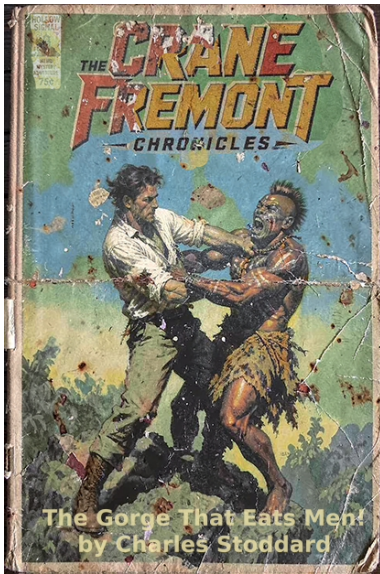




The Gorge That Eats Men!

by Charles Stoddard

A Crane Fremont Chronicles Story

Chapter I: Gas in the Jungle

The trouble started with water. Once every thirty-odd years the Humboldt Current, coming up cold out of the Antarctic, runs into El Niño off the coast of Peru at the wrong time and in the wrong place.

El Niño means the Little One. It's a warm current that slides down from the north across the Equator, and when it comes too far and stays too long, the fish die in the bays and rot on the beaches, and the crops wither, and the storms come out of season.

Rupert Carnahan didn't care about any of that. He was getting ready to fly across South America the hard way so he could write a book about it.

If he'd thought about it, he would have been pleased. A freak storm season made a fine first chapter. Carnahan had written *I Found Madagascar* and *The Man-Eaters of Tanganyika*, and he knew what a hard opening was worth in royalties. He called himself an explorer. He was really an adventurer, which is a different trade with better pay.

The plan was to fly from Lima to the mouths of the Amazon, avoiding every regular air route, and photograph long stretches of jungle where white men had gone in and not come out. It looked like one more stunt from a man who made his living on stunts.

That was the point. For almost a year Carnahan had been an undercover officer in Army Intelligence. Japan was looking across the Pacific with an empty belly, the Nazis were grinding through Europe, and Washington needed men who could wander the world without anybody asking why. A famous writer

collecting material for his next book could go nearly anywhere. Carnahan went, and his reports went home by quiet channels.

What brought him to Peru this time was a rumor. It might be nothing. It might be very bad.

The real trouble began after the plane had crossed the Andes and left Huascarán behind, that enormous white peak, fourth highest in the hemisphere. Lima and the coastal range were hours back.

On a crag high above the eastern slopes, a gray-headed condor sat on her nest and watched the sky.

Condor chicks are ugly, bald, wet-looking things, and the buzzards like them. Six buzzards had been circling the nest most of the morning. The mother had driven them off once, and they had come back, patient as bill collectors.

Then the storm rolled down out of the north.

Carnahan didn't think about currents when the wind caught the plane. He thought about the ground. The ship was flung sideways and dropped two hundred feet in a breath, and Ed, the pilot, fought the stick with both hands and tried to climb. They were near their ceiling already. The Andes winds came in hard and twisting, and the struts groaned. Carnahan sat with his hands an inch off the dual controls.

They were over the back slope of the range now, the long broken drop toward the Amazon basin. The storm had pushed them well south of their filed course. Carnahan didn't seem to mind. He unfolded a map covered in small penciled code marks and studied it with his lips pursed.

The storm blew itself out inside twenty minutes. It hadn't hurt the plane. It had hurt Ed. Somewhere in the fight he had wrenched a muscle in his right arm, and it ached for a while and then quit aching, and he forgot it.

Carnahan picked up the communicator.

"Want me to spell you, Ed?"

"What for? I'm fine."

"I want some pictures. Bring her around south."

He read off the heading. Ed was a good pilot. After the photographs, Carnahan figured, he'd take the stick and let the man rest. The photographs came first. They were the only reason he'd come to Peru.

They reached the place quicker than he'd hoped. Carnahan wiped his goggles on his sleeve, leaned out into the wind, and looked down.

To the east the jungle began, a solid green mass jammed up against the foot of the mountains. Below, a gorge cut deep into the range, so deep the bottom was in shade at noon. A thread of white water ran through it.

The condor came out of nowhere.

She was huge, ten feet from wingtip to wingtip, her feathers the color of gunmetal. She dived at the plane, saw too late what it was, and tried to swerve.

Ed hauled on the stick. The torn muscle in his arm locked up, and his hand jerked. That was all it took.

The propeller went into her at full speed. There was a shriek of metal, a burst of glass, and a cloud of feathers and red meat sprayed back across the windscreen. Something struck Ed in the face. He didn't cry out. A curl of steel from the propeller hub had gone through his goggle lens and into his eye and kept going. He sagged forward against the stick, and the nose went down.

Carnahan was pinned in his seat. The engine died, coughed, caught again, and ran rough. Gasoline was spraying from a broken feed line and splattering his boots. Then a tongue of flame licked out from under the cowl and streamed back along the fuselage.

He got a hand on Ed's shoulder and pulled. The pilot's head rolled toward him. Half the face was gone under blood and bird. There was a glistening gray bulge where the goggle had been, and a few condor feathers were stuck in it. The good eye was open and looking at nothing.

Carnahan let go.

They were losing altitude fast. He fumbled the belt loose, burned his palm on the cockpit rim, got a knee up, and threw himself over the side.

The wind took his breath and his hearing. He counted ten with his mouth open and yanked the ripcord. The canopy cracked open above him and nearly tore him in half at the waist. He hung there swinging, sick and stunned, and watched the plane go.

It hit the lip of the gorge burning. For a second it hung there on the edge. Then it tipped over and went down, and the white water at the bottom took it without a mark.

Carnahan did the arithmetic. That river probably ran a thousand miles through nothing before it reached a town. Nobody would find the wreck. If they did, they'd have no idea where to look for him.

A shadow went across the sun.

The condor's mate was coming. It was as big as the first, and it came straight in, wings half folded, the hooked beak open. Those claws could open a man's belly. They could also slit the parachute, and that would come to the same thing a little later.

He dragged the revolver out of its holster. He was swinging on the shroud lines like a clock weight, and the bird grew in his sights and shrank and grew again. He fired. Missed. The bird raked past him and he felt a hot tearing pain along his thigh, and when he looked down his trouser leg was hanging open and the meat underneath was open too, a long red furrow full of blood that ran down into his boot.

The bird wheeled and came back.

This time he waited. He waited until he could see the scabby skin on its bald head and the red rims of its eyes, and then he shot it through the chest.

It slammed into him anyway. The talons clenched in his jacket and in the skin of his shoulder underneath, and the dying bird thrashed and beat at him with wings like canvas sails, and he smelled carrion on its breath. Then the grip loosened. It dropped away, turning slowly, and fell into the gorge.

He put the gun back. His hands were shaking and he didn't trust himself to hold it. His leg was warm and wet to the knee, and he could feel the blood squelching in his boot.

Then he looked down and forgot about his leg.

There was a fort below him.

It stood at the mouth of the gorge where the river came out between two cliffs. The lower walls were old stone, fitted Inca work, huge blocks set without mortar. On top of that somebody had poured concrete, and there was steel plate and glass catching the sun. It looked as if a contractor had found a ruin and decided to finish it. It wasn't a house, though. It was squat and armored, a pill-box out of the Maginot Line, tucked so far under an overhang of cliff that a plane passing at any height would miss it. A bare, sloping plain ran from its door a few hundred feet down to the edge of the jungle.

Black smoke was rolling out of the gorge.

The wind carried him to the treeline. He came down with his knees bent and crashed into thorn scrub, and the chute dragged him sideways through it. It took him a while to cut loose. When he got to his feet, his face and hands were scored with bleeding scratches, and his leg wouldn't take his full weight.

On the pill-box a stubby gun was turning on its mount. Every few seconds it bucked. Shells arced out over the plain and burst in fat black clouds that spread and settled.

The draft out of the gorge pushed the clouds toward the forest. Toward him. A thread of it reached him, and his throat closed up on a stink of burnt pepper and something chemical underneath. His eyes ran. He stepped back, and his bad leg folded and dumped him in the leaves.

Something was talking in the jungle.

Low voices, all around him, in no tongue he'd ever heard. He couldn't tell how many. Then a drum started, soft and quick, and the voices stopped to let it speak.

Carnahan found his gun in his hand again. He didn't remember drawing it.

He couldn't make sense of it. If the people in that fort wanted him dead, they'd chosen a roundabout way to go about it. Gas only drove a man off. He could outrun gas.

Except he couldn't. He'd lost his machete with the plane. The forest behind him was a wall of creepers and thornbush and hanging lianas thick as his wrist, and there was no trail. A man with two good legs and a blade would need an hour to make a hundred yards. The flies had already found his thigh. He could feel them crawling in the wound, a dozen at least, and when he slapped at them his hand came away red.

The black cloud reached the treeline. He couldn't see the fort anymore.

A shape came through the murk. He raised the gun.

It was a girl.

She wore light tropical clothes, stained and torn at the hem, and her face was hidden behind a military gas mask. She held a second mask in her left hand and an automatic pistol in her right. Long black hair streamed out behind her. She was running badly, staggering, and she ran right into him and shoved the spare mask against his chest.

"Put it on!" Her voice came through the canister thin and high. "Quick!"

The drum got louder.

He pulled the mask over his head. The rubber was hot and stank of somebody else's sweat. She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the cloud.

Something went *tuk* against her mask. A little sliver of cane, no longer than his finger, was stuck in the canvas strap beside her ear, quivering. There was a dark gummy smear on the tip.

He looked back. The jungle was green and solid and showed him nothing.

"Wait a minute," he said. "What the hell is this?"

She dragged him on.

"*La gente del veneno*. The Poison People. They'll kill us if they can. Come on!"

They went into the black cloud blind. He could hear his own breathing roaring in the mask and the drum behind them, angry now. His leg felt like it was full of hot sand. They crossed the open ground at a stumbling run, and then stone loomed up ahead, and a steel door swung open, and she pulled him through.

It banged shut.

They were in a bare room with smooth concrete walls. Gun racks lined two sides of it, rifles and shotguns and boxes of ammunition stacked on the floor. It smelled of gun oil and old sweat. A man stood in the middle of it with his fists on his hips.

He was the fattest man Carnahan had ever seen. His white drill suit was soaked through and strained at every seam. His head was bald and pink and running with sweat, which dripped off his jowls onto his collar. His eyes were small and wet and angry, and when he opened his mouth his teeth were black.

"You little fool. What's the idea, Astrid? You want to get yourself killed?"

The girl pulled off her mask. Her face was pale and fine-boned and very pretty, and her dark eyes were furious.

"Why not?" she said. "It's one way out, Dellara."

The anger went off the fat man's face at once. He started to laugh. It made no sound, but his whole body shook with it, the belly and the chins and the loose flesh under his arms.

"You didn't stay out long, I notice. And look. Company."

Carnahan took off his own mask. The air inside the room was close and hot, and it made him dizzy.

"Would somebody tell me what's going on here?" he said. "My name's Rupert Carnahan. I'm an explorer. My plane went down back over the range..."

"We saw," Dellara said. "We were giving the savages a little something to think about. They were massing for a rush, so we hit them first. Astrid saw your chute and went out to get you."

He took a nut out of his pocket and put it in his mouth and started chewing. Betel. That was what had done his teeth. When he smiled, red juice ran in the corners of his mouth. He took a pistol out of his waistband and held it loosely, pointed nowhere in particular.

"You're carrying, Carnahan. Let's have it."

"Why?"

"Astrid can explain later. Yours too, Astrid. You know you don't carry a gun in the gorge."

Carnahan looked at the pistol and handed over his revolver. The girl threw hers at Dellara's head. He caught it without looking up.

A bell rang somewhere in the building. A door at the back of the room opened, and a man came in wearing a leather flying helmet with the goggles pushed up. He had a narrow, hawkish face and a little pencil mustache that he'd obviously spent time on.

"All set," he said.

Dellara grunted. The flyer smiled and went to a corner and picked up a small cardboard suitcase.

"My end," he said.

"Peanuts, Patel," Dellara said. "Pretty soon there'll be real money for everybody."

Patel set the suitcase on a crate and snapped it open. It was full of dark lumps the size of oranges, packed in straw. He lifted one out by its hair.

It was a human head. Somebody had taken the skull out of it and shrunk what was left down to the size of a fist. The lips were sewn shut with cord. The skin was black and leathery and had a grain to it, and there were blue tattoo lines on the cheeks. A few flies came up out of the straw and circled the suitcase and settled again.

"Good bait," Patel said, turning it to look at the face. "Tourists go crazy for them in Lima. Are the Indians gone?"

"They'll keep clear of the gas for a while. Go on."

Patel put the head back, closed the case, and went out.

The girl went to a round port in the wall as if she couldn't help it. Carnahan limped after her. His boot left red prints on the concrete.

Through the thick glass he watched a cabin plane roll out from somewhere under the cliff and start down the bare slope. The engines came up to a roar. The plane bounced, gathered speed, and lifted. It banked out over the jungle and was gone behind a shoulder of the mountain.

A hand closed on Carnahan's shoulder, right where the condor's talons had gone in, and spun him around.

He was looking into Dellara's face. He could smell the betel and the sweat. He jerked free.

Dellara let him. Then he hit him.

