RESCUE TROOPER

by Andy Turnbull
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CHAPTER ONE

She was black haired and beautiful and she lay on a big white bed. She smiled, and Pedro moved toward her.

She said something but her words were lost in the scream of a klaxon horn. As it sounded, the dream changed.

The young and beautiful woman became old and worn, and the white bed turned into the broken side of a stick-and-mud hut. With horror Pedro again saw his mother pinned and dying under the rock that had rolled through his father's home. Again, he heard her screams.

The klaxon sounded again and someone shouted. A hand shook Pedro's shoulder.

"Ramirez! Get up! Red alert!"

The barracks lights were on as he opened his eyes and red lights flashed on the walls. John Dunn, the new man who slept in the upper bunk, was shaking his shoulder. In the doorway stood a man in fluorescent scarlet coveralls with the white crest of a centurion on his chest.

"Tropics! We load in five minutes!" The centurion glared down the length of the barracks for a moment then, leaving the door open, turned and marched out into the night.

Dunn straightened as Pedro opened his eyes.

"You were dreaming," he said.
"I know."

"A bad one?"

"Sort of. Don't worry about it."

"He always dreams when the horn sounds." MacKenzie stepped into his scarlet coveralls as he spoke.

"Oh." Dunn looked embarrassed as he turned to reach for his own coveralls at the head of the bunk.

Still groggy, Pedro pushed the blanket aside and swung his feet to the floor, then wiped the sleep from his eyes before he stood and stretched. Around him, ninety nine other men hurriedly struggled into coveralls and jump boots.

Pedro was shorter and lighter than most of them, but smooth-muscled and strong. His tan was deep, his cheekbones high and his hair straight and very black. He listened to the chatter of the barracks as he dressed.

"What's the time, anyway?" A voice from somewhere.

"About 2:30."

"I bet Johnston had a half-hour to get dressed." Carter buckled a utility belt around his waist as he spoke. "He's not supposed to get any more warning than we do."

"He doesn't, but he doesn't sleep." Chan spoke precisely as he clipped pouches to his belt. "Johnston stands to at a loading door all night, in full kit. When he's tired, he digs ditches."
From outside came the scream of jet engines starting. Coveralls not zipped, boots not buckled, Pedro grabbed his parachute and his jump-bag -- the one with the green stripe, which contained his tropical kit -- and joined the others as they filed out of the building.

One of the five Manitou transport planes assigned to Red One rolled onto the loading pad in front of the barracks as the century formed in the glare of the floodlights, and the others were on the taxi way. Pedro and several others finished dressing as they stood for roll-call, then a whistle blew and five hundred corpsmen filed into the waiting planes.

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Six thousand kilometers to the south Centurion John Forsythe drummed his fingers on a steel desk in the radio room of the Canadian embassy in Hidalgo, San Cristobal. At the control board nearby a corpsman flicked switches, read meters, then flicked more switches. The corpsman started as the phone rang, then turned to watch as Forsythe grabbed it.

"Radio room."

"Thompson here. Just got back from a reception. Corpsman on duty says you were looking for me."

"Yes sir. I was."

"What's the problem?"

"Probably nothing serious, sir, but the seismograph shows a bad tremor in the hills above Corunda. I have no indication of damage, but it was eight Richter."
"Yes?"

"When we couldn't reach you I sent a red alert to Ottawa. That's what the book says for anything over five, sir."

"That's right. When was this?"

The Centurion looked at his watch. "About twenty minutes ago."

"I was in the car then -- I guess that's why I didn't feel it. Anything on the monitors?"

"Nothing yet, sir. Power lines are operational, phone lines are good and all the radio stations are broadcasting with no emergency bulletins. Looks like there's nothing to worry about, and I'm ready to cancel when you give the word."

"Eight, you say?"

"Yes sir."

"Have we any projections for that?"

"No sir, not in that area. The only earthquake we've simulated here is under the dam at Rio Blanco, and the engineers say it would take twelve Richter with the epicenter right under the dam to be serious. This one probably didn't do anything but shake a few trees. Might have been minor damage in Corunda, but probably nothing in Rio Blanco. I wouldn't have noticed it here if the alarm hadn't sounded."

"How long have the planes been up?"

"They should have taken off about five minutes ago, sir."
Thompson thought for a moment.

"They can't land for an hour anyway unless they dump fuel. Give them another half hour, then call it off if nothing shows. I'm going to bed now -- it will take me about a half hour to get ready, I guess. Call me if anything happens."

Standing by his desk, Thompson laid the phone down. He glanced again at the messages that awaited him and decided they could wait for morning.

He turned to the door where Dorothy Thompson stood with two cocktail glasses in her hand.

"Well?" She offered him a glass. "Can we relax, or are you still working?"

"We relax." Thompson accepted the glass and slumped onto a sofa. Swirled the drink and looked into it as his wife sat beside him.

"At last," he said. "Parties every night, and I can never relax 'till they're over!" He lifted the glass and took a sip.

"Are you still working? The corpsman seemed to think that call was important."

"It might be, but it's not my problem. The spooks have picked something up on their seismograph, and they've called a red alert."

"Spooks. "Dorothy Thompson made a wry face."I wish you wouldn't call them that. It sounds as though the embassy was full of spies or something."
"It is! We have more electronic gear down there than the Americans and the Russians put together! We know more about San Cristobal than its own government does!"

"But Colonel Amez knows we have it -- you even showed it to him -- and he doesn't seem to mind. It's not as though we were gathering military intelligence."

"No, but I still don't have to like it." Thompson finished his cocktail and set the glass on a coffee table, then leaned back into the couch.

"And now Forsythe has called a red alert," he continued. "He had to do it, but it still means god knows how many forms for me to fill out!"

"You have secretaries for that, dear." Dorothy Thompson finished her own drink and set the glass down, then stood. Lifted her eyebrows as she looked down at him.

"Yes dear." Thompson rose to his feet and followed his wife toward the bedroom.

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He was brushing his teeth when the Centurion called again, and he ignored the gentle tinkle of his bedside phone. Then the Centurion used his emergency circuit and the call sounded in every room of the embassy.

"Mr. Ambassador. Radio room."

Thompson spat toothpaste into the sink and rinsed his mouth before he strode to the bedroom to pick up his phone.
"Thompson."

"Forsythe sir. We've had more shocks and something's up. Corunda is not drawing power, the telephones are out and all radio stations are off the air. It looks like the whole town has disappeared!"

"Any bulletins?"

"No sir. Nothing. It's just gone."

"Right. Confirm the red and get Major Morenos on the line. Call the kitchen too, and get someone to bring me a coffee. I guess I won't get to sleep for a while."

"I had Carruthers check the palace sir. Major Morenos is at his hacienda and he's not on the regular telephones. The only way to reach him now is through army headquarters."

"And it will take half the night to reach Colonel Amez. Okay -- start looking for him then, and get me that coffee. I'll call Ottawa after I've spoken to Amez." Thompson hung up his phone and, with an apologetic shrug to his wife, who watched from their bed, he picked up the shirt he had just taken off.

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The five Manitous of Red One held a loose vee formation as they flew south from Gander at more than 800 kilometers an hour. In each plane 100 men sat on four rows of bench seats running the length of the fuselage, their gear stacked in the aisle between them.
Pedro sat in the third plane, between Jeffers and Smithers. The familiar smells of men and oil, of rubberized equipment and the metal of the plane, filled his nose and the whine of jet engines rang in his ears.

He braced his feet against the pile of jump bags in the aisle and leaned back, tipped his helmet forward to shade his eyes, and went to sleep.

He twitched and moaned a bit as the dream began but the men beside him were used to that. He always did when they were on a job.

In his dream he was six years old and he was thirsty. More thirsty than he had ever been in his life before. He wondered, vaguely, whether he could die of thirst when he was already dead.

His leg hurt too but that was different. His leg had hurt ever since the end of the world, three days before, and it hurt because the ridge pole of his father's house was lying on it. The house had fallen down when the world ended.

Pedro had been coming back from the creek with a bucket of water for his mother when it happened. Lugging the full pail with both hands he had just entered the clearing around the house when the ground began to shake.

Frightened, he ran for the safety of the house. He had almost reached it when a boulder, shaken loose from the mountainside above, smashed it from behind. The house fell toward him and the heavy ridge pole knocked him over before it came to rest on his leg and trapped him. Other boulders shook loose and rolled down the hill, crashing through the trees on either side of where the house had been.
Pedro's father had been at the edge of the clearing, carving a new wooden bowl for his mother. Pedro could not see him now but he knew where he was because he had heard screams and moans from among the fallen trees, and then the horrible rattling sound men make when they die. Later he had seen vultures land there, and had seen strips of flesh dangling from their beaks as they flapped away.

His sister had been shelling corn on the front porch and she had stopped work and run into the house when the ground started to shake. Now Pedro could see her arm, sticking out from under one corner of the boulder that had rolled through the house. A vulture had pecked at the arm for a while but it had not been hungry, and Pedro had been able to scare it off.

His mother lay almost within reach, one arm and her shoulder trapped under a corner of the rock that had killed his sister. She had a big cut near the top of her leg.

Blood had run out of the cut for a long time and she had screamed, but the blood dried and her screams stopped before nightfall. Next morning her leg was red and swollen, and she was moaning. Feebly, she tried to brush away the flies that crawled in the pus that dripped down the side of her leg, and now and then she cried for help.

She was angry with him, Pedro knew, because he did not help her.

She had called for Pedro's father first, but then she saw Pedro and she turned to him. Asked for help, then demanded it. Then she begged and finally she cursed him, in her pain, because he did not help her.
Pedro tried to tell her about the log that pinned him. Tried to explain that he was trapped too and that he could not move, but she did not hear him. She cursed him.

He didn't like her curses and he was glad when they stopped -- when she died -- sometime before dawn of the third day.

The flies bothered him now but the thirst was worse. It had begun during the first night.

The water from the bucket he had been carrying had collected in a little puddle where Pedro could just reach it if he stretched until it hurt, and he had drunk some of it the first afternoon.

Then a passing dog stopped and drank. Pedro waved a stick but the dog snarled and dipped its head to drink again. The puddle had been very small, and it was gone now. Pedro had licked the wet mud -- even eaten some of it -- but it did not slake his thirst. The sun was very hot.

And now the devils were coming to get him. They had come into the valley in the morning of the third day in airplanes -- the biggest airplanes he had ever seen. They were red, bright red, like the flames of hell.

And devils had jumped out of them as they flew by. Not the first time they passed but the second, and the third and the fourth.

Three big red airplanes flew low and slow up the valley first, as though they were looking for something. They circled over the village, more than an hour's walk down the hillside from his father's house, that Pedro could see from where he lay.

Four hundred people lived in the village and to a six-year old boy from a small farm on the mountain it was a metropolis.
Most of the houses around the outskirts were built of sticks and mud, like the house Pedro's lived in, but his house had a roof of thatched palm and the village houses were roofed with corrugated metal. Some of the big houses near the center of the village were built of adobe brick, with roofs of red tile.

The church in the central square was of stone and the government office facing it was two stories high and built of concrete block. Stores and cantinas around the square were of sawed lumber, and most were painted in bright colors.

Pedro knew the village because he went to the market there every week with his parents, but it looked different now. Some houses had fallen into the river when the world ended, and most of what remained had burned in the fire that followed. Pedro knew that some people had been trapped in the burning houses -- as he was trapped in the remains of his father's house -- and he imagined he could hear their screams of pain as they burned.

Some of the houses were still smoking when the devils came and the devils went to them first, after they jumped out of the airplanes and floated down on their huge red wings.

Steam rose from the houses as the devils approached, and the smoke stopped soon afterward.

The sky was full of devils for a while, and more and more airplanes came up the valley to drop more devils and huge bundles that grew wings and floated slowly down to earth. In the field beside the village -- the one where the policemen used to keep their horses before the world ended -- the devils built a huge red house and now they brought people from the village into it. Some of the people could walk, but the devils carried most of them.
The red house was the biggest Pedro had ever seen, but it was a devil house so of course it was big. He knew it was a devil house because of the bright red color, and because of the way it moved in the wind. The devils had built it in less time than it took Pedro's mother to weave a basket, and Pedro decided it wouldn't be too bad to be a devil if they could build such a big house so quickly.

But Pedro would never be a devil. If he was still alive when the devils found him -- if he was still alive now -- they would eat him. He knew that from talking to Garcia and Diego, his friends in the village. They went to Sunday school, where they learned how devils eat little boys.

Pedro wondered what it was like to be eaten by devils, and whether it would hurt very much. He hoped the devils would keep him for a little while -- perhaps even give him some food and water to fatten him up -- before they ate him.

If they were going to sell him they might. Pedro knew that farmers gave pigs food and water before they took them to market.

He was very hungry and very thirsty, and his leg hurt very much.

That afternoon two large airplanes landed on the campo and the devils dragged big boxes out of them. From the boxes they brought out silver sticks and bright colored cloth and other things. Working in groups of three the devils put the sticks and the cloth and other things together to make -- airplanes! Little ones, smaller than any Pedro had seen before.

But they worked. As each tiny plane was assembled two men climbed into it and -- with motor sputtering like the motorcycle
one of the shopkeepers in the village owned -- it lifted into the air. Each plane circled the village after it lifted, then followed one of the trails leading into the hills.

One followed the trail that led past his father's house! They would find him!

Desperately, Pedro looked around for something to cover himself with. There was nothing -- he could not even squirm into the shadow of the beam that pinned him. He lay very still and hoped the devils would not notice him.

They might have missed the boy but they could not miss the wreckage of the house, or the gash of torn earth and shattered trees around it. One little airplane came and circled very low -- it would have been lower than the top of the big tree beside the house if the tree were still there. Lifting his head, Pedro could see the two devils as they gazed down at him.

One of them waved. A friendly wave of the hand -- not like a devil at all.

Then the little airplane climbed higher into the sky and flew down the hill, and Pedro thought the devils might leave him alone. He was almost sorry about that -- better perhaps to be caught and eaten by devils now than to lie in the sun forever.

But something must be wrong with the little airplane. It's engine became quiet and it spiralled down toward the creek below him. Watching, Pedro saw it disappear below the treetops, near the field where the trail crossed the creek.

Other little planes still circled and flew up and down both sides of the valley. One flew over to where the plane that spotted Pedro had gone down, then came to circle above the house.
Now the boy could see shiny red helmets and bright red clothes as two devils slowly climbed the path toward him. They looked like men except that their faces were white -- whiter than the faces of the government officials he sometimes saw in the village. As they climbed, they spoke to each other in a strange tongue.

Pedro watched with rising panic as they approached. He tried to sink into the ground so they would not see him. He closed his eyes as they climbed level with him.

Then one of the devils spoke and he heard both of them moving toward him. He could not understand the words but the tone did not sound like a devil at all. He opened his eyes in wonder.

One of the devils knelt and gently offered him water from a red bottle. Pedro drank and passed out before the second devil began to pry up the roof beam that trapped his leg.

He knew, briefly, that he had been lying on the ground outside the remains of his father's house and that he had seen his mother and his sister lying there too. Knew that he had watched his family die. Heard their screams of agony, their cries for help.

Had heard his mother curse him because he could not help her.

Now he rode down the side of the mountain on a funny little truck that ran on two wheels, like a motorcycle, and he was taken inside the big red devil house beside the village.

The devils inside the house wore white and there were she-devils as well as he-devils there. The devil who carried him laid him on a table and a she-devil leaned over and pushed
something into his arm, and that was the last he remembered of the village.

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The boy recovered from the physical effects of his experience in a few weeks but he never forgot the pain or the terror. Any disturbance while he slept might set off the dream in which he was again trapped with the sound of his mother's curses, and he again watched the devils jump from airplanes.

He remembered them in his waking moments too, but that was different. When he was awake he knew that the jumpers were men, not devils. They were Canadians.

But still the red uniforms filled him with awe. He would stare at the men and women who wore them around the field hospital where he was treated after the earthquake, and in the resettlement camp where he spent the next two months. Even in Santa Clara, where he was sent to an orphanage.

