would take some time for repairs to be made. LaPique and his guys should be trapped for an hour or so. I figured we can pay for the damage later."

"Sounds like something out of *Mission Impossible*," Marc said.

"I'm sure *that team* could learn things from Big Al, here," Kit said clearly bragging on the man.

"We may as well head right on down to *Maceio*," David said. "Two hundred miles. Is it worth activating the Goose?"

"Probably not," Alex said. "I do imagine we should trade this in for a new

rental though. If they found our hotel, who knows what else they may have on us.”

The new rental was procured in the name of Ari Stephanopoulos. Alex drove the original to the parking lot in a mall and the others picked him up.

David called ahead and found a motel near the ocean. Alex rented a boat. Kit and Marc worked the web finding out about the tides and more about the islands.

The time went by rapidly. At seven fifteen they were parked at the motel – perhaps a *one* star on a scale of *fifty*. Mark and Kit accompanied David to the check-in desk. There was a lengthy discussion between the manager and Marc, who was handling the Portuguese. Marc turned to the others.

“He believes David has brought us here to make a porn film. That doesn’t bother him – apparently this is a popular site for such things. The problem is he wants to charge us triple the rate.”

“If that’s all, tell him we’ll pay,” David said. “We may have just fallen into a very good cover. I suppose it might help if you two could make goo goo eyes at each other.”

As one, the boys turned their backs on him and folded their arms. The credit card was charged and they exited the office.

David chuckled the whole way down the walk to their room.

Kit and Marc didn’t!

Connie backed the van into one of the spaces in front of the rooms.

“Unload the cameras carefully, Men,” David said addressing Connie and Alex.

They frowned.

Kit explained the confrontation at the front desk.

Alex responded.

“Well if I’d have known, I would have brought the sound recorder.”

David handed Connie one key and pointed, “One Eleven,” he said. “We’ll be here in One Twelve probably arm wrestling to see who gets the second bed and who sleeps far, far, away on the floor.”

There would be no wrestling. Kit let it drop – clearly easier for him to do than for Marc.

“The man thinks we’re in here committing a terrible sin,” Marc said, taking a seat in the single chair by the round, lamp table at the front window.

“He will think what he will think,” Kit said. “Are you in here committing a terrible sin?”

“No.”

“Are you planning to?”

“Well, not that big one. Maybe later in the shower a smaller one.”

Kit lay back on the bed holding his stomach in laughter.

“What?”

Gradually, Kit scooted back against the head board.

"I love you're unadulterated honesty."

"Phrases like, 'I love you,' and words with adultery as part of them may *not* be ones to say so loudly just now," Marc said mostly sincerely. He peeked through the opening in the drapes.

"Cool it, Marc. If you're happy with your behavior then it can't matter what others think. People are all the time misinterpreting my good intentions. Uncle David convinced me long ago that if you're true to yourself that's all you can be in control of. You can never control what goes on inside other minds."

"I know you're right but I have this *small* proclivity for *massive* guilt."

"And such a wonderful way with words," David said. "I've noticed that over and over again. Perhaps writing is in your future."

"Thanks. Such a forte does not, however, diminish the constant wash of guilt I carry with me."

"Deep down you believe you're bad," Kit said thinking he had it all wrapped up. "Most religions control their members by instilling that idea. Stop doing that and it's solved."

"Wish it were that easy. I'm working on it."

"Good. Okay then. Want to come to bed, now, honey?" Kit said patting the bed beside him.

Kit laughed himself into hysterics.

Marc picked up the bible from the table beside him and hurled it at Kit.

"I know it *should* have been funny. For some reason it *wasn't*. Sorry. Glad I missed. I'm usually hard to rile."

"I think we need to visit that café a few miles back up the road," David said. "We can fill our tummies with good food and empty our minds of irrelevancies."

It seemed to work. They spoke about the next day's activities and the need to procure diving gear. Kit presented the tide schedule. They needed to be in place by six a.m. It would give them between three and six hours on the exposed island, depending on how deeply it sat beneath the surface. That, Kit had not been able to ascertain. The blackened island – the *dot* they assumed – went by various names but *Pé com Asas* – roughly *Winged Foot* seemed to lead the pack.

On the way back to the 'infamous' motel Marc directed them to the Candy Shack to purchase the raspberry twisters. Each boy came away with ten meters of the highly touted, hollow, raspberry, candy wound onto a spool. It was delicious, none would dispute that, but the chocolate covered Marshmallow Puffs were unbelievable! Six inch puffs of marshmallow covered in a thick chocolate shell. They filled their pockets.

* * *

They were up at four thirty, fed by five fifteen, and boat-side by five forty.

Alex checked the supplies. Everything he had ordered was there.

"Got almost everything we need," Alex said to David, pointing to the boys with a wink.

"They clearly need bras, and are way beyond the training stage."

Each boy had stuffed a substantial strand of twister into one shirt pocket and a Marshmallow Puff in the other.

"Just wait 'til that night clerk sees us now," Marc said.

Kit took it as a good sign he was able to joke about it in the light of day.

At six thirty they spotted the group of islands and at six forty – a bit behind Kit's schedule – were tied up on the south side of *Winged Foot*. It was, as Marc had suspected, barren, porous rock, rusty red in color. There were a few pockets of tall grasses and a single, short tree, dwarfed and malformed as if transplanted from a Chinese garden.

The island was no more than fifty feet wide and seventy five feet long. The surface was irregular with depressions as deep as five feet and rises half that high. Connie decided to circle the island in the boat to search for clues. His report was not immediately helpful.

"The island appears to be mushroom shaped. Most of this surface area has spread out from the thick base – a broad column. Like a flat bottom ice cream cone with the ball of ice cream flattened out to form the surface. Along the eastern side this top area can't be more than a meter deep in some places at the edge."

They walked toward that side unable to judge the thickness from the surface.

"Look here!" Kit said as they approached the edge. "What do you make of this . . . or these?"

"Looks like to two steel cables. The ends of each one are threaded down into a set of holes drilled through the rock – maybe only a foot and half of each showing across the rock between the holes. The two sets of holes sit two feet apart, parallel to each other."

Alex tried one of the low loops of cable to see if he could pull it up.

"Some help here. Too heavy for me but there is play in it. See what a couple more backs can do with it."

"Connie and Marc took hold with Alex and raised the cable a few inches, proving if nothing else, that it could be raised a few inches and was not tightly secured to anything below other than probably dangling weights of some kind."

"A major problem, of course," Kit said. "LaPique number one didn't have steel cable."

"And problem number two, if he had, they would have rusted away long ago," David added.

"We know he had the ability to drill long narrow holes through rock," Alex said. "We've see it several times into rock much harder than this."

Marc had knelt and was examining the holes through which the looped cables were strung.

"I'm no expert but I'd say these were drilled very recently. Look at the difference in coloring – a much brighter more vivid red inside the holes."

The others looked and agreed.

"I suppose we should take a look underneath," David said. "As a long shot they *could* be supporting the treasure down there, one loop of cable at each end of a chest."

"I've been longing for a swim for weeks," Alex said. "Give me ten minutes. Marc, come along and help me into my rig."

They walked toward the boat.

"I've never done diving with equipment. Kit may have been a better choice for a helper."

"He already knows how to get into this stuff."

"Oh. I see. You are presenting me with an opportunity gain a new skill. Thank you. I learn fast."

Fifteen minutes later they had Alex's report.

"Odd, really. Like a malnourished octopus. Four long strands of hanging, steel cable each one threaded through a hole in a very large rock weight – tied there. The four rocks are just hanging. It's all been done quite recently. I can't figure any purpose for it."