The fist came up from somewhere around the fat man's knees, and it landed under Carnahan's jaw and lifted him off his feet. He went down on his back with his mouth full of blood. He tried to get up. The room swung around him, and when it settled Dellara was standing over him with the pistol, shaking with that silent laugh again, tears squeezing out of his little eyes.

"Take him away, Astrid," he said, when he could talk. "Don't try anything, Carnahan. I shoot straight, and you just found out I hit straight. Keep it in mind in the gorge." The black teeth showed. "And keep in mind there's only one way out of it. You won't use that one, though. Astrid will tell you about *la gente del veneno*."

Carnahan spat blood on the floor and said nothing.

Dellara didn't know. That was the one good thing in the whole day. To the fat man he was a writer with a bad leg and a smashed plane. If Dellara ever found out he was talking to an Army officer, Carnahan's head would end up in Patel's suitcase.

He had to get word out. The plane was the only way. How often did Patel fly?

He found out the next day. Once a week, to Lima.

On Patel's second trip after Carnahan came down, the flyer climbed into his cabin plane with his suitcase of heads, and somewhere in that plane, without his knowledge, was a message in code.

Chapter II: The Message in the Head

Lima is the oldest Spanish capital in South America, and James Grigg spent four days there drinking most of it. He was a plump man from Terre Haute with round eyes and a sunburned scalp, and he liked pisco brandy better than he liked churches, so he saw a lot of bars and one cathedral. Then he took a cab down to Callao and got back on his ship.

The first night out, steaming south, he asked a man up to his cabin to see something.

The man was Dr. Barden, a young botanist collecting for a museum in Philadelphia. Barden didn't much care for Grigg. He did care for Grigg's liquor, which was better than the ship's, so he came. He sat on the edge of the bunk with a highball and watched Grigg dig through his steamer trunk, throwing out shirts and socks and a pair of carpet slippers.

"Forty bucks," Grigg said, coming up with a cigar box. "Forty American dollars. Wait'll you see."

He opened the box.

The thing inside was wrapped in a page of *El Comercio*. Grigg peeled the newspaper back with two fingers, the way a man unwraps a fish. The smell came up first, a dry, sour smell, old leather and smoke and something under that which Barden didn't care to name.

It was a head about the size of a big man's fist. The hair was long and coarse and black and had been oiled. The eyelids were pinned shut with little slivers of palm wood. The lips had been stitched together with a cord and the ends of the cord hung down past the chin in a dirty fringe. The skin was nearly black, and it was puckered and grained all over, and there were blue tattoo lines on the cheeks and forehead.

"Genuine," Grigg said. "Shrunk. The real McCoy. Something to show the boys at the lodge, huh?"

"It'll do that," Barden said.

He set down his glass and picked the head up by the hair. It weighed almost nothing. He turned it toward the lamp. A small brown beetle crawled out of one nostril, considered the light, and went back in.

"Nobody knows how they do it," Grigg said. "That's what the fellow told me. It's a secret."

"I've heard they take the skull out through a slit in the back," Barden said. "Then they fill the skin with hot sand, and run hot stones over it inside and out. Big stones first, then smaller. Keeps the features while it shrinks. Supposed to take about a day."

Grigg's face fell a little.

"Well, I had to smuggle it out, anyway," he said. "The customs boys don't let you... say, what's the matter?"

Barden had brought the head closer to the lamp. He was frowning at the left cheek.

"I don't know. You have a magnifying glass?"

Grigg found one in his shaving kit. Barden bent over the head with it. Close up, the skin was a landscape, cracked and pitted, and the tattoo lines ran across it in rows.

"Some of this work is new," he said. "Look here. These lines on the cheek, the ink's sitting differently. It was put in after the skin dried. Somebody pricked it in with a needle." He held the glass still. "Does this remind you of anything?"

Grigg squinted. His breath was mostly brandy.

"No."

"Dots and dashes. Short and long, short and long. You'd never see it if you weren't looking." Barden wrapped the head back in its newspaper. "Let's go see Sparks. He's all right. He won't say anything to the customs at Valparaiso."

The wireless operator was a thin Scot with nicotine fingers and a cold. He sat the head on his desk on a sheet of blotting paper, put the glass to it, and wrote down letters on a pad, sniffing every few seconds.

"It's Morse, all right," he said. "Not much of it. Room's limited, I suppose." He tapped the pencil on the pad. "Three short, three long, three short. That's an SOS. Then it says, 'Crane Fremont. Find Patel. Lima. Carnahan.' That's all of it."

Barden and Sparks looked at each other.

"But what's it mean?" Grigg said.

"It's somebody asking for help," Barden said. "Whoever did this figured the head would get passed around. People like to show these things off. Sooner or later somebody who knew Morse would look at it."

"Carnahan," Sparks said. "That's the writer, isn't it? The fellow who went missing over the Andes. It was in the papers before we sailed."

"Who's this Fremont, though?" Grigg said.

Sparks blew his nose before he answered.

"Adventurer. Soldier of fortune, sort of. Nobody knows much about him except he turns up wherever somebody's in a bad spot. He sorted out some business in Arabia last year. Bunch of oil men got themselves in trouble."

"He has people all over the world," Barden said. "Agents. Shopkeepers, mostly, that sort of thing. They take messages and pass the important ones along to wherever he is."

"And where's that?"

"Nobody knows that but Fremont. Fremont and two men who work with him. Red Argent and Dirk Marlowe." Barden picked up the head and looked at the stitched mouth. "Sparks, isn't there a Fremont man in Panama?"

"So I've heard."

"Send a wire. Charge it to me. Address it to Crane Fremont, Panama. It'll get where it's going."

Grigg rubbed his hands.

"Boy," he said. "Wait'll the boys at the lodge hear about this."

In Panama City, at the back end of a narrow street that smelled of fish guts and frying plantain, an old man with gray stubble on his head read the wire twice and put out his cigarette in a saucer. He ran a curio shop. Flies walked on the glass of his display cases, over carved coconuts and stuffed baby caimans and a jar of what were sold as jaguar teeth.

He hung the closed sign on the door. Then he went to the back, moved a shelf of pottery, and went down a ladder into the cellar, where it was cool and damp and the walls sweated.

The radio there was not the kind sold in stores. He threw a switch and waited for the tubes to warm, and wiped his face with a handkerchief. Then he picked up the microphone.

A scrambler chewed his words into noise. A narrow beam carried the noise out across the Pacific to a place on no chart.

"Calling Crane Fremont," the old man said. "Calling Crane Fremont."

The next afternoon Grigg and Barden were at the rail, watching flying fish skip off the swells, when Barden grabbed his arm and pointed.

"There. Look."

A plane was crossing the sky well to the north of them, very high, very fast. It was black all over and caught the sun in hard flashes. The wings were small for the body, too small, it seemed to Barden, to hold it up.

Grigg got his field glasses out of their case and fumbled with the focus.

"Has writing on it," he said. "Says *Black Hornet*."

"That's Fremont's plane."

"No kidding?"

"He got the message." Barden watched the black speck shrink toward the brown line of the Peruvian coast. "I'd like to know what happens in Lima. And who Patel is."

The plane was gone. Grigg kept looking through the glasses anyway for a while, then put them away and said he could use a drink.

From the air, Lima looks like a cake left out at a party, pink and white stucco under a hard blue sky. It sits in a desert. Nothing grows on the coastal plain except what's watered, and nobody in Lima ever goes thirsty. Sailors and beachcombers come up from Callao, and for them there are places like El Lobo.

El Lobo had been a family house once, some old Spanish family with a crest over the door. The crest was still there, chipped, and under it the bar served square-faced gin and cheap brandy three blocks from the cathedral where Pizarro's bones lay in a glass box. There was an American jukebox in the corner. It played songs that had been popular in 1934 and had a broken key that made every third record skip. The floor was tile and sticky. Flies crawled on the rims of the glasses and on the bar rag and on a plate of fried yuca somebody had left half eaten. Through the open door the Cordilleras stood up against the east, going purple with evening.

It was dusk. The real drinking was starting. Two men came in off the street and stood blinking in the yellow light.

One was enormous, a red-haired man with a face like a chunk of quarried rock. He held a small, cheap leather suitcase in one hand. His white linen suit was wrinkled and stained down the front and had sweat circles to the waist. His eyes were red and swollen nearly shut, the lids raw. A man would think he'd been drunk for a week. It was red pepper. He'd rubbed it in with his thumbs an hour ago, and it still burned like hell.

He swayed, and caught at the other man's shoulder.

"Easy," the smaller one said.

He was in white too, but he was slight and narrow, with yellow hair cropped close to the skull and heavy black eyebrows that looked borrowed from another face. He didn't look like much. Men who'd thought so had mostly found out otherwise in a hurry, and some of them hadn't gotten up afterward.

Dirk Marlowe and Red Argent, Crane Fremont's two closest men, looked like a couple of sailors from a tramp freighter, near the end of their money and their shore leave. Nobody looked at them twice.

Marlowe moved his head a quarter of an inch toward a table near the back.

"That's him."

He said it without moving his lips, too low for anybody a foot away to catch, but Argent heard. Argent growled something and lurched off between the tables, banging chairs, a bear in a china shop. He dropped into a chair, which complained loudly, and shoved the suitcase between his feet.

Marlowe sat down across from him.

"Gin," Argent said. He let his head roll. "Gin. That's what I want. Gin."

A waiter came over, wiping his hands on his apron. Marlowe ordered. In a while they had a bottle of trade gin between them, two smeared glasses, and a fly that wouldn't leave the bottle neck alone.

Argent's swollen eyes slid toward the next table.

The man there was eating alone, a plate of ceviche and a beer. He had a narrow hawk's face and a mustache so thin it looked drawn on with a pen. That fit. That was Patel.

It had taken a day and a half of careful asking in the right places to put a face to the name. Most people in the waterfront bars had never heard of him. Some had heard of him and didn't want to talk. A bartender at a place on the Jirón Callao had finally given them what they needed. He'd been polishing glasses with a rag that had been dirty since the Coolidge administration.

"Patel? Sure. He comes around every so often. Dunno from where. Does the rounds, every bar in town, buys drinks for anybody. You'll know him. Face like a hatchet and a mustache with about three hairs each side."

Patel never stayed in Lima more than a week, they'd learned. Now and then he went down to Callao. Mostly what he did in town was make friends: tramps, sailors off freighters, drifters, men nobody would miss. This time, though, he'd brought home bigger game without knowing it. Rupert Carnahan was a writer and explorer. He was also an officer in Army Intelligence.

Fremont had suspected that much before he ever left base. A short coded cable to a man he knew in Washington had confirmed it. Carnahan had been in Peru on government business that didn't appear on any paper. He had disappeared there. The United States couldn't go looking for him openly without telling the world what he was, and then he'd be no use to anybody again, if he was still alive.

The Peruvian police would have been glad to help. But Fremont had offered his services to a certain office in Washington, and that office had taken them, and that was that.

The bartender had wanted to know things too, once he'd answered.

"What do you want with Patel, anyway?"

"Heard he could get me a head," Marlowe had said. "One of those little shrunk ones. The Indian kind."

The bartender had shrugged and gone on polishing.

"Could be. Just don't let customs know you want one. They're against the law."

Chapter III: Easy Prey

Argent sat in El Lobo with the gin and thought about Patel's friends. Every one of them, as far as anybody could tell, was the kind of man who could drop off the earth without a single person writing to ask where he'd gone. That was worth something. It was the reason Argent and Marlowe were one table away from Patel now, getting into an argument.

"Nuts," Argent said, and poured. Half of it went on the table. "We got dough left. We go down to Callao tomorrow, that's all."

Marlowe scowled at him.

"And how do you know we get a berth? I told you. We shouldn't have jumped the *Pacific Belle*."

"We got paid off, didn't we? So what're you crying about? Have a drink and shut up."

Marlowe took the glass like it was medicine.

"It's easy for you to talk. We don't know a soul here. Say we can't get a berth..."

"Say your grandmother was a streetcar," Argent said. "We got fifty bucks left. That's better'n three hundred soles. I want to see Lima before we sail. I wanna..." He stopped and lit a cigarette and had trouble finding the end of it with the match. "I wanna get some souvenirs."

His eyes were burning like they'd been scrubbed with sand. Through the swollen lids he could see Patel at the next table, fork stopped halfway to his mouth, listening.

Patel finished his beer, stood, and threw a few coins down by his plate. On his way past he stumbled into Marlowe's chair hard enough to knock the smaller man forward. Marlowe's elbow caught the bottle. It went over and gin glugged out across the table and dripped through the cracks onto the floor. Argent grabbed at it and got it upright with about two inches left.

"Hey!" He came half out of his chair. "What's the big idea? Where'd you learn manners, you dirty, clumsy, hatchet-faced crook? Spillin' a man's liquor so he's got to buy more..."

Patel was all over them with apologies. He set the bottle straight. He bowed. He begged their pardon and gave his name and asked theirs, all in one breath, with his hand on his heart. Argent glared up at him through red slits. Marlowe shrugged and leaned back to see what would happen.

"Sure," Argent said. "Sure, I guess it was our fault."

"Mine, *señores*. All mine. Please. Let me buy you another. Waiter!" Patel snapped his fingers over his head.

"We buy our own liquor," Argent said.

Patel smiled at him. It was a good smile. He'd practiced.