Most of the red uniforms left after a few months but some stayed on, at the Canadian embassy in Santa Clara. Saturdays Pedro would sit in the park across from the embassy and watch for them, and sometimes he day-dreamed about what might have been if they had come sooner. Before his mother died. Before she lost her mind and cursed him.

Sometimes he saw himself in a red uniform with a shiny red helmet. A man in red who was not afraid to jump from a huge airplane.

He would land in the open space beside the house and with one hand he would pick up the rock that had pinned his mother. Would throw aside the tree that had killed his father and, with
the medicines all corpsmen carried in their belt pouches, would bring them both back to life. He would save his sister.

In his mind he knew the corpsmen were just men but he never quite lost the feeling that they were more than human. He would always feel a thrill when he saw a red uniform or a red-and-white flag.

Few people in Costa Grande had even heard of Canada before the earthquake -- but that was before. Now everybody knew about the huge country far to the north, Costa Grande's best friend.

And while he was in high school Pedro learned that he might be able to go to Canada. He might wear a red uniform and a shiny red helmet himself! Fly to the rescue of people who needed him! Jump from a huge red plane to save people who were dying!

Canada was a huge country but they did not have many people so they allowed some foreigners to wear the red uniform.

If Pedro were accepted he could join the corps for three years. Then he could go on to university or trade school in Canada if he wanted to, and it wouldn't cost him any money. The Canadians would pay him money, and he could come back to Costa Grande with training that would get him a good job in the government or with enough money to start a business.

When he was eighteen years old Pedro and a half-dozen others from his school sent a letter to the Canadian embassy, and three weeks later a corpsman came to speak to them.

There were many more applicants from Costa Grande than the corps could accept but few were as well-prepared as Pedro. He
spoke fluent English and French, he had read everything he could find about Canada and, by the time he applied for admission to the corps, he knew more about Canada than most Canadians would ever learn. His experience as a victim of a disaster counted in his favor too.

When he was nineteen years old he was accepted into the corps' elite Parachute Rescue Brigade.

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In his three months of basic training he learned more about the history of the corps. It had begun after changes in the world's weather pattern dried up huge areas of Canadian forests and fires became raging infernos that burned over thousands of square miles. As provincial resources were exhausted the federal government began to help and, as the fires continued, the federal fire brigades developed into the biggest and best-equipped fire-fighting force in the world.

And as the problem spread to other countries the Canadians -- backed by a world that saw the trees that supplied its oxygen being burned -- offered help. When huge fires threatened to sweep the Amazon basin Canadians formed the core of the UN task force that helped the Brazilian army fight them.

The Amazon fires were under control and the Canadians were packed and ready to go home when one of the most destructive earthquakes in world history wiped out the city of La Paz, in Bolivia. The thousand smoke-jumpers who landed in the ruins the next morning were credited with saving thousands of lives and, when a landslide wiped out three towns in Colombia a year later, the Colombian government asked for Canadian help. The Federal Fire Brigade units that responded to that call later became the core of the new Canadian Rescue Corps.
Pedro had been sucking at his mother's breast when that happened and his mother never heard of the new Corps. It was barely established when she died in the ruins of her home.

But the corps had grown steadily, partly under pressure from other nations, partly under pressure within Canada. Gradually, it replaced most of the Canadian armed forces -- taking over and enlarging the medical corps, air transport command, the engineers and the signal corps. They were "borrowed," one unit at a time for different jobs as the corps grew, and world opinion demanded that they be kept as part of the new unarmed forces.

The military fought hard but they were doomed in an unequal battle. It was obvious that Canada had no geographic reason to fear invasion from anybody but the U.S., and it was equally obvious that if the Americans did invade, the Canadian Armed Forces could not hope to resist them.

Within a few years the armed forces had shrunk to one brigade of military policemen, maintained only for loan to United Nations peace-keeping operations.

There was resistance to the change within NATO, but not much because it had long been obvious that Canada's military contribution to NATO was negligible, and that a neutral Canada could contribute more to world peace with a large and effective rescue corps than could a partisan Canada with small and obsolete armed forces.

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Russia and the U.S. had formed their own rescue corps by then but the idea didn't work well for them because their rescue corps were associated with their armies.

The American corps was nearly disbanded after their aid was refused by Nicaragua, but they changed it instead. The U.S. had the men and the machines and the resources -- as Canada had not -- to plan and launch a long-term assault on world famine, and the American Rescue Corps became the American Development Corps.

The Russian army still maintained a small rescue corps but they were not welcome in many countries and the main Russian effort now followed the American lead. After Libya offered land and support for a huge American base for the Sahara Desert Reclamation Project, ten thousand Peace Troopers landed in Ethiopia to attack the desert from the other side.

Both countries now put more effort into "the battle of the deserts" than they did into the space race, and both accepted foreigners into in their ranks with free technical or university education offered after three years' service.

And the whole world supported the Canadian corps, now so big that even with conscription there were not enough Canadians to man it. After Russia and the U.S. opened the ranks of the Peace Troopers and the Development Corps to third world students, with free education as a bonus, the Rescue Corps followed their lead.

But like the U.S. and Russia Canada also refused to allow foreigners who came to serve in the corps or to study in Canada to stay as immigrants. Canadians realized now that by accepting the best educated and the best qualified citizens of the third world as immigrants Canada had robbed the third world of the
people who could help it develop, stolen most of the benefits of the poor countries investments in education and helped keep millions of people in poverty.

As a foreigner Pedro could enlist in the Rescue Corps for one three-year hitch, but no more. Three years' service in the corps entitled him -- as it entitled Canadians -- to three years advanced education in the school of his choice but then he must leave the country and he would not be allowed to return as an immigrant for at least ten years.

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He woke with a start when the public address system cleared its electronic throat. Seconds later he heard the voice of Group Leader Martin, commander of Red One.

"This," it said, "is a training exercise."

"We're flying to Hidalgo in San Cristobal. The red alert has been confirmed.

"There's been an earthquake in the hills behind the city of Corunda -- about three hundred kilometers south of Hidalgo. We have no reports direct from Corunda but the information we have indicates that damage may be heavy.

"If we're called in this will be a land job but there's a lake so there may be some flooding. There's a good airport but we don't know what shape it's in. If we have to drop you we'll probably land the planes at Rio Blanco -- about 160 kilometers west of Corunda at the other end of the lake."
"ETA is about nine hours from now, after a one-hour stop for fuel at Key West, and breakfast will be at 0600. Centurions, we'll have a staff conference in fifteen minutes."

The PA system shut down with an audible click.

"I guess this is probably your last flight, Pedro." Smithers, the decade leader, was tall and thin with a long freckled face and a shock of red hair. Two years older than Pedro he was now serving his second enlistment and planned to make the service his career. As he spoke he pulled out a packet of chewing gum and offered Pedro a stick.

Pedro glanced at it, then turned dull eyes back to the floor. "Ten days," he said. "Then I'm out on my ass."

Jeffers looked at him. "No luck with the appeal, eh?"

"No. The regs say I can't serve more than one hitch, and Cunningham says he can't change them."

"Shit man, you can have my time." Dunn, two weeks out of basic training, sat beside Jeffers. "I'm just here for the education anyway," he said.

He spoke with a smile as though it were a joke but the smile disappeared when Smithers leaned forward and looked at him. Embarrassed, the young corpsman turned away.

Pedro raised his head and looked around. "Most of you guys don't even want to be here," he said. "I do, and they won't let me stay! It's stupid!"
Smithers pulled a stick of gum from the packet and unwrapped it. "That's the way it is," he said. "I told you what Cunningham would say." He put the gum in his mouth and chewed slowly.

"He said the corps needs young men, but I'm only twenty one for Christ sake." Pedro reached for the package Smithers was about to put back in his shirt pocket, and took a stick of gum from it. He handed the package back, then tore the stick in half and slipped half into his pocket. He unwrapped the other half and put it in his mouth, then leaned back into his seat as the decade leader continued.

"You're young now, but you'd stay in for the rest of your life if you could -- and you can't do this kind of work forever."

"Cunningham is still doing it, and he's an old man."

"He's a brigade leader. He doesn't jump any more, and he doesn't get into any rough stuff."

"What about Johnston? He gets into everything and god knows how old he is!"

"He's thirty five, and he's an officer."

"I could be an officer."

"You hate the work and you have nightmares when we're on a job."

"I do it, and I want to keep on doing it."

"But you can't." Smithers turned to Pedro again.

"What about school? The corps owes you three years' tuition."
"No way. I had all the school I want in Costa Grande. Pedro shook his head slowly.

"I just want to be a corpsman. To help people."

"There are a lot of ways you could help Costa Grande with the right training." Smithers put his hands on his knees and leaned forward.

"You could help Costa Grande with the training you have right now."

"I don't want to help Costa Grande. I want to help the world."

"Then you'll have to find your own way to do it." Smithers rose to his feet.

"Got to check with Johnston now. See you." Working his way past the jump bags and parachutes that jammed the aisle, stepping over the legs of men who slumped in their seats, he moved toward the front of the plane.

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In the command plane, assistant group leader Saunders watched a map of San Cristobal spool out of the printer as Martin finished his speech.

"Corunda. That's a fantastic place -- I was there for a weekend once. Don't recall much that could be damaged by an earthquake though -- it's mostly a vacation town with no tall buildings that I remember. But Rio Blanco has a lot of industry -- there could be a lot of damage there if they caught it."
Martin drew coffee from a dispenser and settled back at his desk.

"Maybe. I wouldn't bet on anything in this business. From the report it sounds like Corunda doesn't exist any more, and Rio Blanco doesn't even know there's been an earthquake.

"And this is just a training exercise anyway, unless San Cristobal asks for help."

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CHAPTER TWO

Rio Blanco was the first Spanish settlement in San Cristobal and one of the first anywhere on the Pacific side of the Americas. Eighty kilometers from the coast on the river it was named for, it guarded the mouth of the Canyon Blanco where the river broke through the last range of hills on its way to the sea. The town marked the limit of navigation on the river and, in the days of conquest and settlement, it was the meeting place for river boats, ocean-going caravels and mule trains.

There was a mission first, to open the gates of heaven to the Indians it saved. Then an army camp, to open the gates of hell to the Indians who were sent -- after they were saved, of course -- as slaves to the gold mines of the interior.

Those were days of glory for a city of priests and soldiers, traders and slaves. The priests served a god of their own devising, the soldiers served the king of Spain and the traders paid lip service to both but gave their real devotion to profits.

Slaves died in the service of all -- most of them in the gold mines of the interior. Others died building churches for the
glory of God, palaces for the glory of Spain and warehouses for the profits of the traders.

The good times might have lasted longer had the Spaniards been less greedy but the mines gave out after forty years and the Indians native to the area -- who knew where there was more gold and who might have been induced to tell with the proper persuasion -- had long since been worked to death.

The Spaniards guessed there was more gold somewhere and several expeditions set out to find it. They never came back because the jungle was not kind to Spaniards and the few Indians who had escaped the priests and the army were even less kind. Eventually, most of the traders and the soldiers went away.

But Rio Blanco survived, because some of the priests really did care for the souls of the Indians and they kept the mission open for more than a hundred years after the soldiers left. Then the city began to grow again, because there was good land along the coast and the settlers who came to farm needed a supply base. At the beginning of the 20th century it was the port and the market town for hundreds of coffee plantations in the hills, and by mid century it served the same function for the banana plantations of the coastal area.

The banana plantations contributed more or less to the city, depending on one's point of view, because Rio Blanco also served as the joy town for thousands of plantation workers who came twice a month to spend two weeks' pay in a single weekend.

It was a bawdy town in those days -- a brawling, gambling, drinking and whoring center by night and a port and railway center by day. The country's aristocracy lived in the beautiful
and temperate inland city of Hidalgo, 300 kilometers to the north, but they made their money in Rio Blanco.

And then came Major Morenos -- an army officer turned politician and dreamer. With the world turning away from both fossil fuels and nuclear power he recognized the Rio Blanco's potential for a hydro-electric project, and the rest is history.

A dam more than 250 meters high now blocked the mouth of the Canyon Blanco and the lake behind it stretched more than two hundred kilometers upstream. The town of Corunda at the head of the lake had become a world-famous resort and Japanese, German and Italian businessmen poured billions into the development of new industry to take advantage of the cheap power. Rio Blanco still had a few red light districts, but no more than could be expected in a city of a million people.

***

It was near the end of the rainy season and the lake was full to the brim when the earthquake struck. The tremor measured eight on the Richter scale but it was centered under the coffee plantations and the rain-soaked hills didn't transmit shock very well. People in Rio Blanco didn't even notice it.

They did feel it in Corunda but it did no serious damage. Then came the second and third shocks and there was some damage but most people still had no idea what was happening. They felt the ground shiver, then heard a groaning sound. Along the waterfront it seemed as though the level of the lake was rising.

But it wasn't the lake that was moving, it was the town. Billions of tons of mud slid smoothly down the mountain, and into the end of Lago Blanco.
The lake was about twenty five kilometers wide at Corunda and about fifty meters deep. The town and the mountain on which it stood moved slowly as landslides go -- not much more than walking speed -- but their mass and volume were enormous.

They pushed a wave more than a hundred meters high ahead of them as they entered the lake. An hour and a half later it washed the exclusive resort town of Bahia from the opposite shore. Then it fell back and it turned most of the end of the lake into a churning sea of white water and red-brown mud before it began to roll toward the dam.

***

Fifty kilometers from Bahia Reynaldo Diaz and his new secretary shared a bed on his motor cruiser anchored off the honky-tonk town of Buenos Aires. Reynaldo woke to the sound of his dragging anchor and looked out the window. His gasp of surprise brought Felicia to her feet and to his side.

The lake had risen over the Calle del Lago along the waterfront and shouts of surprise, fear and anger came from some of the late-night waterfront bars. As Reynaldo and Felicia watched, people ran from the buildings and sloshed through the rising water. Some ran for side-streets that led up the side of the mountain.

A police car with its engine roaring, lights flashing and siren screaming, sped down a side street toward the Calle del Lago. A half block from the corner it ran into the water and stalled in a cloud of spray, its lights still flashing.

Felicia took Reynaldo's arm but he brushed her away. He burst out of the cabin and sprinted to the bow of the boat where he
bent over the winch that would raise the anchor. He cursed as he fumbled in the dark for the controls.

But he paused at Felicia's gasp of fear and looked up the lake where she pointed. Then they both stood in stunned amazement.

The wave that rolled toward them was so high it masked the mountains behind it. As Reynaldo and Felicia watched, it actually blotted out the rising moon!

But it rolled down the center of the lake in eerie silence and it passed them by. Reynaldo relaxed, glanced at Felicia and smiled. Again he became conscious of sounds ashore, where the water was still rising.

Sitting on the edge of the cabin roof they watched one building near the edge of town crumble.

It made little noise at first -- a sound not unlike the breaking of a wave. But the sound became louder as more of the building fell, and it became louder still as the building disappeared. With a start, Reynaldo realized that it came from behind him -- not from the shore.

He turned just in time to see the white-topped wall of black water that approached. To the side he could see where the edge of the wave was breaking on shore -- and wiping out everything in its path -- kilometers behind the main wave that still rushed down the center of the lake.

Now he could only watch as the huge mass of angry water towered over him. White-faced, Felicia grabbed his arm again but this time he didn't even feel the pressure of her hand.
The speed of a wave is governed by the depth of water under it -- the deeper the water the faster the wave -- and the wave that started at Corunda gained speed as it rushed down the lake. It moved only about 15 kilometers an hour at first but it went faster as the water became deeper. With nearly 300 meters of water at the dam, the center of the wave would reach a speed of about 150 kilometers an hour at the far end of the lake.

But not along the edges where the water was shallow and where the wave -- growing in height as it sped down the ever-narrowing lake -- now washed the shore more than a hundred meters above the normal high-water mark. Here the bottom of the wave was slowed by the land over which it rushed and the top -- unhampered -- cascaded forward in a foaming waterfall.

***

Fernando Sanchez was leaving Rio Blanco as Reynaldo and Felicia died. Every night he loaded his truck with fresh fish, vegetables and other supplies and drove four-and-a-half hours to deliver his load to the kitchens of the finest hotels in Bahia at about five o'clock.