"It may have nothing at all to do with the treasure then," David said. "It may be the beginning of some structure."

"Maybe another house of prostitution," Kit suggested making with the Groucho eye brows.

The remark was ignored.

Kit was pleased.

David spoke.

"Let's do a systematic search of the surface, strung out side by side as if we were searching for a lost diamond ring in a meadow. Start here and work west."

It took several sweeps of the island and over two hours. They came up empty.

"You saw nothing out of the ordinary when you sailed around the island, Connie?"

"I was more focused on the geology but nothing jumped out at me, no."

"How many sets of diving equipment did we bring, Al?"

"Four. Eight air tanks. Twenty hours of search time combined. Can easily get more."

"Marc you'll stay with the boat," David said. "The rest of us will search underwater. Alex north side. Connie south side. Kit east. I'll take the west."

"Can you manage it with the shoulder and all," Marc asked Kit.

“The feet do the propelling under water. I’ll be fine.”

They undressed and donned the tanks, masks, and fins.

“We surface and sound off every fifteen minutes,” Alex suggested. “I have two before nine. Walk to your side of the island and we will submerge at nine. Surface and check-in with Marc every fifteen minutes.”

David surfaced five minutes later and called to Marc.

“I think I have it. Bring the boat around over here.”

At the sound of the boat motor, Connie surfaced on the south side to investigate.

“What’s up?” he called not really able to see anyone.

“Over here on the west side,” Marc called. “David has found something.”

By the time Connie reached the boat Alex and Kit had both surfaced calling out their names for check-in. Marc explained the turn of events to them and a few minutes later all were gathered around David.

“Another LaPique style rock container down there. Looks to be four sides made of flat stones two feet high and three feet long – several inches thick. There’s one large stone laid across the top. In the least it is *not* a natural formation.”

“Let’s go down two at a time and take a look,” Alex suggested. David and Connie, you go first. Marc, we’ll need the camera.”

“The blue one,” Kit added. “It’s waterproof.”

“How far down, David?” Alex asked.

“No more than three or four meters. Hardly deep enough to pop your ears.”

By nine thirty the four divers had all seen the find. With a hand from Marc, Kit crawled into the boat.

“Your turn to take a look old man. Shed your duds and I’ll help you into the gear.”

“Alex already instructed me. Let’s see how well I learned.”

With a few additional, fundamental, instructions, Kit helped him over the side. He immediately submerged. Alex followed him down. The activity in the water had tired Kit more than he figured it would. The sun seemed particularly hot. He slipped into his shirt for protection.

They surfaced.

“Strategy session,” David said.

Kit gave them hands up onto the island as he chattered on.

“I figure we have this chunk of rock for another two hours. Then it will be gone for about eight. I estimate that at high tide it won’t be more than two to three feet under the surface. I suppose as long as we’re working under water none of that really matters, comes to think of it? Thank you for listening. Hold the applause. I’ll be back to astound you with more verbal gymnastics after a short break.”

“Suppose he’s running a fever?” Marc quipped to the men.

“No,” David said. “He’s just running off at the mouth. I’ve determined he has a release valve that automatically requires it every so often.”

“You’ll be sorry you treated me so badly when I end up at the bottom of the sea in an attempt to rescue the lot of you.”

It was worth a chuckle.

“Let’s see the pictures you took, Kit,” David said.

They gathered close to look.

“It is the booby traps we are initially concerned about of course,” David said. “It’s ten to one that the treasure *is* inside that rock box.”

“My suggestion is that we do a very complete examination of the overhang above the rock box,” Kit said. “It’s about the only place for a booby trap. There may be something here, above it all, in the picture – in that shadow.”

“I think he’s right,” Alex said. “Why don’t Connie and I go down and take the first look. We will need lights. That’s all shadows up under there.”

Kit and Marc handed over the lights – miner’s lights for the foreheads and wide beam flashlights to carry.

They were gone fifteen minutes. Kit became impatient. When they surfaced they spoke directly to David.

“Something. You need to take a look at it.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Kit said.

He handed the camera to David.

“The flash is on so just click away.”

It was far less subtle than the other arrangements they had encountered. Perhaps because LaPique knew it would remain in the shadows and had been set in place long before any kind of underwater lights had yet been conceived. David took the pictures and examined the area with his hands. Eventually they surfaced and crawled onto the island beside the boat.

“Just as deadly as the others but quite simple in design. There is a three inch solid iron rod some twelve feet long wedged between the rear of the cover stone below and another larger stone forced in place up against the overhang. I believe it is a variation on the theme back in the first cave. When the cover stone is lifted up and slid off the back, the rod slides off, too, and falls, releasing the large stone above and perhaps additional material stashed there.”

“And the solution is?” Kit asked.

“To chisel our way across the top stone leaving the rear portion in place to continue supporting the rod. When the stone cracks in two, we pull the front section off and see what we have inside.”

“Seems pretty simple,” Kit said. “That worries me.”

“Get your head out the box, Son – the *time box*.”

“Ah! The time box. Well, let’s see. For one thing there would not have been the flashlights so they could see what they were up against under there.

And, they had no adequate diving gear. I'm impressed they could set the stone box in place, now that I think about it. But to chisel through the stone lid would have taken days."

They sat in silence for a long moment. Marc spoke.

"Doesn't that deserve at least a short Master to Grasshopper exchange?"

They laughed.

"Grasshopper agree," Kit said.

"Master pooped! Later, perhaps," David said.

The exchange was sufficient as far as Marc was concerned.

"There is room for three of us to chisel," Alex said. "One from each side and one from the middle. With hammering involved I will opt for Marc and Connie down there with me. Pooped Master can engage Hopper with clipped wing top side."

Armed with hammers and chisels the three submerged.

"I am bothered by how a chest of any material could have survived down there all these years," Kit said. "The stone box can't be waterproof."

"I know. We'll find out in a short time, I suppose."

"It's always more fun to speculate first," Kit said prodding David to brainstorm with him."

"Okay. You first."

"I got nothing. I defer to my esteemed colleague from Indiana, representing the loft above the Blue and White Grocery and all the dust bunnies therein."

"In general nothing from rock or clay or metal or wood, even if preserved in tar could stand the wet ravages of salt water over a period of two hundred – going on two hundred and fifty – years. Think what substance they *did* have that was basically erosion proof – short of acid which does not play a role here."

"Glass?"

"Bingo, I think?"

"But a glass chest? How could it possibly be made strong enough to hold gold and jewels?"

"It probably couldn't."

"Ah! Think outside the chest, he says."

David smiled and nodded, keeping his ideas to himself, delighted to see his nephew putting the pieces together.

"Grandma's rainy day jar you've told me about. All her extra coins went into it and were saved for some possible emergency that might befall the household in the future."

"This must be some humongous jar you're describing," David said pushing Kit beyond his first inspiration.

"Back to the strength thing."

Kit grew quiet. Then his face brightened.

“Lots and lots of *little* rainy day jars.”

“Sealed with . . .”

“Hmm. Good point. Have to be sealed to keep out the salt water and metal lids are out.”

“Or . . .”

“Or? You’re suggesting they might not have to be completely sealed if . . . if, after the coins or jewels were placed inside, the jars were filled with fresh water or oil or some such non-corrosive thing. Then a most modest seal would keep out the salt water. There would be no vacant space for it to seep into. A . . . what do you call those things? Like the glass stoppers in perfume bottles. It makes an evaporation free seal. Maybe set them in place with a thin layer of hot wax.”