"Of course you do. You're Americans, aren't you? I can hear it. You don't know how seldom I get to talk English. I'm hardly ever in Lima. Let me sit with you a minute?"

"You can go sit on..."

"Yeah, sure," Marlowe said, over him. "Sit down if you want. We're going anyhow."

Patel pulled out a chair.

"I didn't mean any harm. In fact..." He paused and looked at the table. "I couldn't help hearing. You said something about souvenirs. As it happens, that's a little sideline of mine. When I do get into Lima, I pick up a few *libras* that way. My souvenirs are not the ordinary kind."

Argent sat up.

"Yeah? That's just what I'm after, mister. Something different. Hey, you don't mean them heads?"

Patel looked over one shoulder and then the other.

"Not so loud. Yes. They're illegal, naturally. I buy them off the Indians and bring them down. It pays my traveling expenses, that's all."

Marlowe chewed on that and then shook his head.

"Not me. I seen those things in the museum here. Little black faces with their mouths sewed up. They give me the creeps."

"Shut up," Argent said. "Nobody's talkin' to you. How much, Patel?"

"Forty dollars. American."

Argent's mouth fell open.

"Forty bucks! That's a fortune. Mister, I'm a sailor. I'm just a poor sailor tryin' to get a little head." He thought about that, and it hit him, and he laughed so hard he had to hold the table. The waiter looked over. Marlowe looked disgusted.

Patel smiled politely through the whole thing. When it was over he leaned in.

"Well, perhaps we can work something out. They're valuable, yes. They're also illegal, and I don't like keeping them around. I'll let you have one for ten dollars. Five, even. Any tourist will give you fifty for it. In the States, a hundred. You can find five dollars, can't you?"

"Yeah. Okay. Let's see one."

"I don't carry them on me. They're in my room. It's just across the street, if you want to look."

"Sure!"

Argent threw money on the table, got up, knocked his chair over, left it there, and picked up his suitcase. He weaved toward the door with Patel at his elbow. Marlowe trailed after them, complaining about everything.

Across the street, in the black mouth of an alley, somebody watched them go into a sagging two-story hotel with a broken sign.

Patel's room was on the second floor at the back. It was hot as an oven and smelled of kerosene and old sweat and something sweeter and worse. There was an iron bed with a gray sheet, a basin of scummed water, and a cardboard suitcase on the floor. Flies moved in a slow cloud under the bare bulb.

Patel opened the suitcase. There were three heads in it, wrapped in straw. He picked one out and held it up by its hair.

Argent had seen one before, the one from the ship's radio room, by way of a description from Panama. He hadn't seen one in the hand. The skin was black and leathery and gave off that sweet smell. The stitches in the mouth had been redone at some point with newer cord, and one corner of the lip had torn where the old stitch had pulled out, leaving a tiny ragged gap. Something white and dry was packed in the gap. He didn't look closely enough to know what.

"Five bucks," he said.

He counted out the money, damp bills from his trouser pocket. Patel folded them away. Argent snapped his own suitcase open on the bed. It was a mess of dirty shirts, socks with no heels, a razor, a pint bottle with nothing in it. He wrapped the head in a shirt with a yellow stain under the arms, stuffed it in with the rest, and latched the case.

When he looked up, Patel was smiling at him.

"Well. Thank you. How about a drink on it? Cumshaw, as you sailors say."

"Suits me. Trot it out."

"Oh, I haven't a drop up here. But there's a place close by, the Cuzco. Best brandy in Lima. The man who runs it is a half-breed, but his brandy has a pedigree, I promise you."

"Lead me to it," Argent said.

They went down the stairs single file. The stairwell had no light and the treads were warped and sticky underfoot. Almost at the bottom a man came charging up out of the dark carrying a suitcase of his own, and he ran right into Argent, and the two of them went down together in a heap on the landing.

Argent bellowed. His suitcase went flying. For a few seconds there was nothing on the stairs but swearing and elbows and thrashing legs and a hat rolling down the steps. Then the two of them got untangled. The other man said something quick in Spanish that might have been an apology and went on up the stairs two at a time, carrying his suitcase. Argent groped around, found his, and shouted something after him that would have gotten him thrown out of most churches.

"Nuts," he said, rubbing his elbow. "Let's go, Patel. I need that drink."

The Cuzco was a long low room down three steps from the street, lit by two oil lamps and a candle on the bar. The floor was dirt with sawdust thrown over it, and in places the sawdust was dark and clotted where somebody had been sick or bled or both. A dog slept under one table. Flies crawled on the dog.

Argent had been inside fifteen minutes when he discovered his suitcase was gone.

He'd had it when he came in. He was positive. He said so, at the top of his voice, and kept saying it while he went from table to table looking under them, and said a few things too about the honesty of the clientele and of the half-breed behind the bar. The half-breed stood with his arms folded and did not say anything. Then Argent remembered he'd shoved the case under a table by the door when they first came in.

He went to look. It was there.

Nobody had paid any attention to the tall dark man who had come in a few minutes after them, carrying a leather bag. He'd ordered a brandy at that table by the door, drunk half of it, and gone out again. When he left he was still carrying a leather suitcase. It wasn't quite the same one he'd come in with.

Argent sat back down with his bag between his feet.

The brandy came. Patel lifted his glass to them. Argent drank his in two swallows and Marlowe drank his slower, and both of them knew there was something in it besides brandy. There was a bitter flat taste at the bottom. They'd expected that. If there hadn't been, they'd have been badly disappointed. They didn't fight it.

Argent's tongue got thick first. The lamp on the bar stretched out and split into two lamps and then three. He tried to say something to Marlowe and heard his voice coming from down a long pipe. Then the table came up and hit him in the face.

Marlowe lasted a little longer. He was aware of being lifted, and of somebody's breath on his face, and of a car, and of bouncing, a lot of bouncing, on a road that seemed to be all holes. His head banged against something metal. He tasted blood. Then he didn't know anything.

A few miles outside Lima, in a dry field where nothing grew but thornbush and a crop of broken bottles, Patel stopped the car and switched off the lights.

A big cabin plane stood in the open, pale under the stars. Beside it was a shed of rusted corrugated iron, big enough to hide the plane in daylight. A heavy man came trotting out of the shed. He had a scar running from his left temple down across his cheek to the corner of a flat nose, an old one, thick and shiny and pink, as if somebody had laid him open with a machete and then sewn him shut with fishing line. He smelled of rum.

"Ready, *señor*?"

"All ready, Pedro. Two more for the trip. The others are still asleep?"

"Sí. In the plane. Tied. One of them, he wakes up a little, so I give him more." Pedro Vargas shrugged. "He make a mess of himself. Is not so nice in there."

"I don't care if it's nice. Help me with these. The big one ought to make Dellara happy. The other's a runt, but he looks tough enough. Not a bad night's work."

It took both of them to carry Argent. They half dragged him across the dirt with his heels plowing two furrows and hauled him up through the cabin door. Marlowe was easier.

Inside, the cabin stank of urine and vomit and the heat of the day that the metal walls hadn't let go of. Two men lay on the floor among some crates, trussed at the wrists and ankles. One was a skinny boy in a merchant seaman's jersey with his mouth hanging open. The other was an older man, bald, with a week of beard, lying in a puddle of his own making. Flies walked across his open eyes and he didn't blink.

Pedro drove the car into the shed, padlocked the door, and came back with Argent's suitcase.

"And this?"

"Throw it in." Patel was already in the pilot's seat, flipping switches. "I'll want that head back. It's good bait. That makes about twenty times I've sold that one. The mouth's starting to come apart. I hope it holds up for twenty more."

Pedro climbed in and pulled the door shut and latched it. He found a coil of rope in the corner and tied Argent and Marlowe the way he'd tied the others, hard enough that their hands began to go dark. Then he checked the two on the floor. He nudged the bald man with his boot until the man groaned. Satisfied, he sat down on a crate and took a bottle out of his shirt.

The engines coughed and caught and came up to a roar. The plane rolled out across the field, bucking over the ruts, and lifted into the air. It circled once over the scattered lights of Lima and then turned east, toward the Cordilleras, a black wall against the stars.

Chapter IV: The Trail Begins

Crane Fremont drove a rented Ford with one working headlight and a gearbox that ground every time he shifted into second. Twice he checked the mirror. Lima was a smear of yellow lights behind him, getting smaller. Nobody was on the road.

He turned down a cart track, bounced through a stand of eucalyptus that dropped bark on the hood, and left the Ford parked at the edge of the trees where somebody would find it by noon. The rental agency had his deposit. The deposit was worth about as much as the car, and the agency could keep the difference.

The *Black Hornet* was where he'd left her, squatting in the dry grass of a pasture that belonged to someone who hadn't been asked. She was a heavy-looking ship, blunt-nosed and black all over, with short thick wings and a propeller too big for her. A man who knew airplanes would have said she'd never get off the ground. That man would have been wrong. Under the black paint was a skin of alloy lighter than aluminum and stronger than armor plate, and nobody outside Fremont's own people knew how it was made.

Nobody knew much about Fremont, either. He had turned up in the world's back corners some years ago as if he'd been dropped there, a young man with a lot of money and no visible family, and what he found in those corners had surprised him. Men who sold other men. Men who bought girls off the docks in Macao. Opium, guns, slavers, and the respectable gentlemen who financed all of it from clean offices.

In Singapore one of those gentlemen had decided Fremont was a pigeon to be plucked. It was a mistake. When Fremont sailed out of Singapore three months later, the gentleman was in a box and his organization was spread across the harbor bottom in pieces. Something had set hard in Fremont during those months, and it hadn't softened since.

Word got around after that. It went up the rivers of Indochina and out to the Tuamotus and across the Siberian steppe, and into the kind of places where the law was a rumor. Two men had come to work with him along the way, Red Argent and Dirk Marlowe. The *Black Hornet* came too, out of a hangar on an island in the South Pacific that wasn't on anybody's map. When a call for help came through that nobody else would answer, they went.

Men Fremont went after usually ended up dead. The law could be bribed, delayed, argued with, or outrun. Fremont couldn't, and he didn't try very hard to bring anybody back alive.

He didn't look the part. Crossing the pasture in the moonlight, he looked like a college man on summer vacation, long and loose in the legs, brown-faced, with untidy black hair so dark it had a blue shine to it. The face was young. If you looked longer, the bone under the face was hard, and the eyes were older

than the rest of him. They were black and deep, and usually there was something easy in them. Sometimes there wasn't.

He ran his palm along a seam in the hull, pressed, and the cabin door swung out. He climbed in and pulled it shut behind him.

It was cramped inside. Lockers filled every wall, packed with gear: rope, rifles, medical kits, flares, a folding boat, a box of dynamite sticks wrapped in oilcloth, tins of food, a crate of things he hoped never to need. The cabin smelled of oil and canvas and the cigarettes he'd smoked on the way in.

He dropped into the pilot's seat and switched on a receiver built into the panel. Tubes warmed. A needle shivered, wandered, and settled.

Somewhere over the Andes, a little transmitter was ticking out the same short signal over and over. Fremont knew exactly where it was. It was inside a dead man's head.

He'd had Argent's suitcase for fifteen minutes back in Lima, between the fight on the hotel stairs and the switch under the table at the Cuzco. That had been long enough. He'd sat in an empty room down the hall from Patel's with the shrunken head in his lap and a scalpel, and he'd opened it along the old seam at the back of the skull where the original makers had taken the bones out. The skin was stiff and greasy and cut like boot leather. Inside, packed in a nest of dried, crumbling stuffing that smelled of smoke and something rancid, was a smooth round river stone the makers had left in to hold the shape. He'd dug it out. A couple of small white grubs had come out with it and dropped writhing onto his trousers. He'd brushed them off. Then he'd fitted in the transmitter, a ball of plastic about the same size and weight as the stone, and sewn the head shut again with surgical silk.

Patel had taken the suitcase. Patel had taken the head. Every few seconds now, the head was telling the *Black Hornet* where it was.

Fremont smiled a little. Patel would be watching for anybody on his tail. He'd be watching the ground and the sky behind him. He wouldn't think to watch his own luggage.

He hit the starter. The *Hornet* ran a remarkably short way across the grass and lifted, banked, and swung east toward the mountains. Her engines were quiet for engines. The alloy soaked up a good deal of the noise. It didn't soak up all of it, and nothing would, except shutting them off.

He found the beam and stayed on it. When he drifted, a tone in his earphones told him which side he'd slipped to. After a while he trimmed her out, climbed, set the controls, and lit a cigarette. The match lit his face for a second, brown and still.

He wasn't in a hurry. Patel wouldn't land before dawn, Fremont figured. A man who flew kidnapped sailors into the mountains wouldn't be landing at an airfield, and he wouldn't want landing lights on wherever he was going.

The signal slid south along the spine of the Cordilleras, keeping to the eastern side where the mountains broke down toward the Amazon country. The snowfields were yellow under the moon. Fremont flew with the cabin cold and the cigarette burning down between his fingers.

This had been Inca country. Before Pizarro, before anybody in Europe had heard of potatoes, the Incas had run an empire here from Cuzco, roads and storehouses and runners and gold mines. Their legends said the first man and woman had come up out of Lake Titicaca, children of the sun. The Spaniards had come later and made slaves of their grandchildren, and Peru hadn't gotten around to outlawing slavery on paper until 1918. Fremont had read that somewhere. It had stuck with him.