The trip was slow but most of it was pleasant. Not the first part -- that was a laborious grind back and forth through switchbacks up the mountainside to the top of the dam.

But then came a half kilometer drive across the top of the dam, with the city lights spread out below, and a stop for coffee with his older brother Carlos -- a night operator at the power plant and half owner of the truck.

Fernando pulled into the parking bay above the powerhouse where a service elevator climbed the sloped face of the dam.
Climbing down from the truck and crossing the road he leaned over the reservoir and dropped a three-pronged fishhook on a line into the water just above the water-level sensor Carlos had showed him.

Jigging with the hook he caught the sensor and lifted. A red light flashed and a buzzer sounded on the main control board in the powerhouse below.

At the board Carlos flipped a switch to cancel the alarm. He glanced at his shift manager, then poured two cups of coffee and headed for the service elevator. Above, Fernando crossed the road, un-zipped his fly and pissed over the side of the dam. Then he straddled the guard-rail and watched the elevator climb the curving wall of concrete.

Carlos waved out the window as the elevator rose and he stepped out, paper cups in hand, as it stopped. Together the brothers sat on the guard rail, drank coffee and looked out over the city below.

***

In a house on the outskirts of Hidalgo an army sergeant tapped gently on a door, waited thirty seconds then tapped again. He waited another minute before he opened the door and walked to the bed.

"Coronel!" He gently touched the man's shoulder. "Coronel."

Carmelita Amez woke first. She looked across her husband at the orderly who stood by the bed.

"Is it important, Juan?"
"Very important, senora." From habit the sergeant whispered in the presence of his sleeping colonel, even though he had come to wake him.

"Then I'll do it." Carmelita reached over and shook her husband's shoulder.

"Eduardo! Eduardo!" Her voice was soft but insistent.

"Umm?" Colonel Eduardo Amez, commander of San Cristobal's army, opened one eye and looked at his wife.

"Coronel!" The sergeant spoke normally now.

"Huh?" The colonel rolled over, then sat up as he recognized his orderly.

"Juan! What is it?"

"Señor Thompson, sir. The Canadian ambassador. He insists on speaking to Major Morenos!"

"Well he won't. Not this weekend." The colonel smiled apologetically at his wife, then turned back to the sergeant. "Did he say what it was about?"

"He said there has been an earthquake sir. Near Corunda. He says there is much damage."

"And did you check? Do our people know anything about it?"

"I tried to phone the police station at Corunda, sir, but I couldn't get through. I think the lines must be down."

"And army headquarters?"
"They couldn't get through by phone either sir. They're trying the radio now."

"Well...." The colonel considered. "I guess I'd better speak to the ambassador anyway. Is he still on the line?"

"No sir. I told him you'd call back."

"Okay. I'll do it from the study."

Amez swung his legs over the side of the bed while his orderly reached for the robe that lay draped over a chair. He stood and spoke to his wife as the orderly held a robe for him.

"This won't take long, dear. I'll be back in a few minutes."

***

Fernando's truck rolled easily on the well-paved highway. There was little traffic at this time of night -- Fernando would probably meet no more than two or three other vehicles on his way to Bahia -- and there was a full moon.

The road followed the shoreline in gentle curves with few hills. To Fernando's left the lake shone silver in the moonlight; to his right the hills were covered with grass and grazed by cattle during the day. Both were beautiful.

The road was nearly twenty meters above water level and Fernando could see both sides of the lake -- only a couple of kilometers wide here. He could see the lights of a boat on the lake nearly ten kilometers ahead.
Fernando knew the boat and he watched it as he drove. They called it the love boat and it carried about fifty people at a time on four-day cruises from a dock near the top of the dam to Corunda and back. It was a slow way to travel the route Fernando covered five times a week but people said it was a wonderful trip, and Fernando had promised his wife Maria they would take to together some day. This year, perhaps.

But there was something strange about the lights! The boat moved on the flat surface of the water, but the lights were rising. The road was high above the surface of the lake but the lights seemed to be on almost the same level as the truck.

No -- he was looking up at them! Looking up at a boat?

Fernando lifted his foot off the accelerator and allowed the truck to coast to a stop. He looked again at the lights -- and now they were definitely higher than the road.

They could not be on a boat! Fernando had heard of flying saucers -- visitors from outer space, some said. Was this one of them?

Then the lights winked out and Fernando saw something else in the moonlight -- something that looked like a huge wave. Looking down, he saw that the water was rising steadily along the shoreline beside him.

From ahead came the roar of an engine and the screech of tires. Around the curve came a car, skidding nearly sideways. It straightened out -- just barely -- and roared down the straightaway. It's lights flicked up and down and it's horn blared as it rushed past.
Startled, Fernando looked after it in his mirror. He watched it disappear around another bend before he turned his eyes again to the lake. Then he gasped in astonishment.

A mountain of water higher than the road swept toward him! There was no chance to save the truck but he might save himself. Fernando jumped out of his cab and scrambled up the hillside.

He was more than twenty meters above the road when the wave passed down the center of the lake in eerie silence. Fernando had paused for breath and he watched in wonder as it passed him by.

There had been no danger after all! Breathing a sigh of relief, he began to climb back down to his truck.

He had almost reached it when he heard the roar and he turned just in time to see the shore-wave burst over the crest of the hill above him.

***

In the power house Carlos had finished his rounds and come back in the control room when the buzzer sounded and the red light started to flash. Felipe Carillo, the shift manager, looked at him.

"How many brothers do you have, Sanchez?"

"Just one, and he's half-way to Bahia by now."

Carillo walked over to the control panel and tapped the water level indicator.
"Maybe so, but there's something wrong up there. Could the float be stuck?"

"I don't see how."

"Better take a look -- I'll go with you. I never did like you two using that float for a signal -- if you've damaged it we'll have to figure out a story for the day shift. Bring your tool kit and a life-jacket, it might be something we can fix tonight."

They were half-way up the elevator when Carlos saw water running down the face of the dam.

"Look at that!"

Carillo looked. "Guess the float isn't stuck -- but what could cause that? Was the water high when you went to see your brother?"

"I didn't look -- but it seemed normal to me."

"It's not now." The flow of water over the dam became heavier as the elevator rose.

"Something's wrong here!" Carrillo pushed the stop button, but the car kept rising. He pushed the down button, but the car kept rising.

"Water must have got to the controls."

The flow down the face of the dam became a cascade as the fifteen-kilometer-long forward slope of the wave approached at nearly 150 kilometers an hour. Slowed by the pressure of falling water, the elevator ground to a stop about fifty meters below the top of the dam.
The crest of the wave was nearly two hundred meters above normal water level now and its weight was distributed evenly across the bed of the lake. It was transmitted to the dam too and the top of the dam, wide enough to carry a highway but designed and built to withstand the pressure of only a few meters of water, was subjected to the pressure of 200 meters of water -- more than 200,000 kilograms per square meter.

Carlos and Carillo got a close-up view as it started to crack, minutes before the crest of the wave reached it.

Then the crest came. Millions of tonnes of water swept over the top of the crumbling dam to crash down on the city of Rio Blanco nearly 300 meters below, leaving a ragged channel where the waterfront and downtown areas had once been. Only the edges of the city, ten and fifteen kilometers from the river, escaped serious damage.

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CHAPTER THREE

The phone lines failed as Coronel Amez spoke with the duty officer at South Sector headquarters in Rio Blanco. He rattled the cradle of his phone in irritation and angrily ordered the operator to re-connect him.

Furious when the man could not do it, the colonel ordered his car.

Now he paced the floor of Hidalgo message center while six privates -- five of them rushed to duty a few moments before -- manned switchboards. They soon learned that the colonel didn't want to hear about lines they found out of order. He was
interested only in speaking to people -- any people -- they could reach in the southern section of the country. So far they had reached only a police post that overlooked the city from the hills to the north, and the colonel sincerely hoped the man there was drunk.

Civilian airports in San Cristobal were closed at night but a military plane from Hidalgo was on its way to Rio Blanco now, and would be over the city in about half an hour. A naval gunboat, based at Rio Blanco but now on patrol up the coast, had been alerted and was now heading for the city but it would take 'till morning to reach the mouth of the river and several hours more to reach the city. Army patrols now on the road carried radio equipment and would set up communications when they reached Rio Blanco -- or if they didn't reach the city -- in about four hours.

***

For most of the 500 men of Red One there was nothing to do but wait as the planes bored on through the night.

The flight of Red One was still called a training mission and it still might be no more than that. If the alert proved to be a false alarm or if the government of San Cristobal did not ask for help they might fly for hours and then turn around and fly back to Gander. Most of them slumped into their seats to catch up on interrupted sleep while others settled down to card games or conversation.

***

At the Canadian embassy in Hidalgo, Frank Thompson was asleep when Rio Blanco disappeared. He was roused by a
worried corpsman and he hurried to the radio room to find the embassy's full complement of eight corpsmen on duty.

There were no telephone lines to the villages south of Rio Blanco now, but two men at the controls of the embassy's two high frequency radio transmitters tried to call plantations whose frequencies were known. Another spoke by phone to San Cristobal army command.

Forsythe, the centurion, had Ottawa on the satellite phone. He offered the ambassador the handset.

"I've told them the situation sir, but I can't order a full-corps response myself. They're on yellow now, but they won't go red until you ask for it.

"You haven't told me yet -- what is the situation?" Thompson accepted the hand-set as he spoke.

"Rio Blanco, sir. It just disappeared." Forsythe glanced at the clock. "About fifteen minutes ago."

"Disappeared? Just like that?"

"Like that, sir. Like you switched off a light."

"All at once?"

"Everything sir. No sign of trouble, then no sign of the city!"

"Seismograph?"

"Nothing sir. No more shocks."

"What happened?"
"I asked Ottawa for a computer simulation sir. They say it might have been a wave."

"How do they figure that?"

"The time, sir. Corunda went, then Rio Blanco went -- and the time interval is just about right for a wave to get from one to the other."

"But how?"

"It's happened before, sir. In Italy in 1963, an earthquake slid part of a mountain into Lake Como. That started a huge wave that burst a power dam, and it wiped out everything for more than 100 kilometers to the sea."

"You think that could have happened here?"

"I don't know sir." The Centurion looked the ambassador in the eye.

"But I know Corunda isn't there any more, and neither is Rio Blanco." He looked down at the telephone handset Thompson held in his hand.

Thompson looked at it too. Lifted it and was about to speak. Then he hesitated, covered the mouthpiece with his hand and turned his eyes to the Centurion again.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure, sir."

Thompson lifted his hand from the mouthpiece and spoke.
Yellow lights flashed red in the ready-rooms of CRC bases at Gander, Trenton, Gimli, Edmonton and Comox. Horns sounded, and were drowned by the screams of jet engines. Within minutes, more than 200 Manitou transport planes rolled down taxi ways to load the men who double-timed out of their barracks.

A bedside phone chimed gently in a hacienda fifty kilometers north of Hidalgo. Major Morenos stirred in his sleep and rolled over. The phone chimed again, and he pushed his head farther into the pillow.

But the woman beside him woke. When the phone chimed a third time she raised herself on one elbow and turned on a light.

As it chimed a fourth time she put her hand on Morenos' shoulder and shook it gently.

"Oscar. Wake up. The telephone."

The president of San Cristobal stirred. Rolled over and lay face up.

"Oscar! The telephone!"

Slowly, he opened his eyes. Looked at the ceiling for a moment, then at the woman.

"The telephone," she said again. She picked up the handset and handed it to him.
He looked at it curiously, then at the clock on his dresser. Five o'clock! Reluctantly, he took the handset and nestled it into his shoulder.

"Holla?"

"Good morning, Excellency. You have an urgent telephone call from Coronel Amez. Coffee is ready -- shall I send some up?"

"What does he want?"

"I don't know Excellency, but he said it was urgent. He demanded that I put the call through."

"Put him on then, and send up a coffee." He looked at the woman. "Two coffees." From outside came the sound of an approaching helicopter. Morenos turned his eyes to the window, then back to the phone as it made a clicking sound.

"Excellency?"

"It's me, Eduardo. Don't tell me -- the Cubans have invaded. Or you have invaded them. It had better be one or the other!"

The helicopter hovered outside the window now. Lights flared as it began to settle toward the landing pad.

"Neither, Excellency, but something very serious. We seem to have lost Corunda and Rio Blanco!"

Morenos sat upright. "Lost? What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure, Excellency. The Canadian ambassador called me about an earthquake near Corunda. He said they detected it at
the embassy, and that there was considerable damage. I checked with my own staff and we couldn't get through to Corunda, so I came in. We've tried for more than an hour to get news, but we can't. The duty officer here says the telephone lines are down.

"And now we can't reach Rio Blanco. No telephone, no radio contact -- nothing. There are no radio stations broadcasting -- it's as though the whole city had disappeared!"

"Impossible!"

"I know that, Excellency, but it seems to have happened. I've mobilized the army and I have a plane heading down that way now -- and I've sent your helicopter for you. I thought you would want to come in."

"I will." Morenos swung his legs over the side of the bed as he spoke. Hung up the phone, stood and reached for his pants. There was a knock on the door.

"Yes?"

"Coffee, Excellency."

"Not here. Take it to the helicopter!"

"Si, Excellency."

Morenos pulled up his pants and fastened his belt. The woman watched in alarm as he pushed one arm into his shirt and fumbled for the other as he ran toward the door.

***
"I go, Mother." Domec held his battered straw hat at his chest and nodded his head.

"Take care, my son." The Mother-of-all raised her hand and closed her eyes a moment. "There is danger on the river."

"I know the river, Mother. I know it's dangers."

"Perhaps, my son. Perhaps not. Take care, and think of me."

"Always, Mother." Domec nodded his head again as he backed out of the stick-and-wattle hut. Outside, he stopped on the platform of poles that supported the hut on the roots of a huge mangrove tree and looked about. Several other huts, also woven of small sticks and roofed with palm thatch, occupied the roots of other trees in the surrounding swamp. Poles, lashed together to form bridges, joined some of them.

A bridge of poles sloped down from the platform where Domec stood to a raft where several dugout canoes and one aluminum outboard motorboat, barely visible through the water-level mist, were moored. The boat was loaded nearly to the gunwales with bundles of herbs, of leaves and of bark.

On the raft stood a woman, wearing only a short skirt of reeds, and a naked boy.

Domec wore faded jeans and a ragged tee shirt. He put his hat on his head as he walked down the bridge and knelt in front of the boy. Placed his hands on the boy's shoulders and looked him in the face. Somber, the six-year-old looked back.

"I go to the city again, Mayno," Domec said. "I will not return tonight. I will return tomorrow, before the sun sinks into the sea."
Calm, serious, the boy nodded and watched as his father reached to the side and cast off the mooring line of the aluminum boat. Standing, Domec pulled the boat closer to the platform and stepped over the bow. He clambered over baled cargo to the stern and tipped the motor up out of the water. Then he picked up an oar and pushed off from the landing.

As the boat drifted backward into the mist, Domec nodded good-bye to his wife, and waved to his son.

He used the oar as a pole to push the boat around the roots of a big mangrove, and to stop and turn it as it reached a channel, then as a paddle to move past a couple of other crude landing stages and three huts built on the spreading roots of mangrove trees. He kept a stern eye on two boys who watched -- with possible mischief in mind -- from a platform of sticks in the branches of a tree overhanging the channel, then spoke to a lone man who stood, bow and two-meter arrow ready, in a canoe that drifted near the mouth of the channel.

"Good fishing, Hayma."

"Good travelling, Domec. Good trading."

As the boat entered the river Domec set the oar on top of his load, then paused as he heard the roar of engines. Turning, he saw the gray naval patrol boat, spray flying from it's bows, sweep round the end of the island. Domec had seen the boat before -- at Rio Blanco and on the river -- and he knew it was a naval patrol boat but he never realized how fast it could go. If it kept up that speed all the way, he knew, it would reach Rio Blanco before the sun rose half-way in the sky.
And it's wake would disturb all traffic on the river. Domec squatted in the stern of his boat and tipped the motor into the water. He primed the carburetor, started the motor, shifted into gear, and turned the bows of his outboard to face the waves that approached. Turning his head he saw that Hayma had laid down his bow and now used a paddle to turn the canoe beside him. Domec watched as the canoe rocked in the waves, then with a wave to Hayma he eased the throttle open and headed the boat up-river.