“We’re on the same wave length, Kit.”

“How shall we tell them when they come up with the news?” David asked.

“Got change?”

“Some. I’m sure all those pants pockets over there contain some.”

Kit went to the boat and found two jars – one a nearly empty pickle jar – the other a wide-bodied catsup bottle. He passed the three remaining pickles to David and then demonstrated how the catsup bottle slipped in place like a stopper into the other jar. He rinsed them both out, rifled the pants pockets and placed the coins into the jar. It was less than a third full but would certainly serve their purpose.

All was in ready an hour later when they surfaced.

Marc flipped back his mask. The others followed suit.

“You’ll never in thousand billion trillion years figure out this one, Professor Lawrence.”

With out words, Kit handed their model gadget to David. David, equally tight lipped, handed it to Marc. Alex and Connie laughed full bodied guffaws. Marc shook his head as he sheepishly lifted a sample of their find up onto the rock.

“I just *knew* he had you this time. Long live the king. Long live King David, resident of someplace called Indiana, keeper of the blue and white loft, uncle to Atchortee Kit, soon to be wife of what’s her name lady, and eventually father of Kit’s only cousin.”

David and Kit applauded. David had an aside for Kit.

“Are none of our family secrets sacred?”

Kit grinned.

“Levity period over,” Alex said. Time to bring up the booty.”

David had a plan they could revisit from earlier.

“I suggest the two canvas buckets tied to ropes. Kit and I will each man one set, sending them down and pulling them up. Marc can take the jars from us and stash them in the boat. The big guys can be underwater and place the jars

into the pails. That way no swimming up and down will be necessary and should actually take very little time."

The system worked flawlessly and less than an hour later all jars were stowed safely onboard. The liquid in them looked to be some type of heavy, translucent, oil, most likely quality whale oil, David thought.

For some time their attention had been focused on the immediate area and their own activities. They had let down their peripheral guard. LaPique's ship had entered the area and drawn close. Three motor launches were heading their way.

"A gun fight will destroy us," Alex said. "I suggest we see what they want and try to talk our way into a positive position of some kind."

The others agreed.

The lead boat resembled the painting of Washington crossing the Delaware. It was Carlos LaPique who was standing. They pulled close and stopped in the water.

"Dr. Lawrence?"

"Carlos Marcus Pedro Diego Avarado LaPique?"

The pirate nodded and smiled, suggesting he was impressed with David's knowledge.

"You know why I've come."

"There seems to be some room for doubt. Perhaps you will clarify it for us."

"I will have all the treasures you have found or your nephew will meet a terrible death."

"I'd say that clarified it fairly well," Kit said, his hands massaging his throat.

"That won't be possible, Sir," David said. "We no longer have the treasure. It has been handed over to a charitable organization."

LaPique laughed looking around at his men who took their cue and laughed with him.

"Men don't give away treasure they've worked so hard to find," he said suddenly, seriously, sober.

"Some do, I'm afraid. Sorry you don't travel in our circle."

One of his men uncovered a treasure jar in the boat. He held it up for LaPique to see. Kit responded.

"Mud Clams. We harvest them and sell them up in the States. These reefs have the best in the world."

"I'm allergic to clams."

His man set the jar down.

"You will hand over the treasure – all of it. I understand you have a weak spot – your affection for your nephew. You *will* hand it over. Which of the boys is the nephew? The lighter skinned one I assume."

Kit was not going to let Marc become a victim.

"Yes. I'm the nephew usually referred to as Kit."

"Well, nephew, usually referred to as Kit, you will stay here with me. The rest of you will get into the other boats with my men."

Kit and David shared a long glance before David was pushed into a boat and shoved to the floor. They turned and sped off toward the big ship.

LaPique began walking east along the island. The five men with him prodded Kit to follow. They stopped near the arrangement of steel cables that Kit and the others had examined – and dismissed – earlier.

"A special surprise constructed just for you," LaPique said.

He nodded to his men who knew what was expected. With two at each loop of cable, they pulled the cable loop out of the rock a foot and half. LaPique and the fifth man placed Kit under the loops on his back. Gently the men lowered the cables – one onto Kit's chest just under his arm pits, the other across his lower abdomen at the base of his pelvis.

The weight caused great pain and rendered him immobile, although it was in no way life threatening. Kit did not wince, the story of the Avani coming of age ceremony flashing across his thoughts.

"I believe your Uncle will give us the information we want once he understands your situation here. The tide is coming in. In less than an hour you will be covered under a meter of water. He won't let that happen. I will get my information."

"No you won't. He really *doesn't* have the treasure. He doesn't even know where the charity directors have stored it. Much of it may have already been sold and the money spent."

"You're good. I'll give you that. But as I said, nobody gives away a treasure they have worked so hard to discover."

"You're wrong. Eventually you'll understand that. Long after I'm fish bait, it appears."

The men turned and walked to the boat. It was soon making its way back to the main ship.

LaPique explained the situation to David who repeated his story and pled with the man to let him trade places with Kit.

LaPique shook his head, in no way convinced of his captor's sincerity. They were led to the top deck and their hands tied to the rail so they would have to remain standing facing the island. They could see Kit laying there motionless. It was too far away to make out any details. They understood it was at the point where they had discovered the cables and took LaPique at his word about the boy's situation.

The water began lapping against the rock rim of the island. From time to time LaPique would put in an appearance, saying nothing, but cocking his ear in anticipation of some response. David had said all there was to say. There were no more arguments to present. He didn't try.

When alone, the four talked among themselves trying to formulate some plan – first escape and then rescue.

"I can free us with the razor blade in my belt," Alex said but we need much more than that. We can't overpower this crew – I've counted two dozen, most of them well armed."

"We could jump over the side once free," David said, but it would be like shooting fish in a tank once we tried to make a swim for it."

"The sides of the boat curve slightly back toward the keel," Marc said. "If we stayed back against it they couldn't get us in their sights."

"Until they put this thing in high leaving us sitting ducks in its wake."

Marc nodded understanding the problem.

"Seems like its Tinkerbelle time, then," He said feeling the need to momentarily fill Kit's role as the wag.

"None of us want to hear this," Alex began, "but there will be no advantage for any of us to do something crazy and get killed wanting to save the boy."

David's distress turned to anguish as he began thinking about the all-encompassing terror Kit was experiencing at that moment. His death would be devastating but the more immediate concern was the agonizing terror, which was at that moment accompanying the prolonged process of drowning.

The water rolled up onto the island. It began lapping against Kit's body. It rose up the sides of his body. It covered his chest and finally his head and face.

From the distance they couldn't follow the progress precisely but an hour later there was no doubt about what had taken place. They all wept.

Out of nowhere there came a voice over a blow horn. Marc translated.

"NOW HEAR THIS, those on the ship of Carlos LaPique. This is the Brazilian Navy here to take you and your ship into custody. Do not try to run, our frog men have disengaged your propeller. Shots rang out in both directions."

The four of them understood the next step in the standoff might well involve *them* as hostages.

"Now would be a good time to get overboard," Alex said. Connie slid his hands close to Alex's. The ropes binding Connie's hands were quickly severed. He untied Alex and the two of them soon had the others free."

Alex gave last minute advice.

"Once over the side swim as far as you can underwater. Then, roll onto your backs and surface with only your nose and mouth cutting the water. Breath and then roll back and continue swimming submerged."