Once, on a white slope not far below, he saw small figures leaping. Llamas or guanacos, startled by the engine noise, bounding off across the snow.

East of the mountains, nobody had made much of a dent. The Incas had pushed their mines and roads to the edge of the jungle and stopped. The Spaniards had poked up the big rivers and died in large numbers. There were tribes along the Pachitea that no white man had ever laid eyes on, or at least none who'd come back to talk about it. Most of the continent was like that, Fremont thought. The coasts and the big rivers were mapped. The rest was green, and anybody who said he knew what was in it was lying.

The night went on. He kept well back and well above, out of sight of the plane ahead.

At first light the needle swung hard and dropped, and stayed down.

Below him a gorge split the mountains. A fast river came boiling out of it and ran east into jungle, and the jungle went on from there without a break for two thousand miles, all the way to the Madeira and the Tapajós and the Amazon itself. He couldn't see a hut, a fire, a canoe, anything.

The radio said this was the place. Fremont put the *Hornet* into a wide circle and picked up his binoculars. If anybody down there saw him now, he didn't much care. He'd found them.

It took him two passes to see it.

At the mouth of the gorge, jammed back under an overhang of rock, there was a building. It was squat and gray, poured concrete set on top of some older stonework, with slits for windows and steel plate at the corners. A pill-box. No Indian had built that. A bare slope ran down from its door to the edge of the trees. Nothing moved on it.

Fremont pushed the stick forward and went in to land.

His wheels were maybe ten feet off the dirt when the pill-box fired.

A puff of smoke jumped from one of the slits. The shell burst short and to the left with a flat bang that slapped the *Hornet* sideways and rang in Fremont's ears. Whoever was on the gun had been in too much of a hurry.

Fremont hauled back. The nose came up. He shoved the throttle all the way and the engine screamed, and the *Hornet* clawed her way up off the slope. A second shell went off close behind the tail. Fragments rattled on the hull like gravel. Then he was over the trees and out of range, skimming low over the treetops where the morning mist lay in rags.

He climbed and circled back at a careful distance.

The fog was still lying on the forest, making it gray and soft. A few miles east the river spread out into a lake. Nothing there either. Whatever there was to find, it was in the gorge.

Patel's plane would be hidden by now, under the cliff somewhere. And somewhere in that concrete box, or near it, were Argent and Marlowe. If they were still alive.

He made one more pass high over the gorge. The rock overhung the bottom so far that he couldn't see much of anything down there but spray and shadow. He couldn't land at the mouth, not with that gun on it. He couldn't do anything from the air.

That left the lake.

There was no clearing in the jungle, not one. There was the lake. He pumped out the *Hornet's* pontoons on the way down and set her on the water in a long sheet of white spray.

She settled. He cut the throttle back and let her drift toward shore while he looked.

Mist lay on the lake thick enough to hide the far bank. It was already hot. The cabin began to warm the minute he stopped climbing, and sweat came out on his back and ran down under his belt. Mosquitoes found the cracks around the door and came in whining. Through the mist dark shapes floated, low in the water, not moving. One of them opened its eyes as the plane drifted past, two bumps of yellow, and then sank out of sight without a ripple. Caiman. There'd be plenty. He could probably have swum ashore with nothing worse than a fright, unless the lake had piranha in it. He didn't intend to find out.

The pontoons touched mud. He switched the engine off.

The jungle came right down to the water, a solid wall of green, vines hanging off it in loops, roots sticking out of the mud like dead fingers. Birds were screaming somewhere. Insects were going in a long steady drone that got into the back of his teeth. The air smelled of rot and wet leaves and mud.

He opened the cabin door slowly.

Something moved off in the green, a long way back. It wasn't much, a few leaves shifting against the grain of the rest. Fremont dropped flat.

A little thing went over his head with a whisper, struck the window behind him, and fell to the floor of the cabin.

He reached up, pulled the door shut, and locked it. Then he picked up what had fallen.

It was a dart, a sliver of palm wood no longer than his little finger, with a tuft of something soft at the butt end. The point was smeared with a green paste that had gone tacky in the heat. He sniffed at it and held it away. Not curare. Curare was black. This was something else, snake venom maybe, from some local viper, mixed up with plant gum to make it stick.

There were markings on the shaft, burned in so small he had to bring it close to his eyes to see them. A pattern of steps and a square with a line through it. He'd seen that sign before, cut into stone in a museum in Cuzco. The Incas had used it to mean death.

He set the dart down carefully on the map table, point away from him, and wiped his fingers on his trousers.

"*La gente del veneno*," he said.

Chapter V: Into the Gorge

Fremont had heard the stories. Every trader on the upper rivers had a version.

When Pizarro came, the tale went, one Inca clan had run east instead of fighting. They went down off the mountains into the jungle and kept going, and they married into the forest tribes there, and in four hundred years they forgot their roads and their cities and remembered only that white men came from the west and brought death. Now they killed whatever came into their country. Nobody saw them do it. A man would be walking a game trail or bending to fill a canteen, and there'd be a little sting on his neck, and he'd slap at it thinking it was a fly. Twenty minutes later he'd be on his back in the mud with his tongue swollen out of his mouth and his eyes full of blood.

The traders called them *la gente del veneno*. The traders didn't go up that way.

Fremont took off his clothes.

The cabin was already stifling. He stood naked and dripping sweat in the cramped space and took a folded suit out of a locker. It was light gray cloth, thin as a summer shirt, with fine wire threads woven all through it so that it caught the light in a faint metallic sheen. It wouldn't stop a bullet. A machete would go through it with a good swing. But a sliver of palm wood would bounce off it, and he didn't expect the Indians to have rifles.

He pulled it on. It was hot and it scratched. He added a leather flying helmet lined with the same mesh, and a pair of light goggles.

Then he got out the bottles.

He mixed them in a tin bowl, a bit of this and a bit of that, stirring with a spatula until he had a brown paste the color and thickness of peanut butter. It smelled terrible, sharp and sour, with a reek underneath that reminded him of a tannery. He smeared it over every inch of skin the suit didn't cover: face, neck, ears, the backs of his hands, between the fingers, around the wrists. It burned a little going on. Then it began to dry and tighten, and in a few minutes it was a tough, flexible film that didn't show, though it pulled when he moved his face.

He'd learned the trick in Tanganyika from an old witch doctor who used to let puff adders bite him on the forearm in the village square for a few coins and a laugh. The bites never took. Fremont had paid him a good deal more than a few coins to find out why. He'd used it twice since and it had held both times.

He took a few more things from the lockers, loaded his pockets and belt, and opened the door.

The heat hit him. He dropped onto the bank, sank to the ankles in black mud, pulled free with a sucking noise, and made the *Hornet* fast to a tree with a line. He locked her up. The sun was a white smear through the mist. Once he was under the trees he wouldn't see it again until he came out.

He went west along the river.

The mist was lifting off the water, but under the canopy everything dripped. Big drops fell off the leaves and hit his helmet with a sound like someone tapping a finger. The air was so wet it was hard to breathe through, and the ground stank of rot. Mosquitoes came in clouds and lit on his face and couldn't get through the paste and walked around on it, looking for a way in. Far off something made a long thin cry. A sloth, maybe.

Something moved in the green to his left. Just a little.

Fremont touched the pistol at his belt. It was a strange-looking thing, fat and short-barreled, and it looked like nothing so much as the squirt gun a schoolboy uses on his little sister. It was bigger than that, though, and there was a tiny ridged wheel set into it near the muzzle, the kind you'd find on a cigarette lighter.

He didn't want to kill these people if he could help it. They were defending their own ground, which is what most people would do. A good scare ought to serve the purpose better than a pile of corpses would.

Something tapped his cheek and fell away.

A dart. He kept walking. Another one clicked against the right lens of his goggles and dropped into the leaves.

Behind him came a deep thump that shook water off the trees, and a white light flared through the forest. He spun around. Back at the lake the *Hornet* was wrapped in a sheet of crackling fire, and brown figures were scattering away from her into the brush, howling.

Fremont grinned.

It was fireworks, mostly, rigged to go off when anybody touched the hull, and they made a lot of light and noise and didn't hurt the plane at all. If anybody was stubborn enough to try again, the hull could be wired to carry an electric charge that would knock a man down and leave him twitching. Several men had learned that over the years. The pontoon struts were insulated. The *Hornet* was as safe on that mudbank as she would have been back at the island.

He went on.

The jungle was full of whispering now, on both sides of him and behind. The darts kept coming. One stuck in the wire mesh over his shoulder and hung there quivering. Another hit him square in the back of the hand and slid off the paste, leaving a smear of green. The whispering changed. It got louder, and

there was an argument in it. Over and over the darts struck him and he didn't fall down, and the people in the bushes didn't like that one bit.

He saw a machete flash between two trunks. His hand went to the holster.

Then the yelling started, and they came out of the trees.

There were dozens of them. They were short and lean and naked except for bark-cloth strings around their waists, and their bodies were striped with black paint and red clay, and their hair was cut in a bowl across the forehead. Their teeth were filed. Some of them carried blowguns as long as they were tall. Most carried machetes, old trade blades gone black with rust, and they came at him screaming from three sides at once.

Fremont didn't put his back to a tree. These people could go up a trunk as fast as a man runs on level ground, and if four or five of them dropped on him from above it would be over. He stepped backward off the bank into the river instead, up to his knees in the cold brown water.

Nobody followed him in. They stopped at the edge and hung back. Maybe it was caiman and piranha they were afraid of. Maybe they just didn't like water much; from the smell of them that was possible. If any of them tried to come around by the river, he'd hear them splashing.

He was grinning. It was a mean, reckless sort of grin, and the truth was he was enjoying himself.

He had the squirt gun in his left hand. He used either hand equally well. His right was empty and closed.

One of them broke from the bunch and came straight at him through the shallows, machete up over his head, mouth open in a scream that showed every filed tooth. Fremont ducked under the swing. The blade whistled over his helmet. He came up inside and hit the man on the point of the jaw, not hard, a short snapping punch, and the Indian went over backward into the water like a sack of meal. The machete went spinning up end over end. Fremont caught it by the handle as it came down.

The rest were rushing him now. He raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

A spurt of fire leaped out of it, a long screaming red rope that arced twenty feet through the air over their heads and spattered burning into the shallows.

It was kerosene. The gun threw a thin jet of it, fine as a needle, and the little wheel struck a flint at the muzzle and lit it as it came out. Fired over their heads like that, it was mostly noise and light. These people wore no clothes to catch, and the forest was too wet to burn. It hurt, though, if it touched you. And the sight of it did more than any rifle could have.

The charge stopped dead. Men went over backward trying to get away from it. Darts came at him, and bounced off. Somebody threw a machete. Fremont batted it out of the air with his own and it went clanging off into the river.

"*Manco Capac!*" one of them shrieked. He was pointing at Fremont with a shaking arm. "*Manco Capac!*"

Others turned on him and shouted him down. One of them hit him across the mouth. Then they came on again, angrier this time, louder.

This time Fremont didn't aim over their heads.

He swept the jet across the front of the rush, fast, so it barely licked each man in passing. A splash of burning oil caught one in the chest and he fell screaming in the shallows and rolled, and the fire went out but the skin on his breast had gone white and was already lifting in a big wet blister. Another took it across both legs and went down clawing at his shins, and when he took his hands away the hair was burned off his calves and the skin under it was red and weeping. One young man got a spatter on the side of his face and ran blind into a tree trunk, hands over his eye, screaming in a high voice that didn't stop. The air stank of kerosene and singed hair and cooked skin.

That did it. Now they knew the fire could hurt them. They broke and ran, crashing back into the forest, dragging the ones who couldn't run on their own. In a minute there was nothing on the bank but trampled ferns and a dropped blowgun and the smell.

Fremont waded out and went on along the river, slower now, listening.

The one who'd called him Manco Capac had been shut up fast. Manco Capac was the first Inca, child of the sun, the founder of everything. To that man, fire coming out of a stranger's hand meant a god. To the others, it had meant something they'd seen before. Fremont thought about the gun on the pill-box and the gas shells and figured he knew where they'd seen it. These Indians knew what guns were. It hadn't been terror that drove them off. It had been the burns.

He felt sorry for them, a little. Four hundred years ago white men out of Spain had come over these mountains and smashed everything their grandfathers had built, and burned the priests and melted the gold and put the survivors to work in the mines until they died. Now here were more white men, with gas this time instead of muskets. The Indians didn't bother anybody outside their own country. They only wanted to be left alone in it. They were murderous about that, it was true, but there were worse things a people could want.

The ground started to rise. The river came down toward him smooth and fast over a sandy bottom, red-brown with silt. Somewhere downstream it would join the Madre de Dios and then the Madeira and then the Amazon at Manaus, and the water he was walking beside would take months to reach the Atlantic, fifteen hundred miles and more through country nobody had mapped.

The trees thinned. Through them he could see the gray wall of the mountains.

He went slower from there, sliding through the brush, hacking a vine now and then with the captured machete when there was no way around it. The machete was badly balanced and the edge was nicked, and someone had wound the handle with strips of what he hoped was monkey hide. He saw no more Indians. Maybe they didn't like to come this close to the gorge. He could understand that.

He reached the edge of the trees and lay down in the ferns and looked out.