In the village the Mother-of-all paused and closed her eyes as she heard the roar of the patrol boat. Her face relaxed for a moment, then tightened as though she saw something she didn't like. She beckoned to the young man who squatted by the door.

"Call Yama and Mayno, Hotan," she said. "They will spend the day with me."

A tear trickled down her cheek.

***

Ten kilometers out at sea Manuel Ortega leaned back against the weight of the net, his bare fingers hooked into the mesh as he hauled it aboard his small red boat. A short, powerful man with black hair, skin burned a deep bronze by the sun and face accented by a bristly black moustache, he wore an old straw hat, faded blue denim pants and a denim shirt but no shoes.

Most times Manuel was a happy man, but he was not happy now. He knew from the weight of the net that his catch would not repay his efforts, and he needed a good one today.

His one rich haul of the past month had been two weeks ago when the net had been so full he could not haul it himself. It
would have been easy enough with a helper but he had let his helper go three months before when it became a question of paying a helper or paying the bank.

The bank owned the boat, if he did not pay the bank he would have no need for a helper.

But for lack of a helper he had lost the big catch. Unable to haul the net by hand he had jerry-rigged it to a block and tackle. Old and overloaded, the mesh had not stood the strain. Manuel felt his heart burst along with the net as he watched a cascade of valuable Sierra Mackerel -- enough to pay his bills for a month and more -- spill back into the sea.

The net would not burst this time but this catch would not pay his bills for a month. It would not pay for the hours he had spent finding what he hoped was a good spot and setting the net. Would not pay for the fuel he burned in his outboard motor, or for the wear and tear on his boat and his net.

It would not pay the bank interest on the loan that had bought the boat and motor two years before.

He had been proud then. A man with his own boat and a man to be reckoned with.

It was not a new boat and not a large one. Manuel's boat was nine meters long, powered by a 55 horsepower outboard motor. Boat and motor were both a few years old but the motor ran well and the boat was solid and strong -- built of welded steel by the government boat works in Rio Blanco. A good boat for one or two men to work the inshore waters, and a good start for a man of only 25 years with a wife and a small child to support.
Manuel had been proud of the boat, and proud of his new status as a man with his own boat. As his own boss he could sell his catch to the wholesalers who came to San Felipe every day.

He had money in his pocket to buy drinks and his wife had new clothes. When the catch was good he bought a new radio, traded his bicycle for a motorcycle and began to live as he knew he deserved to live.

He was prudent too -- his wife saw to that. Carmine demanded that he save enough money every month to pay the bank for their loan, and enough to buy the gas and oil he would need for another month of fishing. So many men, she said, bought their own boats and then thought they were rich. They spent their money as it came in, and they lost their boats because they did not keep enough aside to keep the boat going.

There was no need to tell Manuel that. The previous owner of the boat had lost it because he was unable to keep up the payments.

It was a piece of rope that caused the trouble, three months ago. Ten meters of that damned plastic rope that floats -- the kind rich people use on their expensive yachts.

Manuel had been coming home and the rope must have been floating across his course. The first thing Manuel knew about it was a horrible clatter from his motor, followed by a ripple of water as the boat slowed to a stop.

He had run over the rope and it had wound round his propeller. Even that should have done no damage -- there was a clutch in the motor to protect it against just such dangers -- but for some reason the clutch did not release this time. Gears had stripped, leaving Manuel helpless in his boat five kilometers offshore.
That was not serious -- he had only wait for an hour or so to hail another fisherman and get a tow to San Felipe -- but his helplessness in the repair shop was another matter. Manuel did not know enough about engines to repair the damage himself and had not the right tools anyway, and the cost of the repair was as much as two of his monthly payments to the bank. Since the bank wanted its money too that meant he had to raise the usual monthly payment twice in a month when he could not even go out for two weeks.

He could not do it. Even after he sold his motorcycle he had to ask the bank for another loan. Since then he had continual minor problems -- nets and equipment broke down, his propeller was chipped and had to be replaced, and his extra fuel tank disappeared one night. Such things happened to other boats too, but the owners of the other boats were not behind in their payments to the bank and they had money for emergencies.

Manuel would have money too except for the way the interest payments backed up. The bank called it "compound interest" and they said it was the usual way of business, but Manuel did not consider it fair. He had had one little piece of bad luck -- not even his fault -- and now it looked as though he might never recover from it. He might even lose the boat.

Now the bottom of the net broke the surface with a few small fish in it. One last heave brought it over the side and Manuel dumped it into the bottom of the boat without bothering to shake the fish out of it. He kicked it in disgust, then stepped to the back of the boat where he reached into his bag for one of the sandwiches Carmine had made for him and for the bottle of water she had filled at the spring on the hillside.
Slumped on the seat he chewed thoughtfully on the sandwich as he scanned the horizon for birds. There were several, but no flocks that might indicate a school of fish that would be worth going after. One spot was probably as good as another now, and none of them much good.

Perhaps his luck would be better another day -- but would there be another day? Manuel had left San Felipe with just enough gas to get to the fishing ground and back and a little to spare. He had no money for more gas, and the store would not sell it to him on credit. He must have a catch this trip.

Perhaps farther out, where the bigger boats fished? Small boats usually stayed close to shore because hand nets could not hold the bigger fish that lived farther out, but one could sometimes have luck with hook and line. A single giant sea-bass might weigh more than a hundred kilograms -- and sell for enough to pay for several days' fishing.

Wearily, Manuel laid the half-eaten sandwich on the seat beside him. Turned, and pulled the starting rope of the motor. He set the motor to half throttle and turned the boat out to sea.

***

Domec tried to relax as the boat cut through the water, its wake gently moving the bushes that overhung the near bank. The river was half a kilometer wide but Domec stayed close to shore, passing within hailing distance of several villages and dozens of farms and plantations and within sight of cars, trucks and busses that travelled the road beside the river.

At some points the river passed through virgin jungle where huge trees grew right up to the bank and the smell of rotting vegetation hung in the air. Often Domec heard the screams of
birds, and once he passed within range of a troop of monkeys that threw sticks, nuts and fruit at him.

Everything seemed right but the Mother's warning disturbed him. She had chosen him to run the boat two years before -- chosen him for his knowledge of the river and of boats as much as for his skill at trading -- and she had never before showed concern when he set out.

Why now? The boat was safe, he knew. The motor was a good one and there would be no serious danger even if it stopped. He would simply drift back down the river until he passed a village, then use the oars to row ashore.

What danger then? The Mother-of-all did not know or she would have told him. Her warnings had saved the lives of several men of her tribe.

There were alligators in the river but they were no danger to a grown man in a boat. No dangerous fish lived in the Rio Blanco.

The most likely danger was from other boats. The naval patrol boat or one of huge ocean-going freighters that sailed up to Rio Blanco could run a small boat down, or swamp it with their wake. But they were dangerous only if the pilot of the small boat was careless, and Domec was not careless. He travelled in shallow water, close to shore, and a ship would run aground long before it could run him down.

The sound of an engine came from up-river. A speedboat swept around the bend ahead and roared down the middle of the channel. In the cockpit, three people waved violently as it swept past.
Domec considered. Could that be the danger? A small boat like that one might travel in the shallows where Domec travelled, and it would wreck Domec's boat if it hit it. And those people acted as though they were drunk. Domec resolved to keep a special watch for speedboats this trip, and to stay well clear of them.

He was nearly 60 kilometers from the village and less than 40 from Rio Blanco when he noticed the rise of the water level and the increase in the current.

He watched and wondered for a few moments, then saw that the banks of the river were no longer slipping by so quickly.

He steered toward shore and rammed the bow of the boat into the overhanging bushes. Then he crawled forward through them to tie up to a solid-looking tree root.

He crawled back under the bushes to the stern just in time to see the foaming wave of the flood bear down on him, and the patrol boat that tumbled over and over in it.

Domec closed his eyes and thought of the Mother-of-all.

***

In the village the old woman raised her hand and closed her eyes. The hut fell silent.

Hotan, entering with a fresh cup of matte for the Mother, froze in mid-step. Felt a chill as, for the first time in his life, he saw fear on the Mother-of-all's face.

The Mother-of-all lowered her hand. Opened her eyes. Thought for a moment, then spoke.
"Hotan. Tell all my children to prepare the canoes. We must take food and all the water we can carry. Tools and weapons. We will travel on the big water."

She turned to the young woman who knelt to one side of the hut, chopping and mixing pieces of bark and leaves in a large wooden bowl. She had stopped when the mother raised her hand and now she watched.

"Yama." The old woman spoke gently. "We will leave on our journey before Domec returns. You and Mayna will come with me, in my canoe."

The young woman set the chopper down. Worry showed in her face.

"Will Domec find us, Mother? Will he know where we have gone? The motor boat goes very quickly -- he will be able to catch up with us?"

Tears ran down the Mother-of-all's cheeks as she answered.

"There is no motor boat, my daughter. There is no Domec."

***

Major Morenos' face turned gray as the pilot's voice on the radio described the scene at Rio Blanco. Sitting across the desk from him, Colonel Amez was already on the phone ordering every military unit he had into the stricken area. He hung up, then turned to the major.

"And you, Excellency. Will you call the Canadian ambassador?" He pushed the phone across the desk.
Morenos glanced at his watch as he reached for it.

"I will -- but it will be late afternoon before they can help us."

Amez' lips turned up in a wry smile as he spoke.

"The first planes will be here in two hours, Excellency."

Morenos looked up in surprise as Amez continued.

"Five Canadian aircraft have called the airport to arrange fuel and a stop-over. They say they're on a training mission.

"Training?"

"They call it that. I told you about the seismograph and the electronic instruments in their embassy."

"Yes."

"They have them in all their embassies and somehow, every time there's a major disaster, they have several hundred fully equipped Rescue Corpsmen flying into the area on what they call a training exercise. I would guess this one began before Mr. Thompson called me."

Major Morenos nodded slowly. He picked up the phone and asked the operator to call the embassy.

***

Red One was approaching the coast of San Cristobal and Pedro was playing poker with Peters and Jeffers when the plane banked into a turn. Jeffers stopped in mid deal and looked at the
others. He was about to speak when the PA system crackled into life.

"Attention Red One," Martin's voice said. "The training exercise is terminated. The government of San Cristobal has asked for our help, and we are now on a mission.

"The earthquake near Corunda seems to have dumped the town right into Lago Blanco. That started a huge wave that took the top off the dam at Rio Blanco, and it wiped out the city.

"Now the wave and half the water from the lake is spreading out over the coastal plain and it's taking everything with it.

"The full corps has been called out, but we're here first and it's our job for now. Other units should get here by early afternoon.

"The local army is moving into Rio Blanco now so we'll start on the rest of the country. Planes one and two will run up the shores of the lake and drop decades wherever they can help. Planes three four and five will follow the flood down the valley.

"There won't be anything left in the main channel so we'll forget that and drop along the edges.

"Centurions, use your own judgment to place your men. Corpsmen, first decades will probably jump in about an hour."

The PA system clicked off and Pedro, with the other corpsmen, stood and began to worm into his parachute harness. He was clipping his jump-bag to the rings when he felt Smithers' hand on his arm.

"Not you, Pedro." "You're not jumping this trip. Report to Johnston."
"Not jumping?" Pedro's face and voice showed his surprise. "What do you mean?

"Sorry -- Johnston's orders. He says you're too close to discharge to jump on something like this."

"But they need me down there!"

"Tell it to Johnston." Smithers glanced toward the front of the plane, then back to Pedro.

"You stay with him today as translator, and you'll be assigned to headquarters tomorrow."

"But ... " Pedro was about to argue when he caught Smithers' warning glance. He looked to the front of the plane where the Centurion, legs spread and fists planted on his hips, watched.

Smithers' face softened.

"Sorry, Pedro. But I can't argue with him any more than you can." Smithers reached for his own parachute and began to strap it on as Pedro watched.

***

CHAPTER FOUR

Nearly twenty kilometers out to sea Manuel lay on the seat of his boat. The sun was strong and a rough awning sheltered him. His hat covered his face, his head was pillowed on a sweater and the heel of one foot rested on the gunwale. A fishline,
looped around his wrist and threaded between his toes, dangled in the water.

Lulled by the gentle rocking of the boat, he was dozing when the chuffing sound of a diesel engine intruded.

He lifted the hat and sat up as a ten-meter launch coasted to a stop beside him. In the stern sat Jose, an older fisherman from San Felipe, and his helper Juan. The diesel idled and Jose waved.

"Hola -- Manuel! Kind of far out for a small boat, aren't you?"

"Hola." Manuel raised his hand to show the fishline. "I came to try for bigger fish."

"Nothing inshore?"

"Nothing."

"And how are they out here? Catch anything?"

"Nothing. This is not a good day for me."

"Not good for me, either." Jose struck a match and lit a cigarette. Puffed, then threw the match into the sea. "I didn't make enough to pay for my fuel today."

"Huh. I didn't make enough to pay for my water!"

Jose's helper laughed, but Jose didn't. He had worked twenty years to buy his boat, and he understood Manuel's problem.

"That's bad -- but you may do better tonight." Jose glanced at the sun, now high in the sky.
"I'm heading in now -- it will take until noon to reach land from here, and I'm too old to stay out under the sun. Come in with me, and we'll both do better this evening."

Manuel glanced at the sun and shrugged his shoulders.

"You go ahead -- I will stay out."

Jose looked closely at him.

"Why? You will catch no fish while the sun is high, and it is not good to stay out all day. Come in and rest, so you can stay out late tonight."

"I will stay out late tonight if I have to, but if I come back now I will not be out this evening. I have not enough gas, and I have no money."

"Can you not borrow money?"

"I did -- that's why I'm in trouble."

"I don't mean from the bank. From your family?"

"They have nothing to lend me now." Manuel shrugged. "If I don't find fish before I go back, I will lose the boat."

"Is it so bad?"

"It is."

"Then you must find fish." Jose took a puff from his cigarette, let the smoke stream between his lips and narrowed his eyes.
"Four years ago," he said, "when Josepo Gomez had no gas, he stayed out for three days until he found fish."

"Gomez? But he has a small boat -- like mine!"

"Smaller -- but he stayed out all night when he had to."

"But the boat would drift -- " Manuel looked about. "The night wind is off-shore! I will stay out all day, but if I stayed out all night I would drift too far! I could not come back!"

"Josepo is an old timer -- he learned to fish with a sail and he knew the old tricks. He showed me some of them. Catch this."

Jose threw a line over Manuel's boat. "Pull me over."

As Manuel pulled, Jose stepped to the bow of his boat, lifted a hatch cover and bent to rummage in a storage compartment. As the bigger boat bumped gently against Manuel's Jose found what he was looking for and straightened up with a bundle of canvas and sticks in his hands.

"This is a sea anchor," he said. "Like they used in the old days."

As he spoke Jose unfolded the canvas and used the two sticks to spread it like a kite into a square about one meter on each side. Two-meter ropes ran from each corner of the canvas to a rusty steel ring. Jose passed the sea anchor across to Manuel.

"When they had to sail with the wind," he said, "they could not always get back when they wanted to, so they used these. Tie that to your bow and drop it into the sea, and you won't drift."

"Is it safe?" Manuel turned the sea anchor over in his hands.
"Safe enough -- the big ships sometimes use them. I made that one after Josepo told me about them, but I never needed it. I asked the captain of a big ship, and he said the current here would carry me about six kilometers north overnight."

"Six kilometers -- that's not too far."

"Have you water?"

"Some." Manuel held up the bottle.

"Not enough." Jose passed over his own water bottle and a package.

"Take this, and these sandwiches too -- Angelita always gives me more than I can eat."

"Carmine will worry when I don't come back! Will you speak to her?"