There was no review or test. They vaulted over the side. It was only a three meter drop. They had been overlooked by both sides. LaPique made a run for shore in a speed boat. It provided a welcomed distraction as David and the others made their way back toward the island. Their boat, which had been moored by laying its anchor up on the rocky surface of the island, bobbed there a meter or so above the surface.

Alex and Connie stopped to get diving equipment. David and Marc ignored the boat and swam directly to where Kit had been secured to the rock. They braced for a grief filled moment as they came upon his body.

They looked down through the water.

The sight was *not* what they had anticipated. The two began to laugh nervously. They shared a quick, automatic, hug then submerged. It was unbelievable! There he laid with two, hollow, ten foot long, raspberry twisters in his mouth. He had shoved the other end of each one through the Chocolate covered Marshmallow Puff and secured them above and below the Puff with restaurant toothpicks. The Puff floated holding the ends of the twisters well above the water.

Kit smiled and waved as they moved near to him. He pointed to the cable across his chest as if to remind them it might be nice to get out from under it.

They surfaced and called out the news to Alex and Connie as they arrived. Alex submerged and slipped a breathing tube from a tank into Kit's mouth. Kit flashed him the circular, index finger to thumb sign and waited to be released. On the surface, Alex set the action.

"David and Connie on the lower cable. Mark and I on the upper. We'll lift together. First, however, I want to tap a message to Kit."

That completed they submerged. The adrenalin surged. The backs and legs strained. The cables slowly gave way to the men's effort and raised a few inches. Feeling the slack, Kit twisted himself over onto his stomach according to Alex's coded directive. From that position he could bend his body in such a way as to pull himself free. On the way up he grabbed one of the twisters.

They surfaced together. Kit held up his hand containing the long red candy tube.

"Who's next?"

David reached out and pulled him close, neither wanting to let go. Eventually they did and were able to redirect their attention to the plight of LaPique who had been taken into custody.

David looked at Kit.

"*Mud Clams, Son?* He picks up a hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold pieces and you tell him they are *gourmet mud clams?*"

"He bought it."

"Yes, due to some chance allergy. What if he'd have opened the jar?"

"I'd have said, 'that one's worth about a hundred thousand clams, big boy'."

They had to hug again.

It was four p.m. when David and the boys entered their suite back in Joao Pessoa. With LaPique in custody it seemed safe to return. Father A had helped David arrange for a private security company to post men in the hallway.

Alex and Connie deposited the 'clams' at the church, also now under the

protection of the security force.

They showered to remove the salt water and stench of LaPique. While dressing for dinner, Kit offered a toast – a foot long section of twister providing the media.

"To life and all the opportunities it brings us to serve one another."

"And to love and the desire to be compassionate," David added.

"And to laugh for the pure pleasure of laughing and to think for the pure pleasure of thinking," came Marc's addition – clearly a more profound set of realizations for him than for the others.

They waited for Alex and Connie to join them at the restaurant downstairs. As the two arrived, Alex tossed a plastic zip bag to Kit.

"The last map," Alex said.

They took seats, ordered, and were soon relaxed and enjoying a delicious meal.

The small piece of hide containing the final map was oil soaked so he left it in the bag pressing the plastic close against its surface to make it legible.

"We all know what it has to be, of course," David said.

All but Marc nodded. Kit explained for him.

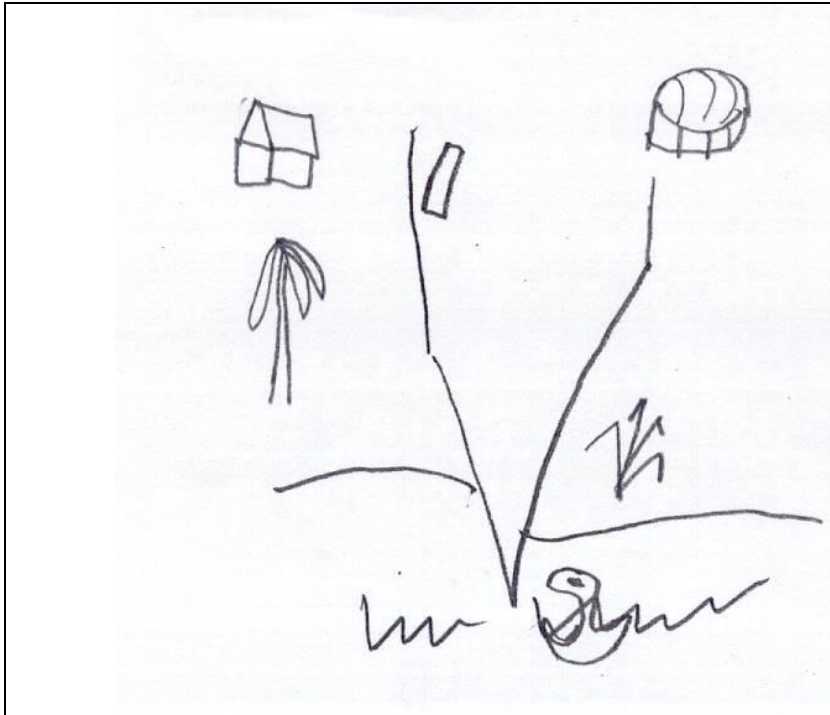
"We began this adventure with no map – revisiting an underwater cave we had reason to discover earlier in the summer. It was treasure number one. This map will surely lead us right back there. We've successfully found all the little treasures now. If legend is correct, there is still one whopper left to be found out there someplace and David and I believe *that* map will be revealed to us when we turn each small map over and connect the dots on the combined back."

"I wonder if we could have located that first treasure," Marc said, "if you hadn't already known."

Kit slid the bag toward him.

"Be our guest."

"Okay. This could be fun. Can you believe I'm saying such a thing? A palm tree and what looks like wetland grass. We have a lot of that near my home. Then there is a house and



**Map Locating
the First Cave David
and Kit Visited
(Map of
interior at end of
chapter)**

a hut probably representing civilization and not – back during LaPique's tenure here. Then there is the irregular, V-shaped thing penetrating or separating, at least, the two gentle curves. I won't even mention what Kit would make

that into. I'm suspecting a bluff of some kind moving out into the ocean separating two beach areas – north and south of it.”

“How do you figure North and South? It has no directional indicators,” Kit asked.

“Most of Brazil's coast line runs north and south. If it is on the coast those pretty much have to be the general directions.”

“Good going, Marc!”

Marc continued.

“I can't be sure about the narrow rectangle on the bluff – an opening, perhaps. And then the anchor. There have been waves intentionally drawn across it. It must mean something underwater.”

“So far you're batting a thousand,” Kit said patting him on the back and grinning.”

“The rest of my idea I can't claim as fully original. It's based on things I've heard you say. Under the bluff will be the treasure cave you have spoken of. Perhaps the rectangle does represent an opening into the top part of the cave – the part above water where the treasure sat.”

As the banana splits settled into place, they all went back to David's suite and gathered around the table. Kit emptied all the maps out of the small box in which he had been keeping them. They arranged them next to each other in a three by three matrix from first to last.

“Time to reveal the great mystery, guys,” Kit said. “Let's turn them over as

they lay."