The slope ran up bare and open to the mouth of the gorge, where the pill-box sat under its lip of rock. It had been built hard against the cliff on one side with the river on the other. Across the river, the far wall went straight up, wet and black and smooth. The only way into the gorge on foot was the strip of open ground between the pill-box and the water, and a man walking it would be in plain view of every slit in the concrete.

There was the river itself, though. A strong swimmer could work his way up against the current underwater.

Somebody had thought of that already. A line of cork floats bobbed across the mouth of the gorge from bank to bank.

Fremont smiled. He wedged the flame pistol into the hollow of a dead tree and covered it with leaves. From an inside pocket he took a small automatic wrapped in oilskin, unwrapped it, checked it, and wrapped it again tightly. Then he took out a pair of pliers, small and heavy, with short jaws ground to an edge.

He stuck the machete through his belt and went down to the river.

Nobody shot at him. Nobody threw anything. He lowered himself in among the roots at the bank, and the cold hit him so hard it pushed the air out of his chest. This water was snowmelt, straight down from the peaks. The channel was wide and the slope easy, so the current wasn't too strong, and he made good time hand over hand along the bottom.

On the way in he'd cut a hollow reed from the bank. When he needed to rest he hung onto a rock or a root under the surface and breathed through the reed. Things nudged at him in the murk. Once something bit at the back of his hand, hard enough that he felt the pressure of it through the paste, and then let go and went away. Piranha, maybe. He doubted even piranha teeth could get through that coating. He didn't care to test the theory for long.

He came up against the barrier in the dark brown water.

It wasn't just floats. Under them hung a heavy net of twisted barbed wire, weighted at the bottom and anchored. It would hold back Indians and canoes and swimmers. It wouldn't hold back pliers. He cut the strands one by one, holding his breath, coming up for air through the reed between cuts. The barbs tore at his suit. One went through the cloth into the meat of his forearm, and when he pulled loose a thin brown cloud spread in the water around his arm. He cut a hole big enough to crawl through and went through it.

The light changed. He was inside the gorge now, and the walls closed in overhead and shut out the sun, and the water went from brown to almost black. He had no idea what was waiting up there. He might put his head up into a row of rifles. He kept swimming.

After a long while he came up slowly in a clump of reeds near the bank, opened his mouth, and breathed. The air was cold and smelled of wet stone. He waited until his heart slowed down, then eased the reeds apart and looked.

The gorge widened here, a quarter mile from wall to wall at the bottom, though up top the cliffs leaned so close they nearly touched. What grew here was sickly and yellow, a few starved bushes and some pale grass, things that had never had a full day of sun. A cold wind came down the canyon from the snowfields with grit in it. It found the wet places in his suit and went straight through to the bone.

There was a building in front of him.

Some of it was Inca, the old fitted stone with its strange polygonal blocks, carved here and there with figures worn almost flat. The rest was new: concrete patched into the gaps, a tin roof, a stovepipe, cement steps, iron doors, glass in the windows. There was a sound coming from it, a steady thumping and grinding that never stopped. A long shed ran off one side. Smoke came from a tall stack at the back and was pulled flat by the wind.

Fremont had seen a lot of buildings like that. Back in the States they were in every mill town from Fall River to Gary.

Somebody had built a factory at the bottom of the gorge.

Chapter VI: The Pill-Box

A rattle of steel came from above. Fremont looked up.

High on the wall of the gorge was the black mouth of a tunnel. A cable ran from it down to the nearest of the patched buildings, and as he watched, a flat iron car came swinging down the cable, jerking and squealing on its pulley, loaded with something heavy under a tarpaulin. It slid into a gap in the wall of the building and was gone.

Nothing else moved. The stack at the back had quit smoking while he watched; the last of it thinned to a gray thread and the wind took that too. The thumping inside the building went on.

A mine, then. Somebody was taking something out of that mountain, and whatever furnaces they had, they'd run them at night when the smoke couldn't be seen from the air. Gold, most likely. The Incas had worked gold mines all through this country, and the Spaniards had worked them harder after the Incas were dead. But a mine this far into nowhere didn't need to hide from anybody, unless what went on in it was worse than mining.

The biggest building sat in the middle with the smaller ones clustered around it. It might once have been a temple. The lower walls were Inca, huge blocks carved with worn faces and serpents and steps, and above them somebody had poured concrete and bolted on sheets of corrugated iron. Narrow slots had been left in the concrete. In three of them Fremont could make out the snub muzzles of machine guns.

The wind came down the gorge with a thin howl. Nobody walked between the buildings. Nobody came to a window.

Fremont climbed out of the river.

The cold hit him at once. The wind went through his wet suit as if it weren't there, and in a few seconds his teeth were rattling. Ten miles back, the jungle had been an oven. Here his breath smoked. He unwrapped the automatic, holstered it, and crouched in the reeds trying to stop shaking.

Argent and Marlowe were here somewhere, unless they were in the pill-box at the mouth. Carnahan was here, maybe. He had no idea where to start looking.

The iron door of the big building opened.

Fremont went flat in the reeds.

A girl came out. She was dark, with black hair pulled back and tied, and she walked fast and loose, swinging her arms, the way a girl walks who played field hockey at a good school and won. She was coming straight down the slope toward the river.

Toward him.

She didn't slow down and she didn't look around. She walked right up to the edge of the reeds and stopped.

"They've seen you, Mr. Fremont," she said. Her voice was low and flat. "They sent me out to tell you something."

Fremont stayed where he was.

"There's no point hiding. Dellara doesn't want you dead. He says to tell you that if you don't give yourself up, he'll kill your two men. Argent and Marlowe."

Fremont thought about it for a few seconds. Then he stood up out of the reeds, water running off him, and pulled off the goggles and stuffed them in a pocket. He walked out onto the stones.

"All right," he said. "Who's Dellara? And who are you?"

"Astrid Voss. I own this mine." Her mouth went hard. "I did, anyway. Until Dellara decided he owned it. He's kept me here for months." She stepped close and put her hand on his arm. Her fingers were ice cold. "There's nothing you can do now, either of us. He's holding all the cards. Go along with him. Wait for a chance."

"Keep talking," Fremont said.

She glanced back over her shoulder at the building.

"There isn't time. They're watching from the temple. Did you get the message? The one Carnahan and I sent?"

"Tattooed on the head. Yes. Carnahan's here, then?"

"He's here. It was his idea. I could get at the heads before they were packed, and he showed me how to do it. With a needle and lampblack."

"And this Dellara knew I was coming?"

"He saw your plane this morning when you tried to land. That started him thinking. He figured out who your two friends were and decided if you were alive, you'd try to get into the gorge. So he put men on the cliffs to watch. When they saw you come up out of the water just now, he sent me out."

"And he'll kill Argent and Marlowe if I don't come in."

"He will." Her voice cracked a little and she got hold of it. "You don't know him. He'd do it and then go eat his lunch. Come back with me. You'll be all right for a while. He'll want to enjoy having you. He'll put you to work in the mine with the rest."

Somebody shouted from the temple. One word, carried thin on the wind.

Fremont shrugged.

"All right. I haven't got much choice. Let's walk. Talk while we go. What's the setup?"

She had to trot to keep up with him.

"I've been here since spring. I inherited this land a year ago. There'd been some mess about the title, lawyers in Lima and Madrid fighting over it for thirty years, and when it finally came to me I flew down with Dellara to look at it. He was an engineer. I met him in Callao. I thought he was..." She made a face. "I don't know what I thought. There were old stories that the Incas had a mine here, and a temple. They were true." She pointed at the cliff. "This was where the ancestors of the Poison People lived."

"Go on."

"The Indians live out in the forest now. They're terrified of the gorge. They say the dead Inca kings are still in here. It's forbidden. They don't come into it, and they don't let anybody else come into it either. We only got in the first time because they didn't expect us. We barely got out again. When it's a matter of keeping strangers out, the taboo doesn't count for much."

"And then?"

"Up the slope there's a cave that goes back into the mine. It was a temple too, underground. It was full of idols. Little men with big ears, and jaguars, and a sun with a face. Dellara said they were brass and painted wood. I picked one up. It was gold. When we got back to Lima he spent two days on the telephone. I tried to find out what he was doing. Then one morning he made me coffee, and when I woke up I was in Patel's plane with a bruise on my head, and I've been here ever since. He can't let me go. I'd tell."

They were almost at the temple. Up close, the old stone was black with damp and streaked white with bird droppings, and somebody had painted numbers on some of the carved faces in red paint.

"What's he doing here?" Fremont said.

"I don't know. Not exactly. They're mining gold. He brought in machinery to crush the ore and get the gold out, and the vein is very rich, and he's poured a great many bars. But that's all I know."

"How'd he get machinery in here?"

"Up the river from the Amazon. You can get a launch right to the mouth of the gorge. He paid for it with the statues, I think. They're all gone. He built the plant into the temple, and he has men here, a crew. Gunmen. And Patel brings in the miners."

"Slaves," Fremont said. "Patel goes down to Lima with a suitcase full of heads, and comes back with men nobody's going to look for."

"White men, mostly." She said it without looking at him. "He tried the Indians from the highlands at first. The *cholos*. They died too quickly. The cold and the work. He had to keep getting more."

Fremont didn't say anything for a few steps.

"You own this mine," he said finally.

"I inherited it. My grandfather married a Spanish girl. The land came down in her family. Some ancestor of hers came over with Pizarro and took it, I suppose. That's how it usually went."

"So Dellara comes in here and strips the Poison People's temple. Their old gods, the graves of their kings. Melts them down or sells them. And now they're out in the forest with their blowguns waiting for anybody to stick his head out."

"He's ready for them. But it's death to go outside."

"That's what the pill-box is for."

"Yes. To keep the Indians out. And it keeps the prisoners in, too, without anyone having to watch them much. Where would they go? Into the forest? That's just suicide with extra steps." She stopped at the iron door. "He lets me go anywhere I like. Why not? I can't get out. I can't fly, so I can't take Patel's plane. If..."

The door opened.

"Come in, Mr. Fremont," a soft voice said. "Come in, come in. I'm so glad you found Astrid persuasive. So glad."

Dellara filled the doorway. He was as fat as a man can get and still walk. His linen suit was gray at the armpits and the crotch and down the front where the sweat had soaked it and dried and soaked it again, and it smelled sour even in the wind. His head was bald and glossy and his cheeks hung in pink folds. When he smiled, his teeth were black, and a little red betel juice ran out of one corner of his mouth and he licked it back in. A cartridge belt went around his stomach, which must have taken a special order, and a pistol hung from it in an oiled holster. His hands were empty. They were small for the rest of him, plump and pink, with dimples where the knuckles should be.

"Come in," he said again. "I don't go outside if I can help it. Outside the gorge it's an oven, and in here it's a refrigerator, and I hate both of them." He laughed, and it came up from somewhere far down inside all that meat.

Astrid stepped past him without looking at him. Fremont followed. The skin between his shoulder blades crawled.

He'd expected machinery. The thumping was louder in here, coming through the walls, but the room inside the door was only a narrow hallway with a concrete floor and a row of doors down one side. Electric bulbs hung from the ceiling on cords. The first door, right at his elbow, stood half open.

Fremont glanced in. Then he stopped.

He turned around and looked at Dellara. Dellara's face showed nothing at all. Fremont went in.

There was a man lying in the corner of the room. Fremont had seen his face in newspaper photographs, smiling on the deck of a steamer with a pith helmet under his arm. It took a moment to be sure. Rupert Carnahan's face was a swollen purple mass. One eye was shut entirely under a lump the size of a hen's egg, split across the top and crusted black. His nose had been broken and pushed sideways. His lips were torn. His clothes were in rags and filthy, gray-black with rock dust, and the dust had gotten into all his cuts and made dark lines in them. His hands lay palms-up on the floor. They were puffed and blistered from the pick and the shovel, and some of the blisters had burst and were weeping, and three of the fingernails on his left hand were gone. The beds where they'd been were raw and wet. A fly was walking on one of them. Fremont knelt down and waved it off.

Carnahan was breathing. It came out of him in a wet whistle through the broken nose.

The room had been fitted up as an office: a desk, a filing cabinet, a calendar from a Lima hardware company on the wall, two years out of date. On the edge of the desk a man sat swinging his feet. Hawk face, pencil mustache. Patel. He had a revolver hooked by the trigger guard on one finger and was letting it dangle. He watched Fremont kneel down and did nothing about it.

"You know Carnahan?" Dellara said from the door. "Poor fellow. He needed some discipline."

"You gave him plenty," Fremont said. His voice was flat.

"Oh, I did." Dellara came in and leaned on the filing cabinet, which creaked. "When we found out this morning that Crane Fremont himself was on our tracks, with his two helpers, it seemed to me that somebody must have sent you a letter. Patel looked over his luggage and found your little radio, inside the head. Very clever. I'd noticed Astrid and Carnahan had gotten very friendly lately. So I asked him about it." He took a betel nut out of his pocket, bit off a chunk, and chewed. "He didn't want to tell me. I talked him around to it."

He slapped his small fat fists together. They made a soft wet smack.

Astrid stood in the doorway. She was looking at Dellara, and her face had gone very white. She didn't move.

Fremont got up off his knees. He found a cigarette in his breast pocket, a little damp, and lit it, and looked at both of them through the smoke.

"Where are Argent and Marlowe?"

Patel let the revolver swing around his finger once. His legs swung under the desk. Dellara laughed.