"I will, and she will make sandwiches for me to bring you tonight. I will bring a barrel of water too, so you can stay out until you catch fish."

"I will." Manuel moved to the bow of his boat and tied the line from the sea anchor to his painter.

"We'll see you tonight then." Jose put his motor in gear and eased forward on the throttle. He waved as his boat moved toward shore.

Manuel waved, stood and watched for a few minutes. Then he threw the sea-anchor overboard.

***
Juan Delgado didn't like cleaning fish. He would much rather spend his time playing ball in the schoolyard, or swimming at the beach less than a half kilometer from his father's house. Even catching fish in the boat with his father.

But it wasn't a matter of choice because Juan's family was different.

His father was a fisherman, like so many men in San Felipe, and he lived in an un-painted wooden house with a vegetable garden in the back, like most of the others.

But Juan's father was different, because he owned his own boat. It was a good boat -- fifteen meters long with a diesel engine -- and Juan's father hired two men to help run it. But it was because of the boat that Juan had to clean fish.

Like the other fishermen Juan's father sold fish to wholesalers who came every day from Rio Blanco, nearly a hundred kilometers away. The wholesalers didn't pay much for the fish but they would buy everything a man could catch. It was a good business.

But Juan's father didn't sell them all his catch. He saved out more than a hundred kilos of fish a day for Juan's mother to sell from her stall in the mercado. People at the market paid more than the wholesalers, and it was because of the fish Juan's mother sold from her stall that Juan's father owned his own boat.

And it was these fish that Juan had to clean in his mid-day break from school, working at a wooden table in the back yard with a two-wheeled cart full of fish beside him.
He pulled a ten-kilogram fish from the front of the cart and laid it on the table. Expertly slit it's belly with a razor sharp knife and pulled the guts out. Cut them loose with a flick of the knife and pushed them off the end of the table into the bucket below. Then he lifted the fish into the back of the cart and reached for another from the front.

His mother told him that with his help his family was becoming rich. She said Juan would be able to go to high school when he grew up, and perhaps even to university. He understood that, but he thought it would be better if his family were rich now, when he was ten years old and there were so many things to do, than to be rich later.

When Juan was in high school he wouldn't want to play ball so much. When he was in high school people would expect him to spend his time studying, or walking with muchachas in the plaza, and he wouldn't want to do that anyway. He wouldn't mind cleaning fish then.

If he did go to university, he thought, he would get a job in the government afterward and he would change the law so families would be rich when their sons were ten years old and wanted to play ball. They could be poor later, when it didn't matter so much. He threw the fish he had just cleaned into the cart beside him and reached for another one.

Then he paused as he heard the crashing sound and the screams from the schoolyard.

Dropping his knife he jumped for the wooden fence at the edge of the yard. Standing on the bottom rail and holding the top he could see over the fence and up the alley to the school. Sometimes he clung there to watch his friends playing ball when he was supposed to be cleaning fish.
He grabbed the top of the fence and looked over, but he didn't believe what he saw.

The school crumbled, as he watched, into a sea of liquid mud. A wall of mud as high as a man rolled down the alleyway, carrying broken pieces of houses and half a truck with it. Some of the shapes that appeared briefly on the surface might have been parts of people, but it was hard to tell.

Twelve hours after the earthquake, about a hundred kilometers downstream from the dam and nearly four kilometers from the mouth of the river, the flood was now a moving mass of mud that carried the remains of a city, several towns, a forest and a few dozen plantations.

As it passed Juan's house it picked up the fence and slammed it back into the yard. Juan landed in the wooden fish cart with a section of fence lying over him and that saved his life as the cart was picked up and carried on by the mud.

He woke as cold water rose around him. The flood had carried nearly everything that would float out to sea and the cart, now one of millions of pieces of wreckage that covered the surface of the sea for kilometers, was sinking under its load of fish, flesh and mud.

The section of fence still covered him and Juan pushed against it. The boards were held down by the branches of a floating tree it had drifted under and they didn't move, but the push was just enough to overcome the marginal buoyancy of the cart. Juan had barely time to catch his breath as it sank, and it was a very long time before he struggled to the surface among the branches.
He spat salt water from his mouth and caught hold of a branch while he looked about. He was in the sea -- he knew that from the taste of salt -- but the water was muddy, like the water of a swamp, and he was surrounded by floating junk. It might look like this, he thought, in the swamp where the Indians lived.

The branch he held was too small for him to climb up on but it joined with a larger branch not far away. Juan pulled himself over to the larger branch and pulled himself up onto it. Carefully, he walked the larger branch to the trunk of the floating tree and looked about again.

It looked like the swamp -- there were trees and bushes sticking up out of the water all about him -- but they moved up and down the waves, as though they were floating, not rooted as they would be in a swamp. There were boards too -- parts of fences and houses -- and he recognized one of the docks from the waterfront at San Felipe.

One branch stuck up into the air. Juan shinned up to a crotch, settled himself into it and looked about.

He was at sea! From here he could see the hills behind San Felipe, as he had seen them before from his father's boat. Below them, a smudge on the shoreline must be the village.

About a hundred meters away floated a small boat with a young woman in it and Juan shouted for help. The woman heard him but she had no oars and she gestured helplessly as the boat drifted away.

***

Maria Munez was sixteen years old and most of the men agreed she was the most beautiful senorita in San Felipe. The daughter
of a storekeeper she was engaged to Giorgo, eldest son of the owner of a boat-yard.

The engagement was expected, since both were among the small aristocracy in a village of less than five thousand people, but the couple quarreled often. They had quarreled the night before and Maria had gone to the boatyard that morning to make peace. Then they had quarreled again and Maria had walked away in a temper.

Giorgo would follow, she knew, and he would try to make friends again if he found her -- but Maria decided he would not find her this time. Instead of going back to the village -- to her father's house or to the store -- she walked out on the beach.

There were several small boats pulled up beyond the high-water line and one of them belonged to Maria's uncle Raoul. She sat on the gunwale of Raoul's boat to think.

There! Giorgo came out of the boatyard office and walked quickly toward the village. He was not a bad looking man, she knew, and she did not dislike him -- not really.

But she did not want him to find her and he would see her here when he came back from the village. She looked about.

The bottom of the boat was clean and she would be out of sight if she lay in it. With one last look at Giorgo's retreating back Maria climbed into the boat, lay down and wriggled under the seat. She could lie there all day if she wanted to, and Giorgo would never think of looking for her in a boat.

He never did. Giorgo was still on his way to Maria's father's store when the flood swept through the village. It crushed him
under the remains of a building and rolled his battered body along in the sea of mud.

Maria heard screams and the splintering of wood and she struggled to get out from under the seat. She was sitting up when the leading edge of the wave of mud picked up the boat and swept it into the water. Terror-stricken, she clung to the gunwale and watched in horror as the village that had been her home dissolved, and as she was swept out to sea.

Juan Delgado was one of more than a dozen survivors she saw in the next hour but she could not help any of them. Helplessly, she watched as the boat and the tree drifted apart. Sadly, she saw the boy's resignation as he realized that she could not help him.

***

Juan was not afraid of the sea. He had been out with his father often enough, and his father was at sea now in one of the best boats in San Felipe.

Soon his father would come back and find him missing. His father would know he must have been swept out to sea, and would come to rescue him.

As Maria drifted away Juan took off his belt and used it to tie himself to the branch to which he clung. He might be there for a long time, he knew, and he would get very tired hanging on to the tree. Held in place by his belt and sitting between two big branches, he would be safe until his father came.

The tree rocked gently in the swell and Juan was comfortable, with just enough shade to break the sun. In an hour he was relaxed and by noon he began to drowse.
And then the last of the tons of mud that had clung to the underwater branches melted away. The tree rolled over, with Juan tied to a branch that came to rest five meters under the surface of the water.

***

Maria's experience hurt too much for her to feel pain. A blessed numbness dulled her memory of the destruction of the village, her knowledge of the destruction of her home and of the death of her family.

The past was blurred as she drifted quietly under a hot sun on a surrealistic sea. Another time she would have recognized the bow of a half-sunk fishing boat nearby. Would have known it for a boat from San Felipe, and would have identified it as evidence of tragedy. Now it was just a splash of color in the macabre wonderland that surrounded her.

The boat rocked gently and after a while she lay again on the bottom again, her face in the shadow of one of the seats. She closed her eyes and passed into a dreamless sleep as she drifted, along with millions of tons of floating wreckage, farther out to sea.

***

Red One split up as it approached Rio Blanco. Two planes broke away to fly along the shores of the lake and to drop decades of corpsmen at the remains of each town they passed. Two more planes followed the path of the flood down-river and the fifth, with Pedro aboard, circled the remains of the city. Even hardened rescue corpsmen were appalled at the devastation they saw.
The edges of the dam still clung to the mountainsides where they had been anchored and all the foundations remained, but a chunk more than 200 meters across and about 100 meters deep had been torn out of the center. Hundreds of millions of tonnes of water had poured through the gap and had washed out most of the docks and the downtown area near the dam leaving a muddy lake nearly a kilometer across, with parts of the steel skeletons of some buildings showing through the surface, in place of most of the city.

The wreck of an ocean-going freighter, crumpled like a child's toy, lay on a mud flat to one side of the lake, and some debris floated around the edges.

Traces of roads and some rubble surrounded the mud flats, and the remains of a few buildings were recognizable near the outskirts of the former city.

The San Cristobal army was already setting up a field hospital in Rio Blanco as the planes arrived, an army convoy was crawling down the side of the mountain toward the city, and three more were en-route from the capital.

Johnston spoke by radio to the army commander of the area, then ordered Smithers to drop a couple of bundles of medical supplies before the plane turned toward the coast.

There was no river now because the flood had washed away the banks that once confined it. The floor of the valley was a kilometers-wide scar of mud, so wide that the river spread out shallow and seeped into it making a treacherous morass as dangerous as quicksand.
Flying down the valley the corpsmen saw several animals that had wandered onto the mud -- perhaps in search of water -- and had become trapped.

One decade of corpsmen was trapped too. The first to jump near the remains of a crossroads village, they had aimed for an inviting mud flat and had sunk nearly waist-deep when they landed.

Pedro heard their curses over the radio as they struggled to free themselves, and the curses of their centurion who had to drop another decade to help the surviving villagers. The trapped corpsmen could take care of themselves, but it would be hours before they were able to help others.

Other decades dropped on solid ground to set up field stations and message centers on both sides of the flood path. After talking with centurions in the other planes Johnston ordered his century to jump on a rise near the mouth of the river, not far from the former village of San Felipe. They would build a refugee camp there.

But Johnston did not jump at San Felipe and neither did Pedro, for all his protests. They stayed with the plane as it turned back to Hidalgo, where Martin would establish his headquarters.

***

CHAPTER FIVE

Something was rubbing against the side of the boat and Manuel opened his eyes in confusion. Sunlight dappled the awning above him and he was surrounded by the smell of green leaves. Impossible!
He turned his head. His eyes confirmed the leaves, and the branches of a tree. He must have drifted ashore while he slept -- but how? He knew the coast for perhaps a hundred kilometers each side of San Felipe, and it was beach and rock all the way -- there were no mangrove swamps except at the mouth of the river. Trees beside the boat must mean he had drifted up the river -- and how could he have drifted against the current? Rolling on his side he peered out under the edge of the awning.

Incredible! There were branches and trees everywhere. He dipped a finger into the water and tasted it.

Salt -- he was still at sea.

But why these trees? And how?

Then he saw that the trees were floating. That the upright sections that looked like the trunks of ordinary trees were in fact the branches of jungle giants. He saw mud clinging to some of them, and splintered ends where some were broken. Crawling out from under the awning, he stood and surveyed the scene.

Floating trees and parts of trees as far as he could see in every direction! A strange dark -- muddy -- look to the water beside the boat. A few bits and pieces of lumber floated among the trees.

He would not start his motor with all that junk floating around him -- Manuel had a healthy concern for his propeller and gear-case. He picked up an oar and pushed away from the tree that had awakened him. Standing near the side of the boat, he began to paddle.
The boat didn't move. He paddled harder, then noticed the way the bow swung sideways. Looking forward, he saw the taut line leading off the bow to the sea-anchor. Setting the oar down he crawled forward under the awning and pulled the rope. The anchor didn't move but the boat came ahead to the branch on which the rope was fouled. Manuel worked it loose, then hauled the boat up to another branch. At last he was able to bring the anchor to the surface, pour the water out of it and lift it into the boat.

Now he could move -- but where? The tree beside him was so big that even as it lay in the water some of the broken branches lifted five and ten meters above the surface. Manuel paddled over to it and moored the boat to the stub of a branch.

Carefully he climbed onto the trunk of the tree. It would be several meters in diameter if he could see all of it, and the top was nearly two meters above water level.

It moved slightly but felt as stable as a very big boat. A few steps away was a huge branch -- nearly a meter in diameter -- torn off about twenty meters up. It would have been too big to climb had the tree been standing upright, but while the tree floated it formed a broad and steep ramp a man could walk up. Slowly, wary of the danger of slipping, Manuel climbed about ten meters above water level. The branch curved upward there, and the upper section was too steep for safe climbing.

Now he could see kilometers of debris spread across the surface of the sea. He had been about twenty kilometers from land when he went to sleep and from here he should be able to see the hills behind San Felipe to the east, but the east was as empty as any other direction. That was bad.
The weather was good now but there might be a storm brewing and the offshore breeze must be carrying him farther out to sea. The tree heaved gently in the swell but the movement was natural to Manuel and he didn't notice it as he considered his position.

He might be able to use the motor if he was careful and went slowly -- but how far was he from land? He was now about as high above the water as the lookout basket on the biggest boat in San Felipe, and he knew the lookouts could see the hills while they were still six hours out of port. He had fuel for only three or four hours, so he would be unable to return even if he could find clear water.

He sat on the branch and leaned back against the steep section he had been unwilling to climb. From his shirt pocket he took his last cigarillo and a packet of matches. Carefully, he lit the cigarillo and considered.

Jose had told him the sea anchor would hold the boat even against strong winds, and that he would drift no more than a few kilometers with the current. The anchor-line had held, therefore the boat should not have moved.

But it had moved. He had been just barely out of sight of land when he went to sleep and now he could not see the hills from this branch -- and it was as high as the lookout basket on a big boat. He must be very far out.

And all these trees -- the scraps of lumber. A flood?

That might explain it. A flood big enough to uproot this tree would be very big, and it would set up a current in the sea itself. With such a current a sea-anchor would move a boat, not hold it still. There must have been a flood.
Now it struck him. The flood must have passed through San Felipe! Those scraps of lumber that floated about him were the remains of houses -- some might be the remains of his house!

The house beside the creek where Carmine and little Manuelle had waved as he left the day before. The house to which he would have returned about noon, if the fishing had been better. If his house was gone -- if there were pieces of it floating about him in the sea -- where were Carmine and Manuelle?

The cigarillo slipped un-noticed from his fingers, hit the branch and bounced to the trunk of the tree and into the sea. The burning coal made a slight hiss as it was extinguished, but Manuel didn't hear it.

He rested his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, and wept.

***

Slowly waking from her sleep, Maria felt the heat of the sun on her back and side. She realized that she was not in her bed at home and that she had slept in her clothes.

She saw the gray floor of the boat curving up to the side. Light reflected from water under the floorboards and the end of a piece of rope lay in front of her eyes.

She sat up and gazed in wonder at the dark brown water and the mass of tangled foliage. Among the foliage floated scraps of lumber and something that might once have been part of a wooden fence. She smelled mud and water -- like a swamp -- with a bit of tang from salt in the air.
She remembered climbing into the boat to hide from Giorgo, and the wave of mud that destroyed the village and swept her away.

Now she was lost and thirsty. On land she might have drunk from a puddle or a stream but she knew better than to drink seawater. Nobody drank seawater -- but there might be a bottle of fresh water in the boat.

Not in the stern. She found a length of rope in the bow, tied to an old paint can full of sand, but nothing to drink. She looked about.