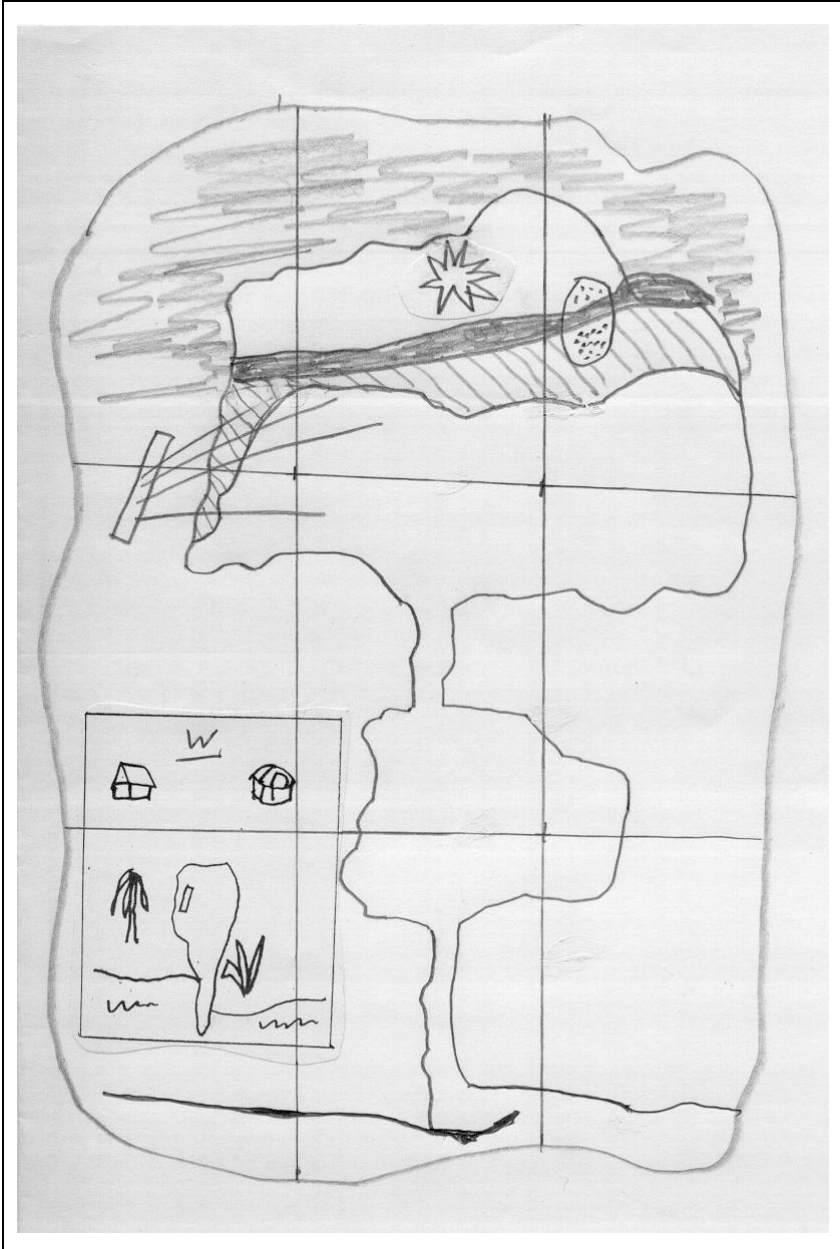
It was done.

"I don't understand, Uncle David. "You see what I see?"

"I do. Map number eight inserted beside an outline of that first cave."

"Why would we be sent back there?"

"Look more closely. There is additional information here – toward the top," David said pointing.



The backs of the nine little maps forming the Major Treasure Map.

"I see. Actually that thick dark band looks to be the cave wall at the rear of the cave we were in. And there is the ledge running in front of it the width of the cave and around to the left under the slit near the ceiling. What's this speckled oval over here at the upper right?"

"Remember that depression with sand in it?"

"Yeah. I used it to pee in."

"See how it seems to run through the wall."

"But probably actually runs *under* it."

"Then there is this open area behind the wall," David went on. "I imagine that is a second room in the cave the entrance being through the sand filled passageway beneath the wall."

"The star back there?" Mark said merely indicating it – a question in his voice.

"Count the points!" David said.

"Nine," Kit said. "One for each son – symbolic no doubt of the joint – cooperative – effort necessary to locate the big prize."

"Looks like tomorrow could wrap things up here," David said.

The finality *that* suggested was not met with relief or joy but with a shared sense of emptiness – like Friday evening at camp when you first realize you will be leaving all your new

friends behind come morning. You pledge to keep in contact but you won't. *That* kind of emptiness.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

No one slept well that night. It was a restless mixture of thoughts remembered and visions of things to come. It was a gentle wash of happy feelings and the stark confrontation of loss. It was elation in friendship and sadness in separation.

Kit had them up at six, the picture of efficiency – *exaggerated* efficiency. He got that way when dealing with anxiety or uncertainty. Had the others allowed it he would have timed their showers and ordered their breakfasts for them.

He caught himself, figuring it must be how Marc had lived most of his life – knowing what was right and wrong for everybody. He slacked up a bit – but only enough to keep the gnawing gremlins of dubiety at bay.

It was eight o'clock before a boat and proper diving equipment had been procured. At eight thirty the boat was moored above the entrance to the cave.

Kit led the way followed by Marc, David, Connie and Alex. They swam with backpacks sealed in trash bags slung across their chests in deference to the air tanks on their backs. It was slow going, burdened as they were.

The huge boulder that had once blocked the narrow opening into the second room had not budged since their previous visit. They soon surfaced in the large room to the rear and disengaged themselves from their equipment.

They moved immediately to the sand-filled depression. Alex spoke to Kit.

"We have decided because of your special attachment to this spot that the honor of emptying it of sand will be all *yourin!*"

It was cause for much laughter. Kit feigned handicap by gently patting his left shoulder. He then took up a shovel.

Alex pulled him back and took the shovel for himself. The sand turned out to be sand mixed with small chards of stone, chipped from somewhere in the cave. The progress was slow and Kit became impatient. Fifteen minutes later Alex proclaimed there was an opening large enough for them pass through. He asked for a propane lantern, lit it, and crawled under the wall.

A few moments later he called the all clear and David, Kit, and Marc entered. Connie remained outside just in case.

The room was wide and narrow only fifteen feet from front to back. His treasure trove trademark was also there, three skeletons, two slouched along the north wall and one the south.

The treasure itself was piled on the floor forming a giant cone – gold pieces and bars, jewelry set in gold and silver, and unset diamonds, emeralds, opals, topaz – probably others.

Such finds have been called a king's ransom. This one would have freed all the Kings in Europe."

They stood in silence – in awe – in utter disbelief. *King of the Pirates* indeed seemed appropriate.

"Can you figure how they got all this stuff in here?" Kit asked.

"Almost have to have used a shoot of some kind from the hole in the outer wall," David said. "Perhaps a canvas tube from up top or maybe scaffolding up the outside wall."

"Or, maybe it was brought here a little at a time over many years," Kit said.

That makes the most sense, actually," David said.

"Took some doing though, didn't it?" Marc said still astonished at the sight.

"Our problem is going to be getting it out," Kit said. "It took a day to remove three little chests of stuff. *This* will take a week – ten days maybe."

Alex lit a second lantern.

"Let me go trade places with Connie so he can see this," Kit said.

The exchange was made. Kit used the time to call Father A and fill him in on the find. It took several attempts to find a spot that would hold a connection.

Marc appeared in the passage hole.

"David wants you inside for a strategy session. Talk loud so I can hear from out here."

Kit jumped into the passage hole. Before he could bend to crawl, however, a deafening rumble swept back at them from the far front end of the cave. The water boiled up near the underwater entrance.

"Al, out here, quick!" Kit called. He scrambled out of the way.

Alex was immediately there. The boys pointed.

"Did you hear the noise?"