"Oh, they're fine. They were the cheese in the trap, you see. You're the mouse. Give me your pistol, Mr. Fremont, and that cane knife. My men are instructed to kill both of them if you don't cooperate."

Fremont looked at him a moment. Then he unbuckled the machete and the holster and dropped them on the floor. Patel hopped off the desk and picked them up. Dellara nodded at him, and Patel went over Fremont from collar to boots, turning out every pocket, running his hands down the seams of the wire suit, pulling off the boots and shaking them. He found the pliers and the reed and the goggles and a few other things and laid them all on the desk.

Dellara picked up the pliers and opened and closed them.

"So this is how you went through the wire. I thought it would be something like that."

He watched Patel put everything in a desk drawer and turn the key and put the key in his pocket.

"To be honest, all this is unnecessary," Dellara said. "I don't believe even Crane Fremont could outdraw me. Look at me. I don't look quick, do I?" His jowls shook. "Watch."

Fremont didn't see the hand move.

There was a gun in it, and a crash that filled the little room, and the rock wall beside Fremont's head burst into splinters. Chips of stone and spattered lead stung his cheek and his ear. When he put his fingers to his face they came away red.

Dellara was holding the gun at his hip, smoke curling out of the muzzle. He hadn't even turned his head to aim.

Chapter VII: The Mine

Fremont didn't move. He'd seen fast men before, in Macao and Hankow and on a pier at Port Said, and he'd never seen anybody draw like that. All that fat had fooled him. It had been meant to.

Dellara spat red juice on the floor and grinned.

"All right. Now you go up to the mine with the rest of the boys. Patel."

He nodded at Carnahan. Patel picked a bucket up off the floor and threw it at the man in the corner, water and all. Most of it was water. Some of it was gray scum from the bottom. Carnahan jerked and coughed and made a noise in his throat.

"Get him up," Dellara said. "He's had his vacation." He looked at Fremont. "Come along. Astrid, you'll find something to keep yourself busy, I'm sure."

He said it sweetly. Astrid didn't answer him.

Fremont went out after Dellara. Patel came behind, hauling Carnahan along by one arm, Carnahan's feet scraping on the concrete. Fremont didn't have to look back to know where Patel's revolver was pointed.

They went through the temple. Fremont had guessed right. It was a stamp mill and a refinery jammed into a stone church: crushers, a ball mill, settling tanks, a row of iron retorts, belts running up into the

dark roof. It was all small and portable, the kind of gear you could break down and float up a river on a barge. Nothing was running now. The place stank of mercury and wet rock and machine grease. A few men sat around on crates with rifles across their knees, rough, unshaven men in dirty khaki, one of them paring his nails with a knife, another asleep with his mouth open. They watched Fremont go by with no great interest.

Then they were out in the wind again, walking up the gorge toward the tunnel. The wind was behind them now and pushed at their backs.

Fremont kept his eyes moving.

The ground between the buildings and the mine was rough, all broken rock and boulders and cracks a man could turn an ankle in. Behind him was the temple with the little buildings around it. Ahead and to the left was the mine. On the right, the river went down toward the mouth of the gorge and the pill-box.

He looked up. Above the mine entrance the cliff leaned out as it climbed, ragged, eaten away by weather, and full of cracks. A good climber could go up it. There were loose boulders all along the higher ledges, big ones. The cliff overhung so far that a rock knocked loose from up there might come down on the temple roof, if it didn't go into the river.

Dellara would have thought of that. He'd have a rifleman on the roof.

The tunnel mouth was in front of them. They ducked under the cable just as a car came grinding out overhead, heaped with black ore, dripping grit on them as it passed. Then they were inside, and the wind was cut off as if a door had shut.

Electric bulbs hung along the ceiling on a wire, every twenty feet or so. Between them it was dim. The air was dead and close and smelled of wet stone, sweat, and old urine.

A short way in, the passage opened into a big chamber. The walls had been carved, every inch, in the patient fussy Inca way: steps and serpents and square-headed men with huge ear plugs and staring eyes. Niches had been cut in the rock all around. Most were empty. In a few there were stone figures left, squat things with folded hands. The gold ones would be bars in Dellara's storeroom by now.

This was the place, then. This was what the Indians out in the forest were killing people for. Fremont didn't blame them. A man with any sense could have made some kind of deal with them, maybe, a share of something, a promise to leave the holy places alone. Dellara had walked in and pried their gods out of the wall and melted them down. Fremont figured a lot of white men had been murdered for less.

They crossed the chamber and went into another tunnel on the far side.

"Lunch time, is it?" Dellara said. "Well, I suppose even mules have to eat. Pedro!"

The tunnel widened again and the lights were closer together. There were men sitting along both walls, thirty or more of them, squatting on their heels or on the bare rock. They were black with dust from hair to boots. Most of them had beards. Most of them were barefoot, and their feet were cut and swollen and some of the cuts had gone bad, puffy and yellow at the edges. They were eating out of tin

pannikins with their fingers, something brown and lumpy, shoveling it in as fast as it would go down. A smell came off the pans of old grease and onions and meat that had turned. Fremont saw something small and white wriggle on the edge of one man's pan. The man picked it off and ate it.

Near the far wall a man lay on his side under a piece of sacking, not eating. His feet stuck out from under it. They were gray. Nobody was paying any attention to him.

There were five guards. Only five, with rifles. Fremont looked at the thirty men and then at the five and wondered about that. Thirty men could rush five, if they wanted to badly enough. Unless they'd seen somebody try it.

The prisoners looked up at the newcomers with flat, empty eyes and went back to eating. An empty ore car came grinding along the cable overhead and went on into the dark at the back of the mine. Patel gave Carnahan a shove. The explorer staggered three steps and went down on his face among the prisoners and stayed there.

A big man set down his pan, got up, and turned Carnahan over and propped him against the wall. He had red hair under the dust, and a face like a slag heap, and his hands were already raw. Red Argent. He didn't look at Fremont.

Marlowe didn't look at him either. He was sitting a few feet from Argent, eating from his pannikin with two fingers and his little finger crooked, and humming to himself. It sounded like some peasant tune from the Balkans, wandering up and down the scale.

It was the Spatari code. A Rumanian radio man had worked it out years ago and nobody much had ever used it. It had no words and no grammar, only the seven notes of the scale in combinations, and Fremont and his men had found it handy more than once when they were in a room with people who'd kill them for talking. To Dellara it was a little man humming a song. Marlowe could have been singing "La Cucaracha" in Chinese for all Dellara knew.

The tune said: *Took you long enough.*

Fremont couldn't hum back without being heard. His right hand moved down by his thigh, a quick twist of the fingers, the one-hand alphabet of the deaf. One word.

Wait.

Dellara crooked a finger. Pedro Vargas came over, the scar on his face pale in the electric light. He was carrying a rock about the size of a man's head with a length of chain wrapped around it, and on the end of the chain an iron cuff. He knelt and locked the cuff around Fremont's ankle. His breath stank of rum and rotten teeth.

"I take no chances," Dellara said. He spat. The juice spattered on a prisoner's bare foot and the prisoner didn't move it. "The good old ball and chain. You won't get away, Mr. Fremont, so you might as well make yourself at home and dig with your friends."

Fremont didn't answer. He picked up the rock in both arms, carried it over to the wall by Marlowe, and sat down. Somebody passed him a pannikin. The stew was cold, with a skin of yellow fat on top.

Something gray was in it that might have been a piece of tripe and might have been anything. He began to eat, or seemed to.

Dellara stood and watched him for a long minute, chewing. Then he grunted, turned around, and went back out toward the light. Patel went after him.

Pedro leaned against the wall with his rifle in the crook of his arm. His eyes stayed on Fremont. He didn't notice anything about Fremont's right hand.

The hand talked. Marlowe nodded, very slightly, and looked down at the floor around him. Whatever he wanted, he didn't find it there. He caught Argent's eye and hummed a few notes.

Argent yawned, a huge cracking yawn, and stretched his arms up over his head, and when he brought them down one hand brushed the wall behind him. A sliver of rock came away in his fingers, thin and sharp, about the length of a needle. A moment later it was in Marlowe's hand. A moment after that it was in Fremont's.

Fremont leaned forward over his knees like a tired man and let his hands hang. One of them found the lock on the cuff.

He could have gotten the cuff off another way. He'd spent years training his body until he could do things with it that most men couldn't, and he could have slipped a joint and squeezed the foot through, though it would have peeled half the skin off his heel. But that would have taken time and would have looked like what it was. The stone pick was better. The lock was old and cheap and crusted with rust and dried blood. Fremont had never met many locks he couldn't open.

It took him two minutes. There was a small click. The cuff sagged.

He didn't move. His fingers talked to Marlowe some more. Marlowe's face showed nothing, and his little finger flicked once against his pan: Yes. He hummed something to Argent. Argent scratched under his arm.

From the back of the mine came a squeal of pulleys.

The ore car came swinging out of the dark, full, running fast down the cable toward the tunnel mouth.

Fremont slid his foot out of the cuff.

Marlowe got up, stretched, took one step, and caught his toe on a rock. He went sprawling straight across the track under the car, arms flailing, his pan flying and stew splashing over the floor. A prisoner yelled. Argent came off the wall with a roar and threw his whole huge body forward, and hit Marlowe at the hips and knocked him rolling out of the way, the two of them crashing into a pile of tools. The car went by over the place where Marlowe's head had been.

Every guard in the tunnel turned to look.

Fremont came up off the floor with the rock in both hands, the chain swinging. Pedro saw him and whipped around, the rifle coming up.

Fremont threw the rock.

It took Pedro square in the chest. Fremont heard ribs go, a muffled crunching, and Pedro went backward off his feet into the wall with the wind blown out of him and the rifle clattering on the stone. Then the ore car was going by between them. Fremont jumped, caught the iron rim of it, and hung there, legs kicking, while the car dragged him along. A rifle went off behind him and the bullet sang past and smashed into the rock somewhere ahead. He got a knee over the rim and hauled himself up and in.

He was lying in the ore, sharp black rock that cut through his suit and into his ribs and thighs, with the heap of it between him and the guns. The car was going fast. Shouting came after him and boots running.

It slowed coming into the bend before the tunnel mouth. He went over the side before it stopped, hit the floor hard on one shoulder, rolled up, and ran. The bright square of daylight jerked and swung ahead of him. The skin of his back waited for a bullet. The car was still rolling along behind him, filling the tunnel, and none came.

He came out into the wind.

The temple was to his right. The pill-box was off to the left, down the gorge, out of sight around the bend.

He went straight up the cliff.

The rock was rotten and full of cracks and he went up it fast, hand over hand, jamming his fingers into the cracks and kicking his boots in, not testing much. A flake came away under his left hand and went bounding down and he hung by one arm until his foot found something. He kept going. The broken rock tore his palms open. He left red smears on the gray stone.

Below him the guards came pouring out of the tunnel with Pedro at the front. Pedro was bent over, holding his chest with one arm, his rifle in the other, and blood was running from his mouth and down his chin onto his shirt. Every few steps he coughed and more came out. They didn't look up. They were looking down the gorge, along the river and among the boulders, where a running man would go.

Fremont was a long way up now, working sideways to the right, toward the temple. The cliff leaned out farther here. Under him there was nothing but air, and far below, the river, gray and slick and fast. It made the climbing harder. It also meant that anything he knocked loose from up here would come down where he wanted it to.

A puff of smoke jumped from the temple roof.

The bullet hit the rock a foot from his face and burst into a silver splash of lead. Grit stung his eyes. Down below, somebody shouted and pointed. Now they'd all seen him. Their rifles started banging.

They were shooting uphill at a moving target and mostly hitting the cliff. The man on the roof was better.

His second shot took Fremont high in the side.

Fremont's body jerked straight and arched backward off the rock. His hands came open. For a moment he seemed to hang there against the sky with his arms out. Then he fell.

He'd been leaning out over the river. He went down past the cliff face, turning, and hit the water in a white burst far below, and the river closed over him.

Pedro and the guards came running and stumbling across the broken ground to the bank. They stood there with their rifles pointed at the water, breathing hard, waiting for something to come up.

Nothing came up. Pedro spat blood and pointed with his rifle barrel.

A long red streak was sliding away downstream on the gray surface, spreading and thinning as the current took it toward the mouth of the gorge. Pedro watched it go. He grinned, and his teeth were pink.

Chapter VIII: The Black Hornet Returns

The man on the roof had been better than Fremont had figured on.

The bullet had gone in under his left arm and out the back of his shoulder, through meat and nothing else, but it had torn a channel the length of his finger and it bled freely. He let the current take him. Every so often he came up for a mouthful of air, gray light and a glimpse of rock walls going by, and went under again. The cold water kept the bleeding down. It also made his whole arm ache to the bone.

Blood in a jungle river was a bad thing to be trailing. Fremont knew that. Something brushed his leg once in the murk, and then something else nipped at the open wound, a quick tug and a sting, and he kicked at it and it went away. The paste on his skin had mostly held. The paste didn't cover the hole in his shoulder.

He couldn't get out until he was clear of the gorge. The pill-box was still sitting at the mouth with its gun. He thought about the wire net and whether Dellara had sent anybody to patch it. There hadn't been time, probably. Probably.