More than a kilometer downwind was an island, but it was a strange island -- it seemed to be moving. It rose perhaps fifteen meters out of the sea to its highest hills but the hills moved and one of them suddenly sank out of sight as she watched. For about ten minutes Maria wondered whether it was a ghost island or if she was dreaming.

Then she realized that there was no island. She was looking at a huge mass of floating debris -- trees ripped whole out of the jungle, parts of buildings, docks and the remains of fishing boats -- that had been swept out to sea along with the boat in which she drifted.

Hundreds of thousands of jungle trees had been uprooted by the flood and rolled and skidded along the river valley -- some of them for 80 and 90 kilometers. Most of their branches had been smashed to splinters as they rolled but the biggest branches -- many of them bigger than the trees of temperate climes -- had resisted breakage and had become locked inextricably together.

Jungle vines, some as thick as a man's body, had been swept up by the flood too. Most had been torn to shreds but the shreds of
huge vines are themselves huge, and hundred-meter lengths of
vine wound in and around the debris binding it all into a
gigantic raft laden with hundreds of tons of mud and clay.

Other trees and vines had been uprooted closer to the coast or
had been washed down the river channel, and many of these
had drifted out to sea almost intact. Their small branches and
leaves were broken and torn and the trees were dying, but big
trees die slowly and some leaves would remain green for
weeks.

The trees and vines, together with the wreckage of hundreds of
boats, houses, storage sheds, fences and other wooden
structures, had gathered and were still gathering at the center of
a low-pressure atmospheric system. The breezes that pushed
them together were gentle but the branches of thousands of
trees acted as huge sails and the trees swept other debris ahead
of them as they were pushed along.

Huge branches snapped like toothpicks near the center of the
floating island, but those that did not snap were forced together
in an intricate lacework that would lock them together against
the action of wind and waves. A hurricane might break the
floating island apart but some trees would float as one until they
became waterlogged and sank.

Maria didn't know what had happened but she saw the trees.
Where there were trees, she reasoned, there might be fruit. And
where there was a lot of wreckage there might be something she
could drink -- a barrel of water, perhaps, or a can of soda pop.
She tried to decide whether a full can of pop would float or not
-- she had never seen one thrown into the water.

Something soft thuddied against the side of the boat and she
looked to see. It was a dead dog.
Faintly, from the island of wreckage, she heard the scream of a woman or a child. She saw a human shape near the edge.

There were people on the island who might be able to help her. If they could not, it would still be better to die among people than alone.

There would be shade on the island too. Maria looked at the rubbish that floated around her, hoping to see something she could use as a paddle.

***

In his second week on the job at NASA headquarters in Houston Peter Steiger worked with a dozen other clerks in the main file room. The job was routine but Steiger was still fascinated by the hundreds of satellite photos that crossed his desk every day. He looked up now as a technician dropped two handfuls of prints into the tray on the corner of his desk.

"What are those?"

"First run of the San Cristobal pictures. The Canadians want a survey of the whole country, and this is the first pass."


"The Canadian Rescue Corps -- they're down there cleaning up that mess. Don't you follow the news?"

"Sure -- as long as it's sports." Steiger leafed through the pictures.
"What happened, anyway?"

"An earthquake and a flood, from what I hear. The quake knocked over a power dam and the dam flooded a city."

"Sure made a mess of things, anyway." Steiger turned one photo over and checked the code on the back. "What do they want these for?"

"Survey of the damage and to locate survivors. To plan rebuilding -- all sorts of things, I guess. We shoot pictures every time they go out and send them to their field headquarters but we keep prints on file here to give guys like you something to do."

Steiger dropped the first pile of prints and picked up the second. What about these?"

"They're the over-run. When we shoot a strip across something like that we start the cameras early and stop them late. These are mostly shots of the sea, up to about a hundred miles out. Lots of junk there, but I don't think the pictures are worth saving. We didn't send them to the Canadians."

"Oh." Steiger leafed through the second pile. Stopped and looked again. "My god!"

"What?"

"Look at that! The trees floating out there! They must be worth a fortune!"

The technician leaned over the desk and looked at the picture. It showed a huge mass of floating wreckage, like an island several miles in diameter.
"Yeah. I've seen that sort of thing before after a flood. All the shit gets swept out to sea and a lot of it collects in one place if there's a low-pressure area out there -- but it's mostly just trees.

"Just trees? Fifty million dollars worth of them! Take a tug out there and you'd be rich for life!"

"Fifty million? For trees? Sounds screwy to me. What would you do with them?"

"Sell them to a saw mill."

"Okay -- but they wouldn't be worth that much!"

"They are."

"How do you know?"

"I worked my way through Oregon State scaling trees on the rafts -- looking at pictures like these and figuring what the trees are worth."

"Well -- these ones wouldn't be worth much anyway. Take a look through the glass -- you'll see the way they're torn up."

"Some of the ones I counted on the coast didn't look like much in the boom -- they get beat up before they get to the water -- but the wood inside is good."

"So what would one of those be worth?"

Dropping the photo on his desk, Steiger swung a magnifier over it and reached for his scale. He looked through the glass as he slid the scale over the picture.
"Look at this! One tree with a trunk more than twelve feet in diameter!" He turned the scale. "The main log would be nearly a hundred feet long!"

He tapped the keys of his calculator and looked at the result.

"More than a hundred thousand board feet in one tree! Enough to build a dozen houses!"

"Let's see that!" The technician moved around the desk and leaned over the magnifier. "Which one are you looking at?"

"Here." Steiger tapped with the tip of a pencil on the photo. "That one tree is worth $50,000 or $100,000, just as it floats there!"

"Hold it!" The technician leaned closer. "Move your pencil a bit!"

"Huh?" Steiger moved the pencil and crowded his head beside the technician's. "What are you looking at?"

"There! Just above the tip of the pencil -- what's that beside the log?"

"Looks like a boat. Just a minute." Steiger swung the big magnifier aside, and reached for a high-powered loupe. He dropped it on the picture, bent over and peered through it. Then he straightened up.

"It's a boat, all right. And take a look on the tree. On that big branch, just down from the boat."
The technician leaned forward. Looked through the loupe. Then he straightened up and looked at Steiger.

"I'd swear that's a man!"

"So would I." Steiger looked again through the loupe, then moved it aside. He picked up a yellow grease pencil and circled Manuel and his boat, then handed the pile of pictures to the technician.

"I guess you better send these to the Canadians too," he said.

***

CHAPTER SIX

Maria heard the sound of an aircraft. She turned and searched the horizon.

There! Back where the land must be! A dot that grew as she watched.

The bright red plane passed almost directly overhead as it flew toward the floating island. Maria stood and waved but there was no sign that anyone saw her.

In the plane Pedro sat on a folding seat by the open door, his eyes glued to binoculars as he scanned the floating trees.

"See anything?" Johnston crouched beside him and shouted in his ear. Even Johnston had to shout over the roar of the wind and the scream of the engines.

Pedro shook his head.
"The picture shows a boat out here," Johnston said, "but that was this morning. It won't be there now -- look at the way this stuff is closing up. Any boat has been crushed by now!"

"There still might be people." Pedro's voice was blown away by the wind and Johnston didn't hear him. Suddenly the he leaned forward and his binoculars locked on something.

Johnston shouted again in his ear.

"See something?"

"A man." Pedro turned to the centurion and shouted. "Near the center."

"Shit!" Johnston grabbed the phone by the door.

"Pilot!"

"Sir!"

"We have someone! Circle here!"

As the plane circled, Johnston leaned over Pedro's shoulder to see the lone man near the middle of the floating island. Then he picked up the phone again.

"Pilot?"

"Sir?"

"Can we get a chopper out here?"

"No sir. Too far for a single engine copter, and that's all we have."
"How far out are we?"

"More than fifty kilometers from land, sir."

"Right. Patch me to Martin."

***

Maria knew some planes could land on water and when the Manitou circled she wondered if it were one of them. She leaned over the bow of the boat and paddled with her hands. It might land by the floating island, she thought, and perhaps she could reach it before it flew away again.

She paddled for several minutes while the plane circled and Johnston talked by radio to Group Leader Martin.

"Sir? Johnston here. We've found that mess of trees the Americans told us about, and there seem to be people on it."

"How many?"

"At least one -- possibly more. But we can't do anything sir. Jumpers can't land in that stuff -- it's just a floating log jam and it would kill them. If they didn't hit something and break their legs, they'd go right through and come up under it.

"And we can't drop them in the water. There's so much junk floating round here they'd never find each other -- or the boats."

Pedro stood. Touched Johnston's arm and spoke.

"I'll jump," he said.
Johnston scowled and turned away from him, still speaking to the group leader.

"No sir. The only way I can see is a chopper. How soon could we get a big one here?"

"Not today." Martin answered. "Nothing big this side of the Rio Grande. The Americans are sending some from Dallas but they won't be here 'till about noon tomorrow."

"What about ships, sir?"

"Just fishing boats, and we couldn't ask them to go out that far. They don't like to get out of sight of the coast. Navigator?"

"Sir?"

"What's the weather there? Will those people be all right overnight?"

"Could be sir, but I wouldn't bet on it. The season is just changing now, and it's hard to say. If the weather holds for a week it will be good for the next six months -- but it might not hold.

"And they're right in the middle of a depression here -- that's why the trees are all crammed together. It seems to be moving fast and that could be bad news in these latitudes. They might be okay or they could be in for a storm -- I just don't know."

"Which way are they moving?"

"West, sir. Out to sea."

"So they won't be any closer tomorrow."
"No sir. Tomorrow they may be too far out for most twin-engined helicopters."

"What about a flying boat? The Americans have some in Panama." Martin again.

"No way, sir." Johnston answered this time. "No flying boat could land in that stuff -- it's like noodle soup down there."

Pedro grabbed his arm this time. "I'll jump," he said. Johnston ignored him as Martin continued.

"Figure something out if you can," the group leader said. "But don't lose any men."

"Right sir. I'll call back after we've looked it over a bit more." Johnston looked at the hand-set a moment, then hung up. Less than a second later it buzzed and a yellow light flashed.

"Sir?" It was the pilot.

"Yes."

"We have fuel for about another fifteen minutes on station, then we should head back."

"Okay -- we'll drop that guy a raft and head back. Tomorrow we can figure a way to get him out."

"Right, sir." The plane stopped circling as Johnston hung up the phone and turned on Pedro with a scowl.

"You'll jump, will you? Into that mess? You're supposed to be a trained corpsman, for Christ' sake. You know better than that!"
"I'm a rescue jumper, and there are people down there who need help."

"One man -- I'll grant you that.

"But how in hell could you help him? You'd kill yourself landing in that shit and you couldn't help anyone even if you did survive. We don't know how to get that guy out, and we don't know how we could get you back.

"And on top of that there may be a storm forming here, and you know you're not going to help anyone in a storm. If there were any waves that stuff down there would be like a meat grinder!"

"I still want to jump."

"If I thought you could do any good maybe I'd let you. But that guy can live or die without your help, and whether you jump or not won't make any difference to him."

The plane's two drop-masters dragged a life-raft toward the door. Johnston pulled Pedro out of their way.

As the plane turned again toward the island the lead drop-master released a streamer. Falling at about the same rate as a parachute, the weighted yellow ribbon drifted with the wind as it fell to splash down near the edge of the floating island.

***

Maria's face fell as the plane stopped circling and turned away from the island.
But it flew straight for a few minutes, then turned back! She wondered if the yellow streamer was attached to a message, or perhaps to a bottle of water.

It would not help her. The streamer would land on the island, and there were people there already. They would find the water first.

***

"Okay, that's it." The lead drop-master kept his eye on the spot where the streamer landed.

"Drop the raft just about the edge of the island and we'll put it right on top of that guy."

"Right." The second man helped tip the bundled raft on end as the plane began another run.

"Now!" Both men pushed and the raft dropped free. Pedro heard the twang as the static line drew taut, then saw the parachute blossom.

***

The plane had flown a wide circle and now it approached Maria again. When it was nearly above her a dot fell from it -- a dot that sprouted a huge flower-like brilliant red top, the same color as the plane.

She knew what that was. It was a parachute -- and a parachute meant there was a man coming down. Perhaps the plane wouldn't fly any more. Perhaps it was going to crash!
Maria was disappointed because she thought the men in the plane might have seen her and sent help, but as the parachute came closer she saw that it supported a box or a bundle of some kind. A box that would land on the floating island. She began paddling again, because there might be food in it, or water. She hoped there would be water -- if the men in the plane knew the sea they would know that water was very important.

***

"How'd we do?" Johnston stood in the doorway beside Pedro and the drop-masters as the parachute drifted to within a few meters of the man. He watched as the bundled raft caught among the branches of a floating tree."

"Shit!" the centurion shifted his hands on the door-frame. "Now what?"

As the plane circled they watched the man clamber through the branches to reach the raft.

"What's he doing?"

"If he's smart he'll just cut it open and get the water and the rations out of it."

"If he's smart," Pedro said. "If he knows rafts, you mean."

"Well -- what else can he do?"

"First thing, he's going to read the instructions, right? I mean -- Christ, they're there in ten languages!"

"Yeah, but that's for inflating the raft. He can't inflate it there!"
"Does he know that? Should he?" Pedro looked out the door again. "Oh Christ -- there it goes!"

As they looked, the raft began to unfold. It pushed the man off the branch on which he balanced, and continued to grow.

Then it sagged. In less than a minute it was a limp yellow mass among the trees, its metallic radar reflector hanging below it and winking in the sunlight.

"Punctured itself." Johnston said.

"Where's the man?" Pedro asked.

"Don't see him." One of the drop-masters peered out the door. "Maybe he got hurt when he was pushed off the branch."

"We killed him."

"All right. Knock it off." Johnston said. "Nothing more we can do out here, and not much time left. We'll see if we can think of something tomorrow."

"He picked up the phone. "Pilot?"

Pedro was lying flat on the floor of the plane now, his head out the door. He grabbed Johnston's ankle.

"People sir! Three of them! One's a woman!"

"Hang on a minute. Make another circle." Johnston hung up the phone and looked out the door.

"Where are they? I don't see them."
"I do. I did. One of them waved at me."

The centurion leaned out and looked down, then pulled himself back inside.

"Okay, you did. But there's nothing we can do for them now."

"We'll see about that." Pedro jumped to his feet and clipped his jump-bag to his harness. Reached to fasten his static line to the clip by the door.

"No we won't." Johnston pulled his arm down. Held it as he roared. "You jump when I tell you to jump -- not when you think it's a good idea."

"Sorry sir." Pedro's fist came up in a short arc that ended just under Johnston's solar plexus. The big man gasped and let go Pedro's arm as he doubled over.

The drop-masters stared in astonishment as Pedro turned and dived head-first out the door. His static line trailed behind him but his hand gripped the ring of his ripcord.

He pulled and heard a rustling sound followed by a dull thud, then felt the comforting drag as his chute unfolded above him.

***

Maria paused in her paddling to watch when the plane turned back. She saw the second black dot fall and the second red parachute blossom, and she realizes that this one would not fall on the island -- it would land near her boat!
Then she saw arms raised to hold the ropes of the parachute. Legs, dangling below. This was no box -- this was a man. Perhaps the plane was broken after all.

***

Pedro looked up and checked his canopy first. He had never had a malfunction himself but he had seen two of them. One man had sprained his ankle coming in on the small reserve chute and both had packed their parachutes more carefully after that. Pedro had packed his chute carefully before he saw the malfunctions.

Satisfied with the chute, he looked below. He had some control over his landing and he had a minute or more to select his spot. He pulled a riser and spun slowly beneath the chute to survey the sea.

There! Off to one side was perhaps a hundred meters of clear water. It was close to the limit of his range and he might not make it but it looked good. He steered for it, then scanned the sea for alternate landings.

He was still more than a hundred meters above the surface when he saw the boat, and the girl standing in it. He yanked hard on the right hand riser and his parachute spun. The sea was dirty around the boat but there was nothing big, and there was one clear patch not far away. He headed for it.

Nearing the water he inflated his life jacket, pulled down his goggles, folded his arms flat against his chest -- straightened his legs and pressed his feet together. Seconds later he was down.