"Yes I did. Most likely a rock slid somewhere between here and the entrance we've been using. Once the water calms, I'll go take a look. The others came out onto the ledge

There were no more rumbles and no more agitated water. Alex slipped into his fins and air tanks, tied a rope to his waist, lit a flashlight, and submerged.

"What's taking him so long?" Kit said after no more than five minutes had passed.

No one responded. They had all gathered on the ledge. The boys sat dangling their legs in the water. Connie squatted picking at the gravel. David paced.

Presently, Alex returned. The news was not good.

"Been a rock slide in the vicinity of that huge boulder. No way to get through that passage now."

"Now?" Kit asked.

"Several options," Alex said. "One is to blow that skylight hole wider and proceed out that way. It would bring all kinds of attention to this spot, however, and might weaken and dislodge the ceiling. We don't need either of those things just now. Option two is for us to use mini-charges of explosive to work our way through the rubble down there. It looks like the debris fell from around the dome, which was formed when the boulder fell when we were here a month or so ago. The release of all that weight probably sent the structure into disequilibrium and just now finally began breaking up. "

"That sounds a lot like you're saying more may be on the way."

"It is a possibility for sure."

"Where do we get those mini charges you mentioned?"

"We have enough large charges with us to make quite a few."

"How will you light it under water," Marc asked.

"The fuse is waxed and has an oxygen releasing chemical built into it. Once lit it won't go out underwater."

Kit looked at David.

"We try that first then?"

"If it isn't going to be too risky for Connie and Alex."

"A piece of cake," Connie said. "I'll make the firecrackers and Al can go play with them under water."

"Sounds like you have done this before," Marc said.

Connie responded.

"You know the story about the little Dutch boy – the one who put his finger in the hole in the dike to save his town?"

"Yes."

"Alex was the *other* little boy who blew the hole in it in the first place."

"It's set then," Kit said acknowledging the humor with a faint, quick, smile. "While you two work on that the rest of us can consider the problem of loot removal."

"There may be one more thing," Alex said. "Have you tasted the water in this pool here in the cave?"

"Yes. I got it in my mouth regularly while Uncle David and I were recovering the first treasure a few weeks ago. I hadn't considered it before but its *not* salt water. How can that be?"

"Springs, I assume," David said. "Probably the remnants of the springs that carved out this cave in the first place."

"How can that pose a problem," Kit asked looking at Alex. "At least we have drinking water."

"If the rubble significantly cut off the water flow *out* of here it will begin backing up *in* here. We have no idea of the flow rate so we need to begin marking the water level on a wall – under the skylight perhaps. Every fifteen minutes. Hopefully the debris from the rock slide is porous enough to keep up with the flow from the springs."

"I'll handle the marks," Marc said.

"Seems appropriate that Marc should mark the marks," Kit said trying to keep things light.

He turned to David.

"That leaves you and me to brainstorm about the treasure."

"You were able to reach Father A a while ago?"

"Yes, amid lots of static and cutting in and out."

"Get him again and see if he has a total tally for us – either on projected worth or total ounces."

Kit soon had the information.

"Would you believe almost 8,000 ounces per chest. At a mere five hundred dollars an ounce that brings each chest in at a minimum of four million dollars. Take that times ten chests and we got forty million. Father A says his guy thinks that will double in terms of artifact value. We're talking eighty million dollars!"

"It will take some time to spend that as your programs get organized. Do you want to take all of this out now or wait until later?"

"I hadn't thought of that. Let me consult with Father A."

David watched Connie work dividing the coated paper into sheets in which he rolled the powder and a short portion of the fuse. He taped them shut and placed them within easy reach from the water.

Alex gathered the first hand full.

"This will go faster with somebody in the water keeping these babies dry until I light them."

David slipped into the water. It seemed suddenly colder. They swam as far as the cave wall would allow. Alex handed David a lighter and the charges.

"I'll light one from the lighter as you hold it, submerge, set it, and return before it goes off. Then I'll go back down and see what's happened. We'll repeat until it clears or we run out of explosive."

There was nothing to discuss. Alex selected a charge, David lit the lighter, Alex lit the fuse, and was immediately underwater. In less than a minute he was back. As he surfaced the explosion was heard – faint, though it could be felt as a powerful surge through the water.

The report was positive. A significant amount of rubble had been moved. Alex's private fear was that the shock wave might bring down even more from above. That time it hadn't. There seemed to be no other choice.

They repeated the routine five more times. David swam back to Connie

and got more. Marc reported the water was, in fact, rising – three inches since his first mark.

"That has to be a mammoth spring," David said.

He turned to Kit.

"Better let Father A know we're in something of a pickle here. What did he say about moving the gold?"

"His guy still wants to offer it all at once. He already has some bid commitments."

"Okay then here's my idea. Alex you listen, too. Brazil is a huge corn producer. Virtually every vehicle in the country runs on ethanol – one of their outstanding achievements in terms of planetary health. Corn is stored in huge storage silos and it's transported from the trucks into the tops of those big, round, silos by the use of augers – enclosed rotating screws

"We could feed one down through the opening up there. Then, arrange a pipe down to the ground below opening into a gravel truck. I'm sure there must be hand turned models available."

It received a thumbs up from Alex. Connie nodded.

"I'll get on it with Father A," Kit said. "He knows everybody. Probably a helicopter will have to be involved."

"Let him handle that. He's clearly resourceful. It will be refreshing to hear how a priest puts a camouflaging spin on such a thing and keeps it out of the papers," David said, chuckling at the thought."

Kit began taking care of things.

Alex went back to work having found a piece of wood which served as a dry, floating, repository for his charges. David re-entered the rear cave to estimate the volume of the stash. Using what he remembered to be the formula for establishing the volume of a cone he calculated somewhere between 250 and 300 cubic feet. At his estimate of four thousand ounces of gold per cubic foot – about 333 pounds – it came to one whale of a lot of pounds.

Twenty minutes later Kit received a call. All the augers were too wide. Father A had, however, located a narrow, portable, conveyer belt with cross bars, used for moving sections of sugarcane, by far the largest source of ethanol in Brazil. It was twenty five meters long and could be hand cranked. He had arranged for a salvage company to deliver it by helicopter within the hour. It would be slid in through the opening near the ceiling. He had also arranged for a foot wide metal culvert to be set in place outside to catch the material as it dropped off the upper end of the conveyer belt. It would empty into a power sized dump truck as had been suggested.

David had a final suggestion and Kit relayed it to Father A.

"Better have the top of the truck's bed covered with tightly stretched canvas to keep prying eyes away. Cut a hole in it just large enough to insert the pipe. Also send us five, sturdy, coal shovels"

David hoped the conveyer was narrow enough. Anything wider than eight inches could not enter.

The water had risen another six inches. Six more and it would begin creeping up onto the ledge. Alex continued to blast at the pile of rocks. Occasionally a piece would fall from the ceiling of the main cave and splash its way to the bottom of the pool. Several had come close to Alex as he worked under water.

They soon heard the helicopter and saw an unfamiliar face peering at them through the opening. Marc translated.

"Got shovels first – coming down on a rope."

Kit and Marc received them and moved them back out of the way.

"Got just enough room for the gadget to slide in here," the man said, "But the angle through the rock will be tricky."

The rest of the procedure fell into place quite efficiently and the conveyer was soon firmly set in place.

"Got sand bags," the man said. Thirty at Father A's request. I'm beginning to send them down the conveyer now. May need to turn the cranks backwards to get them started."

"For a priest he sure thinks like a survivalist," Marc said to Kit.

"His first calling was to be a pirate. Apparently he was well into his education in that direction when the priesthood grabbed him."