He tried to think about what came next. Alone and unarmed he couldn't do anything against Dellara and Patel and a building full of gunmen, much less get thirty men out of a mine. He had the *Hornet*, though. The *Hornet* was a long way from unarmed.

The current carried him to the mouth faster than he'd expected. He felt for the net in the brown water and found it, and found his own hole in it, the cut ends of the wire bent back the way he'd left them. Nobody had touched it. He took a breath and went through.

Up on the bank, two of Dellara's men were walking along with rifles over their shoulders, looking at the water. One of them was eating a banana. Fremont was three feet under the surface in water the color of strong coffee, and they didn't see him.

He let the river carry him a long way into the trees before he crawled out. He lay on the bank in the mud for a while. There weren't any piranha out here that he knew of. That didn't mean much. A finger-long leech was already on the back of his hand, fat and black, working at the edge of the paste where the water had softened it. He pulled it off and it left a little round wound that kept bleeding.

The flame pistol was where he'd hidden it in the dead tree. He tore a strip off the tail of his wire suit, wadded it up, and bound it tight under his arm and over the shoulder, pulling the knot with his teeth. Blood came through it right away, but slower.

Then he started back toward the lake.

A drum was going, somewhere far off in the forest. It kept up with him. When he stopped, it stopped. When he walked, it walked. Fremont didn't speak the language of the Poison People and didn't need to. It was saying what drums like that always said.

Nothing came at him. He saw nothing in the trees and heard nothing but the drum.

The *Black Hornet* was still tied up at the edge of the lake. Around her door the mud was trampled with bare footprints, and a dozen little darts lay scattered in it where they'd bounced off the hull. The fireworks had left a black scorch down her side. Nobody was there.

He climbed in and shut the door behind him and sat in the pilot's seat for a minute with his eyes closed. Then he went to work.

He'd already slipped the mooring line. He set some switches, checked his gauges, and started the engine, and the big propeller turned over and caught, and the *Hornet* swung away from the bank and out onto the lake.

He took her up the river on the surface. It was wide enough for her, just. The current pushed against her hard, and the engines dragged her up it against the push. Fremont sat with his good hand on the controls and his jaw set and steered her by feel. He'd built her. He knew every quirk she had, how she'd answer a touch on this lever or that one, how she'd yaw if the current caught her wrong. She did what he asked her.

Well short of the gorge, around a bend where the men at the pill-box couldn't see, he put her into a little backwater where the water lay still under hanging vines. She couldn't go farther as a plane.

She wasn't only a plane.

He'd built her to be several things. The wings folded up into the hull. Under the belly were caterpillar tracks that could be let down when the ground called for it. The cabin could be sealed and the ballast tanks flooded. Inside of a few minutes she could fly, she could swim under the water, or she could crawl over the ground. Today she was going to do the last two.

He worked the controls. With a long whine of hydraulics the wings drew back into the body and plates of black alloy slid over the openings. He pulled the pontoons up, and the *Hornet* settled into the water until it lapped at her sides. He opened the ballast tanks and let the river in, and while she sank he ran the treads down underneath.

Brown water climbed the windows and covered them. Steel shutters came down over the glass, leaving only thin slits to look through. With a soft bump the *Hornet* settled on the river bottom, humming, shivering with the vibration of the engines.

He nosed her out into the channel and turned upstream.

She was too light. The current got under her and she began to tilt sideways, slowly, until things started sliding across the cabin floor and a tin of biscuits rolled out from under the seat and burst open against the wall. Fremont swore and opened the tanks wider. She took on more water and settled, and leveled out. He let his breath go and went back to the controls.

Foot by foot she crawled up the riverbed against the current, under the brown water. It was hard work, even for the *Hornet*. Without her engines she couldn't have done it at all. The river was broad, which kept the current down, and the bottom was mostly sand and gravel without any big boulders. Even so it was a lot like flying blind into a gale. The view through the slits was nothing but brown water and drifting silt and once the pale belly of a dead fish going by.

He kept her in the middle of the channel. When the floor began to tilt to one side, he knew he was climbing toward a bank and corrected. He watched his instruments. He had a fair idea how far he needed to go.

He hardly felt the net. Something dragged across the hull and twanged and then the pressure was gone, and he guessed he'd torn it loose from its anchors and it was floating off downstream on its corks behind him. The men at the pill-box might notice. They might figure a log had come down and torn it. It didn't much matter. They couldn't stop him now.

Not much could. Her hull would turn rifle bullets and machine-gun fire and anything short of a field gun. She was weakest in the air and strongest on the ground. Heavy shells would hurt her, but she was fast and hard to hit.

When he figured he'd come far enough, Fremont angled her toward the right bank. He loosened the revolver in the holster he'd buckled on, and nodded to himself, and gave her full throttle.

The black back of the *Hornet* broke the surface of the river. Water poured off her in sheets. She came grinding up out of the shallows onto the stones with the treads clanking and churning gravel, a big wet black beetle crawling out of a pond.

He opened a valve and blew the ballast out in two gray jets. She rose and lightened and picked up speed. Through the slits he saw he'd guessed right. The mouth of the mine was almost straight ahead. Up the gorge the temple sat gray and still in the dim cold light.

Nobody had spotted him yet. He sent her up the slope, rocking over loose rock, swinging around the big boulders, straight at the tunnel.

Something clanged off the hull.

So that was over. Fremont pressed a trigger on the panel. The machine guns in the *Hornet's* nose opened up with a racket that bounced off both walls of the gorge and came back twice as loud.

That was the signal.

Inside the mine, Argent and Marlowe would hear it. In those few minutes on the floor with his fingers talking, Fremont had told them what to listen for, and what to do when they heard it. They'd have passed it along to the others by now. Machine-gun fire meant the mine was taking itself back.

Shots cracked inside the tunnel. The ore car came out on its cable, jerked to a halt, then ran on, fast, down toward the temple, and disappeared into its hole in the wall.

A man came staggering out of the mine mouth. He snapped a shot at the *Hornet* that went somewhere into the sky, and then his legs folded and he went down on his face. It was Pedro. His shirt was soaked through with blood from the chest down, and there was blood all over his chin and his teeth. He dragged himself to his knees. His hand groped in a crack in the rock beside the tunnel mouth, and found something there, and pulled, and he fell over on his side and lay still with his eyes open and a bubble of red slowly swelling at the corner of his mouth and then not swelling.

Somewhere in the rock, gears began to grind.

A sheet of steel was coming down across the mouth of the tunnel, slowly, shining. A gate. Dellara had built it in for exactly this, in case his miners ever got ideas.

Fremont gunned the *Hornet* up the slope. He was too late. Through the gap he saw men running toward the light, shouting, Argent's huge shape at the front with his red head down. Then the steel hit bottom with a crash that shook the ground, and the mine was shut.

He swung the *Hornet* around in a half circle and stopped and looked back at the temple. He didn't see anyone. Smoke kept puffing from the slit windows, though, and lead was whanging off the hull every few seconds.

He was going to have to blow the gate. That meant guessing the charge right. Too little and he'd waste his time. Too much and he'd bring down the side of the gorge and bury thirty men in the dark forever. And there were tall rocks in front of the mine mouth, too close together to get the *Hornet* through. He'd have to do it on foot, out in the open, with the temple shooting at him.

He shut off the engine and got out of the seat and opened the arms locker. The *Hornet* carried enough guns for a small war. He took out a dozen pistols and a dozen rifles and piled them by the door, with belts of ammunition. Then he got out the explosive. It wasn't dynamite. It was a powder of his own, worked out in the island lab, and it came packed in sticks. He picked out several, and then after a second's thought one more, a bigger stick, a dirty greenish-black. He wound a loop of wire around that one. He got a hand drill with a hardened bit.

Bullets were still banging off the outside.

He pushed the door open a crack, holding the sticks against his chest. A bullet through that bundle would leave nothing of him but the boots. He didn't think about it any longer than that. He went out the door low and fast, ducked between two tall rocks, and ran for the mine.

The air was full of bullets. One plucked at his sleeve. Another skipped off a boulder in front of him and went whining away. He got to the gate and dropped flat against the rock beside it.

The cable was still there. The gate had sheared it when it came down, but the cut end had jammed in a crack in the rock and the line was still taut, running down across the slope to the temple. He hooked the loop of wire on the greenish stick over the cable, lit the short fuse, and let go.

The stick went sliding down the cable, swinging and turning. Halfway down it slowed, and Fremont, lying between his two rocks, held his breath. Then the cable dipped and the stick picked up speed and went on down and vanished through the gap in the temple wall.

He'd cut the fuse right. Inside the temple there was a flat blasting roar, and red light flashed in every window, and glass went flying out over the stones.

It wasn't going to have hurt them much. That stick was mostly noise and smoke. He'd picked it on purpose. Astrid Voss was probably somewhere in that building, and he couldn't blow her to pieces to get at Dellara. It would keep their heads down for a minute or two, though.

He was already back at the gate with the drill. The rock around the frame was old and weathered and the bit went into it easily. He drilled four holes, wiping sweat out of his eyes with his sleeve, blood dripping off his elbow from the reopened shoulder and spotting the rock. It wouldn't take much of a charge. He pushed the sticks in, tamped them, and ran the fuses.

He couldn't light them yet. The men inside had to know.

He hammered on the steel with his fist. After a moment somebody knocked back.

He rapped out a message, quick and short, in a code Argent and Marlowe would know. A bullet whanged off the gate beside his head and splattered his face with hot lead. Another one ripped across his ribs, through the suit and through the skin, a burning line that started bleeding at once. Inside, somebody knocked back three times fast. That was Marlowe. They were getting back from the gate.

Fremont lit the fuses. Then he ran.

He went back through the rocks toward the *Hornet* bent double, with bullets kicking up grit all around him. At the door he threw the rifles and pistols out onto the ground in a heap, where the first men out of the mine couldn't miss them. Then he slammed the door, got into his seat, and sent the *Hornet* clanking up the gorge toward the temple. Somebody had to keep those riflemen busy.

He looked back once.

Far down the gorge, men were coming at a run, ten or a dozen, the light flashing on their guns. The crew from the pill-box. Somebody in the temple had cranked up a telephone. The miners would come out of that hole between the men in the temple and the men from the pill-box, and be cut to pieces in the middle.

One of those had to be stopped. The pill-box crew had tommy guns, but there weren't many of them, and once the prisoners had rifles they'd outnumber them three to one. The temple was the problem. The temple had the high ground.

The charge went off behind him.

It wasn't loud, a heavy thud he felt through the treads more than heard. Then the cliff over the mine mouth shrugged, and rock started sliding down it, a slow gray river of stones and dust, bounding and crashing, and the whole face of the mountain seemed to sway. Fremont watched it through the slit and didn't breathe.

The slide slowed and stopped. Dust rolled out across the slope. The gate was gone under twenty feet of broken rock.

Beside the pile, one big rock trembled and fell outward. Behind it was a black gap.

A red head came shoving through it. Argent got his shoulders out, then the rest of him, and stood up covered in gray dust from head to foot, and saw the pile of guns. He raised one huge arm at the *Hornet*.

Then he was running for the guns with Marlowe right behind him and a crowd of filthy, bearded men behind Marlowe. Bullets from the temple went into the dirt around their feet.

Fremont had wasted enough time. He turned the *Hornet* toward the temple and floored it.

Concrete was a good wall. But the temple wasn't all concrete. Where the old Inca walls were still standing, Dellara had left them alone, either because they looked solid enough or because he'd liked the carvings. Four-hundred-year-old stone with no mortar in it.

That had been a mistake.

A grenade burst beside the *Hornet*. She reared up on one tread, hung there, and crashed down again and kept going. Fremont jammed the throttle all the way forward. Straight ahead was a stretch of old wall, cracked and leaning, covered with carved serpents and staring faces. He grinned at it.

Behind him, Argent and Marlowe would be passing out rifles to men who had been chained in the dark for months. Those two at the head of that crowd would handle the pill-box crew, tommy guns or not. Fremont's job was the temple.

The carved wall swung up in the slits and filled them.

The *Hornet* hit it nose first. The old stone gave all at once. Blocks the size of steamer trunks went tumbling inward and dust and rubble came down on the hull like hail, and then the *Hornet* was through, inside the temple, rocking on her treads in a cloud of dust.

He saw the machinery, the crushers and tanks and belts. He saw a gallery running around the walls high up, where the Inca priests had once stood, and men kneeling along the rail with rifles. He stopped the *Hornet* in the middle of the floor and opened up with everything in her nose.

The gallery came apart. The rail splintered. Men jerked and spun and screamed. One of them took a burst across the belly and folded over the rail and hung there with his rifle swinging from its strap, and something gray and wet slid out of him and dangled toward the floor. Another went over backward with half his jaw shot away. A third dropped his rifle and stood up with both hands in the air, and the burst caught him before Fremont could stop it, and he sat down hard against the wall and stayed sitting. Blood ran off the edge of the gallery in strings and splattered on the machinery.

Nobody threw grenades down at him. They didn't want to wreck their gold plant, Fremont guessed. It didn't matter. Nobody up there was shooting at the miners now.

He turned to look back out through the hole he'd made, toward the mine.

He couldn't see the mine. He couldn't see the slope, or the miners, or the men from the pill-box. A wall of black fog was rolling down the gorge, thick and slow, curling over on itself, pushed along by the cold wind off the peaks. It was already across the slope and still coming. It was the same black stuff he'd seen the pill-box gun throw at the Indians that morning.