For a dirty-water landing, it wasn't bad. One branch as thick as his arm broke when his feet hit it and the jagged end grazed his
side as he plunged a couple of meters below the surface. When he came up another one caught between his parachute harness and his coveralls, twisting and cutting him slightly as he took its weight. He hadn't expected a feather bed.

Supported by his life jacket he reached back and pulled the branch loose from his harness. Then he flipped up his goggles and, paddling with his arms, he turned to look for the boat.

***

Maria watched in wonder as the man with the parachute turned toward her. She thought they always fell straight down -- or were carried by the wind -- but this man seemed to be able to go where he wanted to. She realized he was coming to her but she was not surprised -- hers was the only boat in sight. She would have to share it with him for a long time until they were rescued and she hoped he would be friendly -- but not too friendly.

He was going to land less than ten meters from her. Maria stood on the seat, ready to jump in and help him if he could not swim. Even if he could swim, she thought, he would have trouble with those heavy clothes and with the big yellow thing about him.

There was a splash and she prepared to jump. Then the man popped to the surface and Maria realized that the yellow thing was a life jacket. The man faced away from the boat when he surfaced but as she watched he turned toward her and spoke.

"Buenas dias, muchacha!"

He was in no trouble. Maria sat on the side of the boat and watched him paddle toward her.
It was hard to see with the red helmet he wore but she guessed that he was a few years older than she was, and good looking. He spoke Spanish like a native, but not like a native of San Cristobal.

He reached the boat and hung on it while he un-clipped a bag from his chest and handed it to her. She put it on the seat while he swung himself aboard and pulled his floating parachute in.

"I'm sorry about your plane," she said.

"Huh?" He looked at her as he took off his parachute harness.

"I'm sorry your plane is broken."

"He scanned the sky anxiously. Looking up, Maria saw that the plane still circled. The man spoke.

"But the plane isn't broken."

"Then why did you jump with the parachute? Now you are here too, and we may never get to land!"

"I came to help you," Pedro said. "Don't worry -- we'll get to land." From a pocket on the leg of his coveralls he took out a small bright red box wrapped in plastic. Broke the seal of the package and unwrapped a small radio. As Maria watched he held it up to his mouth and pressed the talk switch.

"Pedro here," he said in English. "I'm down and safe -- and I've already got a boat and a girl." Maria heard the words, but she did not understand them. She started at the tone of the answer.

"You son-of-a-bitch. You're going on charge for this!"
Maria did not understand the words but she recognized the mixture of anger and relief in Johnston's voice. Like a father, she thought, speaking to a child that has done something dangerous.

When Pedro answered she knew she was right because his tone was that of a son explaining something to his father.

"Sorry about that, sir, but I've proved my point -- I've already found a survivor."

"Big deal! Now how are you going to get back?"

"I will. Can you drop me a boat and some supplies?"

"I don't know why I should waste them on you," Johnston said, "but I will." "Spread your parachute so we can see you."

"Right." Pedro clipped the radio to a ring on his chest and stood in the stern of the boat. With arms spread, he held his bright red parachute like a bullfighter's cape.

The plane circled and screamed by less than fifty meters off the water. A yellow streamer dropped from it to land within a few meters of the boat.

"Got it," Johnston said. "We'll drop the motorboat next pass, then a raft. You don't need the raft, but it's got enough supplies to keep you a week."

"Your radio works like a telephone? You can talk on it too?"

Maria looked at Pedro in wonder.

"Yes. I talk to my friends in the plane." He looked down at her.
"And can they help us?"

"They will drop us a boat, and supplies."

"Will they drop some water?"

"Lot's of water. Here's some for now." With one hand Pedro opened his belt pouch, lifted out a can of water and gave it to her.

***

Now he turned to face the plane as it approached, skimming the surface of the sea. A yellow bundle was thrust out the open door, a parachute blossomed and the bundle splashed down beside the yellow streamer that still floated near the boat. The plane banked and circled for another pass.

"Leave that for now!" Johnston's voice came from the radio. "Life-raft coming next."

Another low-level pass, and a bundled life-raft splashed into the sea, a few meters from the still-packaged motorboat. The plane climbed and turned toward land. Pedro set the radio on the seat and stripped off his coveralls.

Wearing red shorts and a T shirt he jumped into the water and swam toward one of the floating bundles. As he swam, Johnston's voice came again from the radio.

"There's a radio and a beacon in that raft. Turn it on as soon as you unpack, and I want a report on everything you find there."
Pedro pulled a red ring, then trod water and held the rope as the bundle unfolded. Maria watched in wonder as it inflated into a bright yellow boat.

About five meters long and two wide, the sides of inflated rubber tubes, the new boat had three full-width rubber seats running across it and one small seat in the bow. Mounted on the stiff stern was a bright-red outboard motor, and Maria could see the red gas tank strapped down beside the middle seat.

Grabbing one of the ropes that circled the sides of the boat Pedro climbed aboard. Moving to the stern he primed the outboard motor and started it, then idled the new boat over beside Maria. She passed his coveralls and the radio over, then climbed across herself while Pedro tied the wooden boat to the stern of the inflatable.

Then he drove the boat slowly to the bundled life-raft and tied another rope to it before he headed the motorboat, with the raft and the wooden boat in tow, toward the floating island.

***

Now Maria inspected the can of water he had given her. The size and shape of the can were familiar -- she had seen them by the hundreds in her father's store -- but the cans in the store held soft drinks. Would such an expensive can contain only water? She snapped the tab, lifted it to her lips and tasted water.

"Is it good?" He was looking at her.

"Very good senor, and I thank you -- but I am not used to drinking water from a can."
"It's water, just the same. That's an easy way to carry it." Pedro rested one knee on the stern-seat of the boat and craned his neck to find a route through the floating debris. One hand held the tiller of the outboard motor.

"Si senor." From the middle seat, Maria looked at him. "And who are you, senor? You look like a soldier -- but soldiers do not wear red clothes. And you are not from San Cristobal.

For the first time, Pedro looked at her. She was young, he thought -- 12 or 13 years -- and tired and frightened, but she remained calm and she was probably pretty smart. Her skin was light bronze, her cheeks were high and her straight shoulder-length hair was jet black. She was probably part Indian, he guessed, like himself.

The fawn-colored cotton dress looked good but it needed pressing now. She was probably a village girl, but much better off and probably better educated than the average village girl. She waited for his answer.

"I am called Pedro, muchacha, and I come from Canada. That," he pointed to the coveralls that lay in the bottom of the boat, "is the uniform of the Canadian Rescue Corps."

"And what is that, senor?"

"It is something like an army, muchacha, but we don't fight wars. Instead, we come to help people who need it."

"From Canada? Where is that?"

"A long way to the north, muchacha. North of Los Estados Unidos."
"Oh. And how did you know I needed help, senor?" Maria took a sip of the water as she waited for his answer.

"I didn't know about you -- but we knew about San Cristobal."

"Yes." Maria was silent a moment, remembering the mud that had swept through San Felipe. "What happened, senor?"

"An earthquake, muchacha. Then the dam broke at Rio Blanco. You know of the dam?"

"I have seen it, senor."

"It was a big dam, muchacha. And there was a terrible flood after it broke."

"I saw the flood in San Felipe, senor. It was terrible. And now -- are we going back to land?" The water can was empty and Maria set it carefully on the bottom of the boat. She turned to see where they were heading.

"No muchacha. We cannot go back to land in this boat -- it is too far. We'll go to the floating trees ahead -- I think there are more people who need help there -- and we'll wait."

"What will we wait for, senor?"

"For my friends to come back. For something to take us to land."

"A ship, senor?"

"I'm not sure about that, muchacha. We'll just have to wait and see."
CHAPTER SEVEN

The inflatable boat could make about 25 knots under normal conditions but it was slowed by the wooden boat and the bundled life-raft in tow. Slowed too by the maze of debris through which it moved, and by the need to thread a route around floating branches and trees. Pedro had landed less than 500 meters from the island, but it took more than 20 minutes to get there.

That gave him time to reconsider his jump. To realize what he had done, and the position he was in. Before he headed the boat toward the floating island he had turned for one last look at the departing plane, and had realized with a shock that the sky was empty.

Now he was alone with this young girl in an inflatable boat among thousands of drifting trees more than fifty kilometers from land. For the first time since he had joined the Rescue Corps, he was on his own.

The feeling came as a shock because he had not realized until then how much he depended on the other corpsmen in his decade. On his century and on the corps.

There had been other times when he thought he was alone but they were nothing like this. He had been following orders then, and other corpsmen had been within easy range of his pocket radio.

There had been helicopters and boats or trucks to bring help should he need it, and a camp nearby to which he could return for the night. He had been doing something specific, and
usually something that either Smithers or Johnston had told him to do. He had been a member of a team, following orders.

Now Johnston knew where he was, and the navigator of the plane knew exactly where he had jumped. Pedro had the boat and the raft, and in the raft he had a powerful radio. That wasn't too bad.

The plane would be back tomorrow to drop more supplies if he needed them. He was not lost.

But he was alone and on his own. No other corpsman could jump to his aid if he got into trouble, and there would be no helicopter to take him to a field hospital if he were hurt.

And he was at sea, with no way to get back to land. A Manitou could reach him to drop supplies, but it could not land to pick him up.

Pedro had climbed mountains on three continents. He had trained on deserts, in swamps, in rain forests and on the frozen wastes of the arctic. The Rescue Corps worked everywhere, and the training of a para-rescue corpsman included survival techniques and experience in every type of country to be found in the world.

Every type of country. Everywhere that people might be subject to natural disaster.

But not at sea. There were few disasters of the sort the Rescue Corps was expected to cope with at sea, and there were no courses on seamanship in a regular corpsman's training.
Pedro was alone and on his own in a strange situation for the first time since he had been trapped in the remains of his father's house nearly fifteen years before.

And for the first time in the three years since he had donned the red uniform, he felt fear.

***

The boat bumped against something in the water and the shock brought Pedro out of his reverie. The floating debris became thicker as he approached the island, and he shifted the motor into neutral while he stood to choose a course.

Floating logs, branches and bits of wreckage surrounded him but they were no problem. The boat would push them aside easily enough, and it would not be damaged if he travelled slowly. There were several large trees between him and the island but he could avoid them by angling off to the right. He looked past them to the island itself.

Most of the trees had been stripped bare and some were covered in mud. He could land on them if he had to, but there would be no shade. He would probably have to spend several days on the island, so he might as well choose some-place he would want to stay.

Off to the right were several trees that still had leaves, and that looked more inviting than most. Kneeling on the stern seat, Pedro shifted the motor into gear and headed toward them.

Maria was the first to spot another survivor -- a man who stood on one of the trees between them and the island. He called and waved while the boat was about 100 meters away, and Pedro turned to pass close to the tree so they could pick him up.
Then there were more people and more calls, most of them from among the still-green trees they were heading for. Pedro waved back and held the boat on course.

One man dived into the water and swam toward them, and Pedro slowed the boat as he approached. The swimming man caught the rope that circled the boat as they pulled alongside, and the man they had picked up from the tree helped him aboard.

Others saw where they were heading and began scrambling through and over the trees to meet them as they landed. Six people waited on one huge tree as the boat approached.

Pedro had been impressed by the tree as he approached but it was only as he came closer that he could see how big it really was. The trunk was at least four meters in diameter and about thirty meters long from the six-meter root-ball to the massive lower branches that rose ten meters above the sea and stretched about as far to either side.

The trunk was half submerged but it still offered a relatively flat space covered with rough bark, nearly three meters wide by thirty meters long and more than a meter above sea level. Half the root ball loomed like a small hill at one end of it, and from water level the crown of the tree looked like a forest.

One big branch, stripped of small branches and of leaves, stuck straight up about ten meters in the air -- almost like a flag-pole, Pedro thought -- near the base of the crown. Between it and the crown the stub of another branch, nearly a meter in diameter and perhaps five meters long, stuck out to one side of the tree and sloped down to water level. Pedro eased the boat alongside it as two men in faded denim shirts and pants and a woman in a
tattered blue dress scrambled to meet him. One of the men took
the rope Pedro handed him and knelt to tie it to the stub of a
twig.

"Tiennez agua?" The woman asked for water. The men waited
anxiously for Pedro's answer.

"Tengo." Pedro reached into his belt-pouch. He handed a can of
water to the woman, then turned to pull in the life-raft.

"No tiennez mucho!" The woman looked at the can. Carefully
she snapped the tab and drank, then reluctantly she passed it to
one of the men.

"Tengo mas!" The life raft was beside the boat now. Maria
watched as Pedro turned the floating bundle until he could
reach and pull the red ring. All six of the survivors started as the
bundle hissed, then began to unfold. They watched in wonder as
it turned into a circular ten-man yellow life raft with a teepee-
shaped roof crowned with a metallic radar reflector.

Others crowded onto the branch as the raft inflated and Pedro
had to wave them back so he could have room to work. He
grabbed the rope that ringed the outside of the raft and turned it
so one of the four triangular doors faced the boat and another
faced the branch. Then he folded back the flap of the door and
reached inside for a coil of rope that he passed to one of the
men on the branch.

"Tie that, will you? To the branch."

Now he stepped into the raft and folded back the door that faced
the branch. He beckoned to the others.

"Tenemos mas agua aqui," he said. "We have more water here."
Maria climbed out of the boat and pushed others aside to follow Pedro into the raft. She watched as he knelt to unfasten one of the bags that lined the sides, and to pull out several cans of water. She took them from him and passed them to the others who followed her into the raft.

From outside came the sound of a splash. Then a shout, and more splashes.

Pedro stepped to the door and looked out, but saw nothing. He climbed onto the branch and walked to the trunk of the tree before he saw the source of the sound.

A woman floundered in the sea beside another tree. As Pedro watched she swam toward a branch where a man knelt to help her.

She would be safe but others would not. Pedro returned to the raft and looked inside. Maria knelt on the floor to read the instructions printed in Spanish on a bag of supplies.

"Muchacha!"

"Si?" She looked up at his call.

"I'm going away for a while, with the motorboat," he said. "You're in charge here. Give water to everybody who comes." He pointed toward a package tied to the side of the raft. "There are food bars in there -- give one to anyone who is hungry." He looked at the men, now sitting in the open doorway by the boat.

"Have you had water?"

One stood, a water can in his hand.
"I have, senor."

"Good. You come with me. Turning, Pedro stepped into the boat and sat by the motor. He started it as the man climbed from the raft into the bow of the boat.

"Senor?" The man questioned with his eyes, one hand on the rope that moored the boat.

"Cast it off!" Pedro waited while the man untied the rope, then put the motor in gear and turned the boat away from the log.

"There are people all over the place," he said. "Some of them will be able to walk in, but we'd better collect the others."

***

Traffic was heavy at Hidalgo and the Manitou had to wait for clearance to land. For the third time as it circled, Johnston opened the door to the flight deck and poked his head through.

"Any sign of that beacon yet? Any signals?"

"Nothing sir." The navigator looked up at him. "The monitor is automatic -- we'll pick it up as soon as he turns on. I'll call you."

"What about after we land?"

"We won't get the signal, but somebody will. I've reported the jump and there will be a general watch for any signals from that area."

"What about the weather -- any predictions?"
"Mets says they should be safe tomorrow, at least, but they're not making any promises."

Now the pilot turned and spoke back over his shoulder.

"That's our clearance to land, Centurion. We're going down now."

"Right." Johnston backed out of the flight deck, returned to his seat and strapped himself in, then stared out the window as the plane banked into its final approach.

"Dumb son-of-a-bitch!" he growled. "Bloody asshole! If he gets out of this alive, I'm going to kill him!"

The sound of the engines faded as the pilot throttled back for landing.

***

It was after sunset when Pedro returned to the life-raft with two more survivors, and he could barely see the yellow roof in the gathering gloom. This was his third trip and fourteen people now crowded into the raft that had been designed for ten and there were four more, counting Pedro and the man he had taken as a helper, in the motorboat.

Pedro nosed the boat up to the big branch and tied it to the stub of a small one. One man waited to help the new load of survivors onto the branch and into the raft.