"I didn't know. Interesting."

Alex stopped long enough to supervise the setting of the sandbags. He placed them so both the entrance into the rear room and the rear of the conveyer were enclosed and protected. It bought them some eighteen inches of water level. A large black plastic tarp was the last thing to come down the belt.

Marc and Kit looked puzzled.

"To wrap around the front of the bags to help make it a water tight dam."

"You're saying a priest just gave us a dam gift," Kit said.

Except for Kit's own private chuckle there was no response. The tarp was soon in place. The water began splashing up over the outer edge of the ledge.

"Seems like I've been here before, guys," Kit said, paling at the sight, all the left over terror suddenly welling up inside him. Beyond that he kept it to himself.

"Here's the plan," David said." Two of you on the crank. I'll work in the rear room and shovel the material into the pass-under tunnel. Somebody out here will shovel it from there into the feed box at the base of the conveyer. You may need to rotate between cranking and shoveling. I imagine the one with the shovel will tire first."

With nods all around David crawled back through the passageway. Kit set three air tanks in after him.

"Just in case," he called to his Uncle.

David gathered them in, realizing it had been a good precaution. Should the water penetrate or overflow the sandbag dike, the passage would fill. Although that would not prevent him from still exiting through the water, it would remove the source of fresh air.

They all donned gloves and David began dumping shovel after shovel of the treasure into the passage hole.

Connie drew first shovel outside. The boys turned the crank. The gold and jewels began their climb to freedom. It worked surprisingly well. On occasion a coin would tumble to the ledge or into the pool. The rest reached the top where they plummeted into the waiting truck.

About an hour into the activity, with the water up over the bottom sand bag a familiar voice called down to them from the opening.

"Hey Father A," Kit called back. "Engage the Angel Express to take you up there?"

"Angels of a kind I suppose. These guys are all giving us there service. I just felt the need to survey the situation myself. How are you doing, *really*?"

Kit explained the operation.

"Alex is still trying to blast our way out through the rock slide that has us trapped in here. David is in the back room shoveling the treasure into the pass through, there. And you can see what we're up to out here."

Connie leaned on his shovel and addressed Father A.

"We could use more explosives. Let me write you a note with the details and send it up the conveyer belt."

"That's related to something I've been told to tell you," Father said. "The government geologists are concerned with the blasts. They say a large section of the front of the bluff here is poised to collapse. If it does, it will fill in the entrance to the cave and you'll never get out. I've arranged an alternative. A school of frogmen have arrived and they are on their way to begin removing the rubble from the other side. They have a 'claw-dingus-something-or-other' that will speed the process."

"Connie gave him the thumbs up."

"I need to leave, now," Father A said. "This harness contraption has numbed my groin and although that presents few problems for a priest, I really don't want to have to deal with dangling gangrene?"

He waved and disappeared.

Kit turned to Marc.

"I've been meaning to ask you if Father A is really representative of Catholic priests in general."

Considering that last remark of his I sincerely doubt it. When I was nine, my priest taught us boys about the birds and bees without ever using the terms penis or vagina. In the end some were still convinced intercourse involved the index finger and the ear canal."

Kit and Connie broke into laughter. Marc seemed to be at his funniest when he wasn't trying to be funny."

"You got all that straight, yet, yourself" Kit asked at last.

"Oh, yes. *My* thumb into *her* mouth. I got it down cold. Well . . . not down cold as in I've ever done it, you understand."

Kit couldn't resist.

"A brand new meaning comes to mind for the term *Thumbs Up*."

"You're awful, you know?"

"Maybe. I just try to legitimize those perfectly normal parts of human life that others have improperly turned into sordid and immoral events. Erections happen, thank goodness, so why not celebrate them as the normal, wonderful, essential, happenings they are instead of characterizing them as dirty and disgusting?"

Alex pulled himself up onto the ledge to sit and rest.

"I always come in on the laughter – never on the joke."

Connie relayed the bad news and good news about the blasting and frogmen.

"I'll get on a shovel as well, then," He said, standing in the water which was at that point calf deep.

"Let me go in and spell David for a few minutes," Kit said. "I'll fill him on what's unfolding out here."

Alex took a shovel and Connie moved to help Mark at the crank.

"Aren't your arms and shoulders tired, yet?" Connie asked him.

"Oh, yes! But concentrating on the pain makes we momentarily forget the probable consequences of that growing crack in the ceiling."

He pointed.

"Yes. I see. Some of that has occurred today has it?"

"ALL of it has occurred today – most of it within the past two hours."

"Al, look at the new crack in the ceiling. What do you say?"

"Ouch!"

"Marc's been tracking its progress."

"In what direction is it growing?" Alex asked, wider or lower?"

"It is opening up – peeling back sort of. Dropping at the edges."

Kit reappeared.

"Get David out here," Alex said.

Kit called to David and he was soon standing there in the hole, stretching. Alex pointed to the ceiling.

"Ouch!"

"Already been used by Al," Marc said. "I've reserved, 'Oh, my!' Connie is speechless, and I assume Kit will have some expletive that the prudes of the world will demand be purged from the record – *Nix* ed, so to speak."

It had been funny but the sudden realization of danger would postpone the laughter until it would be recalled at some future time.

"No real alternative but to be here at the moment," Alex said. "So, I'd suggest we get back to work. Want me inside, David?"

"No, it's actually a fairly easy assignment – run the scoop into the pile along the floor and then slide the loaded shovel over to the hole and dump it."

"What kind of a dent have we put into the pile?" Connie asked.

"Maybe a tenth of it. Hard to judge from a cone."

"Ten more hours and the water level will be up to our necks," Marc said.

There was a loud noise – the sound of a mammoth crack as it inched its way down the wall to their left as they stood facing the pool. It stopped several meters above the water level. The cracked section of the ceiling slumped another few inches.

"Back to work, men," Alex said calmly as if they had just taken a leisurely break to watch the heavens on a star lit night.

The process speeded up though no one spoke of it. Kit shuttled back and forth between the main cave and the room behind. He helped David fill the hole almost full then slithered through it on his back and helped empty it onto the conveyer belt. The predicted ten hours to completion was likely cut to seven because of it.

They drank from their bottles but no one considered stopping for food. Rotating jobs – and thereby muscles – helped maintain their stamina.

By the time the water was within an inch of the top of the little levy, nearly half of the treasure had been removed.

The first face they had seen in the opening reappeared.

"Got more sandbags and lunch. Which first?"

"Bags, definitely bags first," Kit said.

There were thirty more, which were immediately set in place and the tarp re-configured.

With the dike better than waist high, they breathed easier and began picking at the food as they continued to work. From time to time they bailed water out of the pass through. The best sandbag dikes leak a little.

The higher dike was a good news bad news event. Higher meant it remained dryer inside and the fresh air passage stayed open. It also meant the one who was shoveling had to raise each load shoulder high in order to dump it into the box on the conveyer. The size of each shovelful decreased.

The water from the springs was cold – much colder than the ocean water. By four they had to take a break. Their bodies had called a mandatory halt.

Kit called Father A.

"What's the poop out there? We're taking fifteen in here. Could sure use some rubber wading pants, like fly fishermen wear."

"The frogmen's claw gadget would not work for some reason. I guess the debris fell mostly to your side of a big boulder and they can't work the device around some corner. So they are attacking it one stone at a time."

"What cover story are you using to explain away all the strange activity out there on the beach?"

"We are removing a material that almost proved fatal to a young man earlier in the week – the treasure being the cause of your brush with death out on the island. I think I'll be forgiven for the liberal spin I put on it."