Dellara had turned his gas loose on the whole gorge. On the miners, and on his own men too, the ones from the pill-box who were down there fighting for him.

Chapter IX: The Heads on the Poles

Fremont swore. There was nothing he could do about it from here. He had gear in the lockers that could be made into masks, given time, and there wasn't any time. The miners had one chance. If they could break through the pill-box crew, they might outrun the gas to the mouth of the gorge.

And then what? Outside the gorge the forest was full of Indians with blowguns. But there was the pill-box. Its crew was up here fighting, so it might be empty, and it had been built to keep gas out. They could get inside.

Argent and Marlowe would think of that. They'd thought their way out of worse. It was such a thin chance, though, that Fremont felt sick as he turned back to the guns.

Then he went still.

Across the floor of the temple, straight in front of the *Hornet's* nose, was the door he'd come in by that morning, the one to the hallway and the offices and the outside. Two people were standing in it. Dellara, and Astrid Voss.

Dellara had her in front of him. One huge arm was locked around her waist, pinning her back against his belly, and her feet barely touched the floor. His other hand held the pistol against her head, just behind her ear, hard enough to push her head over sideways. He was watching the *Hornet*.

"Come out, Fremont!" His voice boomed in the stone room. "Come out or I'll blow her brains on the floor!"

"Don't!" Astrid cried. "Don't you dare, don't..."

Dellara squeezed. The breath went out of her in a whoop and she hung there with her mouth open, trying to suck air back in. His black teeth showed.

"Hurry up! Out, with your hands on top of your head!"

Fremont sat with his hands on the controls. Dellara would do it. He'd do it and then go have his lunch, the girl had said. And if Fremont climbed out of the *Hornet* now, Dellara would kill him, and then the rest of them, Argent and Marlowe and every man from the mine who wasn't already dead in the gas.

His face went still. Something went out of his eyes, whatever easy thing usually sat in them, and what was left was flat and black. A few men in a few ports around the world had seen him look like that. Most of them were dead.

He put his hand on the throttle.

The *Hornet* pivoted on her treads, swung her nose square at the doorway, and charged.

That was the one thing Dellara hadn't figured on. Rage came up in his fat face, and then something else pushed the rage out of the way, because twelve tons of black steel was coming across the floor at him with its engines howling. He screamed. He threw the girl away from him, straight into the path of the treads, and lunged back through the door into the hall.

Astrid hit the floor on her hands and knees and tried to roll and couldn't get out of the way in time.

Fremont hauled on the controls. The *Hornet* reared up on her rear treads, swinging hard to the left as she came up, and for a moment the treads were churning in the air over the girl's head. If anything in her had answered a hair slow she'd have come down on Astrid and left her smeared across the stones. Nothing in her answered slow. Fremont knew to the inch what she'd do.

She crashed down a yard to the side, and before she'd stopped rocking Fremont was out of the hatch. He grabbed Astrid by the arm and the back of the belt and yanked her up off the floor. The bulk of the *Hornet* was between them and the gallery. He half lifted, half threw her toward the open door.

He'd seen Dellara behind him, in the doorway. He didn't climb in after her. He turned around with his back to the hatch so his body was between the girl and the door.

Something slammed into his left shoulder, just below the collarbone, close to the wound he already had, and spun him half around. It felt as if somebody had swung a sledgehammer into him. The arm went dead from the shoulder down. A few inches lower and it would have been his heart.

Dellara stood in the doorway. His face had gone purple and wet and his lips were skinned back off his black teeth. The pistol in his hand was jumping.

Fremont had drawn his own gun. Dellara never saw it come out.

What Dellara saw first was nothing. What he felt was a punch in the chest that knocked him back a step against the door frame. Then he looked down and saw the gun in Fremont's hand, and there was smoke coming out of it, and he didn't understand how it had gotten there.

Fremont had fired once. He stood there and watched, gun still out, his left arm hanging and blood running down it and dripping off his fingers.

The bullet had gone in through the middle of Dellara's chest. His white suit, already gray with sweat, went red in a widening patch the size of a dinner plate. He opened his mouth. Betel juice and blood came out of it together and ran down over his chins and onto his shirt. He tried to lift the pistol and his hand wouldn't do it. He made a gurgling sound. His legs went out from under him all at once, and all that weight came down in a heap in the doorway, and his head hit the stone with a sound like dropping a pumpkin. One leg twitched a few times and then quit.

Fremont didn't feel anything about it at all.

A bullet whanged off the *Hornet* by his head. Somebody was left up on the gallery. Fremont jumped in through the hatch and pulled it shut, dropped into the seat, and sent the *Hornet* clanking back toward the hole in the wall.

Astrid was on the cabin floor among the spilled biscuits, staring at him.

"Argent and Marlowe," Fremont said, over his shoulder. "And the rest. Got to see what happened to them."

"You're shot. You're bleeding all over."

"Can you stop it? Pack something on it and hold it hard while I drive. I can't stop."

She found the kit and tore open bandages with her teeth. She knelt beside the seat and jammed a thick wad against the hole below his collarbone and pressed with both hands, and he made a noise he didn't intend to make, and she didn't let up.

The *Hornet* went plunging down the gorge. The wind had already carried the gas past them, rolling it on toward the mouth, and what was left of it hung in tatters in the hollows. There were men lying on the ground.

Fremont slowed for a second to look and wished he hadn't. They were curled up on their sides, mostly, knees pulled up, hands clawed at their throats. Their faces were dark, almost blue. Pink foam had come out of their mouths and noses and dried there. One had torn his own shirt open and raked his chest bloody with his fingernails trying to get air. One lay on his back with his eyes wide open, and the whites had gone solid red. A tommy gun lay next to him. That one was one of Dellara's, then. Some of the others were barefoot, in rags. Fremont looked at each face going by. None of them had red hair. None of them was small and yellow-haired.

It seemed to take a very long time to reach the mouth of the gorge.

Men were coming out of the pill-box when they got there, filthy and armed and squinting in the light. Argent was a head taller than the rest of them. Fremont hunted through them for a yellow head, and found it, and let out a breath he'd been holding for a while.

The men saw the *Hornet* and a yell went up. Fremont stopped her and climbed out, slowly, with Astrid steadying his good arm. Out here past the gorge the air was hot and thick again and full of the smell of the jungle, and flies were already finding the blood on him. Argent came over grinning.

"You made it, huh? So did we! We cut through those monkeys from the pill-box and beat the gas down here. They left the door wide open, the dopes. We were just about to go back and dig for you."

"How many hurt?" Fremont said.

"Nobody dead. Plenty shot up, though. A couple got a whiff of that stuff and they're coughing up their insides, but they'll live, I guess. What about the fat man?"

Fremont nodded. "Yeah. He's done."

"We better get back inside," Marlowe said. He had a cut over one eye that had bled all down his face and dried, and he was holding his left wrist against his chest. "Your bug won't hold all of us." He jerked his thumb toward the trees. "We've got company."

The jungle was coming alive.

They came out of the green at the bottom of the slope, a few at first, then dozens, then more than Fremont could count, naked and painted in black and red, with their hair cut straight across their foreheads and their blowguns up. The Poison People. They were coming up the open ground toward the mouth of the gorge at a run, without a sound.

"Inside," Fremont said. "Move. Those darts'll kill you."

He slammed the *Hornet's* hatch and locked it and ran with the rest for the pill-box, a few yards off. They got there just in time. Darts came pattering down on the concrete around the door and on the backs of the last men in, but nobody was hit that anybody knew of. The steel door banged shut behind Fremont. Through the ports he could see the Indians close in around the pill-box like water around a rock.

"Well, they can't get in," Marlowe said. "Guess they finally got sick of Dellara's gas."

"More likely they had lookouts up on the cliffs," Fremont said. "They saw the fight and sent word to come and finish it. They didn't waste much time."

Argent had a rifle up and was sighting down the barrel through a port.

"Want me to..."

"Look," Fremont said, and nodded at the glass.

The Indians weren't coming at the pill-box. They'd gone past it, streaming by on both sides, and up into the gorge. They knew they couldn't get in. There was something in there they wanted more.

For a minute nobody said anything. Then Marlowe jerked his head at a radio set on a bench in the corner.

"How about it? We could get planes up from Lima in a few hours. It'll take plenty to haul this crowd out."

He didn't wait for an answer. He sat down at it, clamped on the earphones one-handed, and started tapping out an emergency call.

Fremont looked around at the men from the mine. They were skin and bone and beards and rags, black with dust and blood, their feet wrapped in strips of sacking. One of them had found a cupboard full of canned goods, and they were all around it now, prying cans open with bayonets and knives and the edges of rocks, eating peaches and corned beef and beans with their fingers, juice running down their beards, not talking. He saw sailors off tramp freighters. He saw beachcombers, a man with a tattoo of a ship on his forearm, a kid who couldn't be more than eighteen with sores all over his hands. Men. Somebody had bought and sold them for five dollars and a dead man's head.

His eyes went flat and black again for a moment, and then it passed.

Astrid had gotten hold of the medical kit and was working on Carnahan, who was propped against the wall with his ruined face turned up to her. He lifted one bandaged hand and motioned to Fremont.

"So it got through," he said. His lips barely moved. "The head."

"It got through. I followed it here."

Astrid sat back on her heels.

"I still don't understand why he kept it all so secret. Gold mines aren't illegal. Why the slaves, why all of it? I never found out."

Carnahan looked at Fremont. His lips made a word with no sound behind it. *Germany*.

Fremont understood. Carnahan couldn't explain without telling the whole room what he really was, and outside of Fremont and his two men, nobody here knew that.

"Let me take a guess," Fremont said. "You tell me if I'm off. Dellara was working for the Nazis. Now that I think about it, there was a German agent in Spain during the Civil War who used that name. Sabotage, mostly. The Republicans caught him and stood him in front of a wall, and he got away somehow before they could shoot him."

Carnahan nodded.

"So he speaks Spanish, he comes to South America to work for Hitler, sets himself up as a mining engineer, and this mine drops into his lap. Pure luck. He was going to use the gold to pay for Nazi work down here. Buy people. Set up German money in the banks. And buy food on the coast too, I'd guess, and get it smuggled through the British blockade."

"You guess good," Carnahan said. "There's a lot of gold in that mountain. It could've bought a lot of trouble from here to Buenos Aires."

Astrid's eyes were hot.

"Well, it's not going to buy anything for Germany. I'll blow the whole mountain up first, so nobody can get at it."

"You won't have to," Fremont said. "Once the government in Lima finds out what's in there, they'll give you all the protection you want."

Marlowe took the earphones off.

"Got Lima," he said. "They're sending ten planes. They're leaving now. They'll be here before dark."

Fremont didn't answer. He was looking out through one of the thick glass ports again, and his mouth had gone thin.

The Poison People were coming back.

They came down out of the gorge in a long column, still painted, still silent. A lot of them were carrying things. Fremont saw stone figures in their arms, squat gods with folded hands and big staring

eyes, the ones he'd seen still standing in their niches in the cave. They didn't look at the pill-box much. They went past it and down the slope toward the forest.

Some of them carried poles.

The poles were long and sharpened at the top. On each sharp end there was a head.

They were white men's heads, fresh ones. The necks had been hacked through with machetes, not cleanly, and ragged flaps of skin and gristle hung down from them, and blood was still running down the poles over the hands of the men carrying them. Flies were already coming to them out of the trees, crawling over the open mouths and the eyes.

Fremont knew one of them. A narrow hawk face, a little line of mustache, the mouth hanging open on one side. Patel. The eyes were half shut, and one of them had a dart sticking out of the lid.

He knew another. It was the biggest of them, so heavy the pole bent with it and two men had to carry it between them. Pink jowls, gray now, sagging. A mouth that had fallen open and showed black teeth. A red trail of betel juice dried down the chin. Dellara.

There were others. More than Fremont wanted to count.

The Poison People had found new heads to shrink.

At the edge of the trees, one of the Indians stopped and turned around, an old man with gray in his bowl of hair and a necklace of teeth. He faced back toward the gorge and shouted. It went on for a while, rising and falling.

Fremont cranked the port open an inch to hear it. Heat and the smell of blood came in through the gap. The old man finished, turned his back, and went into the trees after the others.

"What'd he say?" Marlowe asked.

Fremont closed the port. The old man had been speaking Quechua, mostly, the Inca language, the way it was spoken by people who had kept it four hundred years in a jungle. Fremont had enough of it to follow.

"He said they're leaving the gorge," he said. "For good. They've got their gods back, the ones Dellara didn't melt down, and they've got the heads of the men who did it. But the place is spoiled now. Strangers have been in it. It isn't holy anymore. So they're moving on. Many days' walk from here, he said." He looked over at Astrid. "So you've got one less problem. You won't need this pill-box. They're going looking for some new country to hunt."

Down at the bottom of the slope, the last of the painted backs went into the green and the leaves closed behind them. The pole with Dellara's head on it was the last thing to go. It swayed over the tops of the ferns for a few seconds, bobbing, the fat face turned back toward the pill-box with its black teeth bared, and the flies following it in a little cloud. Then it was gone too.

Fremont let out his breath and sat down hard on an ammunition crate. His shoulder was soaking through Astrid's bandage.

"Is there any brandy in that cupboard?" he said. "Before those fellows eat it?"

END

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