"I see. *Lying* has now been relegated to the realm of us *liberals*."

"I thought you understood that."

"No confessions heard related to lying, you're telling me."

"We Catholics are middle of the road. A few liberal types hang among us. Seriously, how are you doing?"

"The water is really cold and keeps rising – from springs in the cave we think. Have two or three hours of work left. Should get it done if the cracking ceiling and wall don't fall in on us first."

"I'm praying for you, you know."

"If it's all the same I prefer you get me my rubber britches first!"

The rest period extended into a half hour. The pants arrived with wool sox.

When Marc saw the sox he commented:

"There must have been a mother working in that store."

With warm feet and merely frigid legs they went back to work.

By five o'clock the shadows and position of the sun outside had significantly reduced the light inside. They lit the remaining lanterns out in the main room.

Alex went back into the water to investigate the rubble and see if he could hear activity on the other side. He reported no sounds and then rejoined the others.

At seven David crawled out from the hole.

"You look terrible, Uncle David."

"A good match to how I feel, then," he said breaking a quick smile. "Every last gold piece, every last jewel, every last bauble is now out of there."

The task had been completed none too soon. The side wall cracked further. The ceiling slumped and a huge chunk broke away and plunged into the pool. It sent a wave up over the dike filling the passageway. Connie removed the last several shovels of dripping treasure. The boys cranked the final pieces of gold and jewelry up the belt and into the waiting culvert.

He called Father A.

"It's all out of here. Now we just need to get *us* all out of here. A big hunk of ceiling just collapsed and I imagine more will follow."

His conversation was interrupted as a geyser erupted in the center of the pool – about where the last, big, piece had fallen. The hydrant size stream of water squirted to the ceiling from where it spread in a solid, umbrella-shaped, sheet, breaking up as it fell back toward the surface. The water rose rapidly.

Kit's phone rang. It was Father A with new information.

"The frogmen report that a sudden surge of pressure from your side has emptied the passage of a significant amount of the debris. You may be able to exit now. They caution that material continues to be dislodged and swept out. So keep your wits about you and be careful!"

Without a good-bye, Kit hung up, zipped the phone inside a baggy, and began shedding his rubber pants.

"The channel is open. We can leave," he said.

As they helped each other into the diving tanks Kit filled them in on the cautions.

"You boys out of here, NOW," Alex said.

Without hesitation they were on their way. David followed, then Connie, and finally Alex. By the time Alex submerged, the water level had receded to its original level. The fountain continued to spray but at a diminishing rate.

A second section of the ceiling fell, grazing Alex on his hip.

Presently, they had all surfaced outside the cave. Convinced they were fit to be on their own, the frogmen entered their boat and sped away.

The rental boat had waited patiently through it all, having kept the important cargo safe – two spools of twisters, a half dozen Marshmallow Puffs, lunch for five, and even enough appropriately sized shirts and pants to go around.

* * *

The next morning they said their goodbyes to Marc who was headed home, still uncertain whether or not he would share his adventure with his family. They knew their Marc – dependable, cautious, conservative, good Catholic boy, Marc. He wasn't yet ready to bring them discomfort by tampering with that image. Perhaps someday.

With the treasure entrusted to Father A, David and Kit said their farewells amid hugs and tears and promises of emails. The priest had a parting comment.

"I don't understand the two of you, you know – near atheists dedicated to spreading kindness and love around the world. Although it may not be to your satisfaction I find the only way I can deal with it at this point in my life is to think of you as good Catholics who just haven't discovered that yet. God Bless."

Connie and Alex were busy getting the Old Goose ready for the flight back to Indiana and then on to the Rivera to renew their fight to enjoy retirement.

"I have a really odd request," Uncle David.

"And how would that be out of the ordinary?"

They exchanged smiles.

"I want us to go back into the cave one more time. It is as though Louie LaPique himself is calling to me through time."

"Now maybe *that's* a little over the edge," David said. "Sure. Now?"

"Yeah!"

"Okay then, to the docks."

The drive was mostly silent – within the speed limit even. They rented diving gear and a small, outboard, boat and were soon anchored above the entrance to the cave.

"You don't have to come along, you know," Kit said.

"I wouldn't miss it for the World."

They made ready and entered the water. Inside, the huge boulder was still in place. They took time to force a few more stones around its base to assure its stability.

In the main room the gusher had stopped and except for the jagged irregularities in the ceiling, the crack in the wall, and the sand bags, it all looked like it had that first time they had been there.

Kit led the way into the rear room. He lit a single candle for light and placed it on the floor. They sat, backs to the wall, David with his legs out straight – crossed at the ankles; Kit with his knees drawn up – arms folded across them.

"I've been thinking of the irony, I suppose it would be called. LaPique the pirate ravaging the ships of the opulently – perhaps *greedily* – wealthy and, through a series of bizarre twists and turns making his take available to help the poorest of the poor, the neediest of the needy.

"It's not a mind-blowing set of thoughts, I know, but I feel this need to thank him. I can't thank him for the pillaging and the killing that accompanied his life, but for the end result. Am I sounding certifiably insane?"

"Your *Positizing*."

"I'm what?"

"In its essence it means finding something worthwhile in even the most despicable or disheartening situations. Few bad things or losses don't have something positive to be gained from them – not that that *makes up for* the bad stuff you understand."

Kit nodded.

"Something feels right in here to me. Do you feel it?"

"Honestly, no. But I can feel the sincerity of your emotion – the revelation, perhaps – that you are experiencing."

They sat in silence for some time. Kit straightened out his legs and sat back. The candle burned low. The shadows swayed, attuned to, but always a beat behind, the flickering of the flame. The cave that held the story would remain for centuries more. The two men sitting there would live out the time allowed to men. The skeletons of those now gone, would sit forever silent. Or, perhaps not!

Kit stretched, preparing to stand and leave. His arm brushed the skeleton sitting to his right. Its arm fell; the hand came to rest in Kit's lap.

"Getting cozy with the long term residents here, are you?" David quipped.

"So it seems. That's like reaching out across time in a very eerie sense. Looks like he took a single slug to his left temple."

"Look at the ring finger," David said. "Some bauble there I'd say."

Kit touched it with his finger and it slipped off into his palm. It was corroded so he took out his hanky and worked on it.

"An initial ring. Engraved in what looks like onyx. It's all filled in with hard packed dust and dirt and such. Let's see here. My gosh! "

He handed it to his uncle who verbalized the find.

"L. L. Would you believe Louie LaPique?"

"You think? But he's been shot and left here."

"Look at the other two skulls. A single bullet directly through their foreheads."

"I'm not following you," Kit said.

"Louie's handedness?"

"Left, we're told. Oh, my! You think? Suicide?"

"The reports all agree he was last seen on the run in this vicinity barely one step ahead of the authorities. He wouldn't be taken alive – we know that much about him. Life only had value while he was pursuing his passions."

"So he came back here to die with the treasure, hoping, I'd guess, that his sons would find him. He shot his companions and then himself. How sad to die alone with no other option."

With his eyes, Kit thoughtfully examined the full length of the remains, then said:

"I wanted to thank him. Perhaps the best I can do is bury him."

Fifteen minutes later they were back out on the ledge. LaPique had been laid to rest in the passageway that led between the rooms. The sand and stones, which he had used to fill it, covered his remains.

Kit decided the ring should go to Father A. David would give up his seat on the Board of Directors to Marc.

"I suddenly feel free from this place, Uncle David. I'm ready to go home."