It was crowded in there, Pedro saw, and there was no need for him to go aboard yet. He leaned back into the corner of the boat and closed his eyes for a moment.
Maria handed out food bars and cans of water as people climbed aboard, then stood and looked for Pedro. Treading carefully on the yielding rubber floor of the raft she walked to the door and looked across at the boat.

Pedro had slipped off the seat and he lay on the rubber floor, fast asleep. Maria looked back into the dim light of the raft and saw that the others were lying on the floor or sitting with their backs to the side. Some were already dozing.

She climbed over the side of the raft and stepped into the boat. Moved to the stern and stood a moment, looking down at Pedro. Then she lay beside him, curled up, and went to sleep.

***

Peter Steiger was at home in Houston, on the phone to a friend in Portland.

"Bill? You remember last year that guy that was telling us about the garbage king? The guy who made a fortune out of junk?"

"No. When was it?"

"Just after the engine on Joe Granville's tug broke down. You remember Joe was talking about scuttling it, and someone started talking about saving old stuff?"

"Where were we?"

"Sitting on the fantail of the tug, drifting beside boom three."

"No. I don't remember anyone talking about a garbage king but I'll tell you who was with us that trip -- it was Alex Foster."
"Foster! That's the guy! You know where he is now?"

"No, but I can find him. Joe would know."

"Would you do that? See if he remembers the guy's name, and where to find him."

"Okay, will do. How's life down there? They going to put you in orbit yet?"

"Maybe next week, if I take my desk with me. About that name -- call me collect if you find anything, will you?"

"Will do. Keep cool."

***

Pedro and Maria awoke with a start the next morning to the scream of a Manitou transport as it flew past fifty meters above the water.

Hurriedly, Pedro fumbled for the radio that lay beside him. Found it, turned it on and heard Johnston's voice.

"--- you son of a bitch! Answer me! Pedro -- do you read? Over!"

"Got you, sir. Sorry -- I was asleep." Pedro looked up at the plane, now banking in a tight turn for another pass.

"You'll be worse than asleep when I get my hands on you. Why didn't you set the beacon? Did you find any -- Holy Christ! Stop them!"

Startled, Pedro looked at the plane then felt Maria's hand claw at his arm. He turned and gasped.

Sixteen people crowded at one door of the ten-man raft to watch the plane. Now that side of the raft was sinking and the other was rising out of the water. As the raft tipped people closest to the door were crushed against the soft wall of the raft by others behind them, pushing the raft farther off balance. There was no time to do anything, and Pedro watched in fascination as the raft tipped to the point where it must dump.

And stopped, the high side held down by the ropes that tied it to the branch. But water was now pouring in over the low side.

Then people scrambled toward the high side and the raft settled back into the water. Several people shouted but one voice roared out louder than the others. A tall man with a small moustache desperately pushed people this way and that to spread their weight evenly.

"How many have you got there, for God's sake?" Johnston's voice again, from the radio.

"I don't know -- I haven't counted. I know there are more I haven't found yet -- I was still finding them at dark last night."

Johnston stood in the doorway of the plane as it circled about 100 meters over the island, a small radio in his hand.

"That why you didn't start the beacon?"

"I forgot sir. I was pretty busy."

"I guess so. Okay, now what?"
"Can you drop me another raft sir? And I'll need some gas for the boat and more water. I have" -- he stopped a moment and counted -- "fifteen people here now!"

"Okay -- you can have the raft, but I can't drop any more men. You're nearly eighty kilometers from shore now and drifting away.

"The choppers from Dallas are delayed so we still have nothing that can reach you and come back. Martin's trying to get the Americans to send a ship for you but God knows how long that's going to take and we don't know if the weather is going to last."

"That's okay sir -- I'm here now and there isn't much I could do about it even if I wanted to. If you'll get me some supplies though, I can keep these people alive until we figure something out."

"You've got them." Johnston thought for a moment. "I'll drop another raft now and I'll try to get a plane out here this afternoon with more gas and supplies." Johnston looked down from the plane, then spoke again.

"We can't drop it near you though -- there's too much chance of getting it tangled in that stuff so you'd never get it out. There's a bit of clear water about half a kilometer to the south -- will that be all right?"

"Is that the best you can do, sir?"

"Best I can see from here."

"Then it will have to do. It's going to take a long time to get it though."
"Can't be helped. I'll wait 'till you're out there before I drop it. Meanwhile, I'm going to look around. There may be other people out here."

Pedro snapped a switch and set the radio down. He looked at Maria and at the people who watched from the raft, then spoke to the men.

"The plane is going to drop another raft and more water. Who will come with me to get them?"

Maria started to speak but a man's voice interrupted and she fell silent.

"I will senor." It was the tall man with the loud voice, dressed in what must have been expensive work clothes a few days ago. A short machete hung in a leather sheath at his belt. "I will help."

Pedro had noticed the man the day before, but he looked different now. Last night the man had been frightened -- near panic -- as he scrambled aboard the raft, and he had sat as far as he could from the open door.

He was still tense, Pedro realized, but he was making a determined effort to control his fear. Pedro was afraid himself, and he felt sympathy for the man.

"Okay," he said. "Come then." The man reached for the rope that moored the boat and pulled it toward the raft, then held it while he offered his hand to Maria. She hesitated and looked back at Pedro.

"I will help too senor, if you wish."
Pedro smiled, shook his head. "You can help, muchacha, but not in the boat. Stay here and take care of the raft. You are in charge of the food and the water until we get back."

"If you wish, senor." With a resentful look over her shoulder, Maria climbed into the raft. There she stood and watched as the man climbed across to the boat and cast off. She watched as Pedro started the motor and the boat moved away.

Steering slowly through the floating debris Pedro looked at the man who had joined him. He was tall, tanned and well built, and pure Spanish ancestry from the lines of his face. His moustache had been trimmed with care and he was handsome enough to be a movie actor, Pedro thought with a twinge of envy.

The man had volunteered readily enough but he looked uneasy as he sat in the bow of the boat. Pedro opened the waterproof pocket of his coveralls and pulled out a package of chewing gum. Opened it and offered the man one.

"My name is Pedro," he said.

"Gracias, senor. I am Ramon." Edging carefully toward Pedro, hesitating every time the boat tipped a bit, Ramon took the stick of gum, then edged back to his seat. He looked at it a moment, then at Pedro.

"The gum is good senor," he said. "But a cigarette would be better, if you have any."

Pedro had taken a stick of gum for himself and was unwrapping it. He stopped and looked up, embarrassed.

"No, I don't smoke. I can get some though -- with the supplies."
Ramon shrugged and smiled. "Thank you, senor. I am used to cigarettes, and I'm not sure I want to give them up right now." He unwrapped the gum and put it into his mouth, then looked at Pedro curiously.

"I have heard that many Norteamericanos do not smoke," he said, "but I did not think you were a Norteameriano. I think perhaps you come from Costa Grande -- no?"

"I was born in Costa Grande, but I have lived in Canada for three years. And you?"

"Raised in Costa Grande, but I have worked in several countries. Before yesterday, I was chief foreman on the Agua Dulce plantation, up the river."

"I do not know the plantation -- I do not know San Cristobal."

"No. Well the Agua Dulce was not the biggest plantation, but it was big enough. We grew bananas and pineapples." Ramon looked at the debris that floated around the boat -- through which the boat plowed.

"Perhaps I should keep my eyes open -- our crop may be around here somewhere."

"You are a farmer?"

"Not exactly, senor. I worked on a farm -- yes -- but as a foreman. I worked with men, not with crops. I have also worked as a foreman on construction, once I was a logger and once I worked in a mine."

"You like the work?"
"Not much, senor. But if I must work I prefer to be a foreman. That way I watch other men work, and that is better than doing the work myself."

"But a foreman works too, does he not?"

"Perhaps, senor. I tell my men that but I think it is not quite true. A good foreman doesn't work at being a foreman. He is a good foreman because that is what he is.

"I see." Pedro looked up and saw that the plane was approaching. He picked the radio up and turned in on.

"-- dammit. Do you read me?"

"Sorry sir. I turned the radio off when I put it down, to save the battery."

"Leave the damned thing on! I'll send you all the batteries you want!

"Turn to the right a bit and slow down. You're getting into the drop zone."

"Right." Pedro turned the boat the right and closed the throttle as the plane circled.

I'm giving you another motorboat with a fresh tank of gas and another radio."

"Okay -- and I can use some cigarettes if you have them. Most of the people around here still smoke."
"We know that, and we have cigarettes coming in. I'll put my spare pack and a lighter in the canister with the radio, and bring you a couple of cartons tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me, just take care of things. There are two more people on a pile of junk about five kilometers east of you -- can that guy with you handle the boat?"

"I think so. Just a minute." Pedro lowered the radio and looked at Ramon.

"Can you run this boat?"

Ramon had relaxed as they spoke, but his tension returned and he looked pale now. He hesitated a few seconds before he answered the question.

"I think so, senor. I have used outboards." He looked nervously around at the trees that surrounded them.

"But never at sea, senor. I do not like the sea, and I might get lost. I cannot see the life-raft from here!"

"It's just over there." Pedro pointed back toward the tree.

"I know that, senor." Beads of perspiration formed on Ramon's upper lip below his moustache. "But it is so easy to get lost at sea!"

"You won't get lost. I'll leave you the radio, and the plane can guide you."

Ramon's face was set. Determined.
"It must be done," he said. "I will do it."

"Good." Pedro lifted the radio to his lips. "Sir?"

"Yes."

"He can run the boat."

"Okay. Let him haul the raft back and we'll lead you to the survivors."

"Will do, but he's worried about getting lost out here. I'll give him a radio -- will you guide him back?"

"Shit! We've got to guide you to the survivors!"

"Can't you do both?"

"We'll try. Does he speak English? My Spanish isn't so hot, you know!"

Pedro looked at Ramon and started to speak.

Ramon nodded. "I speak a little English, senor."

Pedro thumbed the radio again. "He does."

"Okay. Tell him to call if he gets in trouble. If you had that damned beacon going, he could use the direction finder. Do it when you get back."

"Yes sir."
"Drop run starting now -- ready? We're coming in low, to spot it."

"Ready." Pedro stopped the engine, then sat and watched as the Manitou swept in just a few meters off the water. It passed about fifty meters to the side and, as it passed, a yellow parachute blossomed out the drop door under the tail. Tied to the parachute, two yellow bundles were dragged from the plane. Their parachutes opened and they fell into the sea.

As the plane climbed away from them Pedro started the outboard motor and turned the boat toward the floating bundles.

A yellow plastic canister floated off to one side, tied to the smaller bundle by a length of yellow rope. Reaching over the side of the boat Pedro caught the rope and pulled the canister aboard. Unscrewing the top he pulled out a small red radio, like his own, a fresh pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He set the radio on the floor of the boat and handed the cigarettes and lighter to Ramon.

"Thank you, senor!" Hurriedly, Ramon stripped the cellophane from the package and tore the foil top. He spit his gum over the side of the boat, pulled a cigarette from the pack and lit it.

He relaxed, sucked on the cigarette, then tentatively offered the pack to Pedro, his eyebrows raised.

"You do not smoke, senor."

"No thanks."

"Then I will keep these, if I may." Ramon tucked the pack and the lighter into his shirt pocket.
"Do it, but you'll have to share them with the others when we get back to the tree." Turning, Pedro pulled the rope that still connected the canister to the smaller bundle. As the boat pulled alongside he reached out and pulled the ring that inflated the second boat.

The bundled raft was tied to the boat by about twenty feet of yellow rope. Pedro untied it from the second boat and tied it to a tow-ring at the stern of the first, then picked up the spare radio and showed it to Ramon.

"Can you use one of these?"

"I used a radio on the plantation, senor. That looks about the same."

"It is. If you can use any radio, you can use this one." He handed it over, then picked up his own radio and thumbed the switch.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I've given the spare radio to my friend here. His name's Ramon and if he has any trouble, he'll call you."

"Okay -- now let's go after those other survivors. We haven't got enough fuel to stay out here all day."

"Right sir." Pedro climbed into the new boat and started the motor. Lifted the radio again and thumbed the talk switch.

"Okay," he said. "Where are they?"
Three more survivors had found the raft by the time Ramon returned, and a half dozen people sat near it on the trunk of the tree. Maria sat with them until the boat came into sight, then she stood to watch it approach. She felt cold as she realized that Ramon was alone.

She elbowed people aside and slid down to the branch as the boat pulled alongside, and she pushed her way forward and knelt to catch the boat as it approached. She spoke as Ramon shut the engine off.

"Where is the senor?"

Ramon's face was tense as he looked at her, and his voice sounded higher, somehow.

"He is safe," he said. As he spoke Ramon half-stood, carefully balancing the boat with his hands on the branch.

"But where is he?"

"The plane dropped another boat, and he is using it to search for more people."

"Oh?"

"Yes, senorita. Now if you please -- this boat is not steady!"

Maria stepped back and, with exaggerated care, Ramon climbed carefully onto the branch. His tension seemed to ease as he stood, but he still did not look well.
"Water senor?" A woman leaned out the door of the raft, offering a can of water.

"Si." Ramon began to edge his way toward her, then stopped suddenly as she gently lobbed the can toward him. It was a near-perfect throw but Ramon grabbed desperately for it, and nearly missed.

Clutching the can with an apologetic smile he edged past the raft and up to the truck of the tree, then walked with firmer steps toward the root-ball.

Maria and the others watched him until one woman touched her arm and pointed. Ramon had not moored the boat when he landed, and now it and the bundled raft were drifting several meters away from the branch!

A young man jumped from the branch and just managed to grasp one of the ropes that surrounded the boat as he splashed into the water. He pulled himself aboard.

Several coils of light rope were held to the sides of the boat by tabs with snap fasteners. He un-snapped one and threw it to a man on the branch. The man missed his catch but the rope fell over the branch, and a woman caught it before it slipped into the sea. She handed it to the man, who used it to pull the boat in, as Maria watched.

"Tie it to the branch," she said, "and tie the raft too."

***

Maria was standing beside the moored raft when she heard the call. It came from the side and, turning, she saw two men and a
woman on another tree. They were only about thirty meters away from the raft by water, but much farther if they had to walk across the trees to reach it.

One man looked strong. The other man and the woman did not. At Maria's feet floated the boat Ramon had used.

She had been raised in a fishing village and she had seen people rowing boats all her life -- but boats were men's business and women in San Felipe did not use them.

Maria had tried once, in the basin of the boatyard just a few months ago. She had embroidered a new shirt for Giorgo -- the son of the boatyard owner and the man she was expected to marry -- and she wanted him to wear it to a dance that night so she brought it to him at the yard.

But Giorgo was working on a boat anchored near the middle of the basin and he could not hear her call from shore.

There was a small boat moored at the dock but no man about to take her out to the boat where Giorgo worked. Excited about the shirt Maria had climbed into the boat, untied it and pushed off.

One man noticed her when she was about half-way out, zig-zagging about the basin and making little progress. He called others to watch, and to laugh at her mistakes.

They shouted advice, most of it calculated to increase her problems.

Giorgo heard them. He came out on deck of the boat where he was working and saw Maria in the boat. Saw and heard the men on shore.
Maria's father would have praised her for trying, whether she succeeded or not, but Giorgo didn't. He was angry, and Maria was not sure whether he was angry because she had failed or because she had tried.

Giorgo never spoke of it afterward but that day he stood on the deck of the boat and shouted instructions to her. Shouted orders. Confusing orders.

She tried to obey but perhaps she tried too hard. If she were left alone she could do it, she thought, but the shouting frightened her. Giorgo's was worse than the other men's.

Finally Giorgo sent a seven-year-old boy in another boat to tow her back to the dock. He refused to allow her to come to the boat where he worked, and did not ask her why she had come.

She did not give him the embroidered shirt. Instead she took it home and buried it in the back of a drawer in her dresser. When he came that night to take her to the dance, she said she had a headache.

***

Now she looked at the boat tied to the branch. Looked around the tree where she stood and saw that no-one was watching her. Some of the others were inside the raft, the rest were on the trunk of the tree and no-one else had noticed the three people on the other tree.

Hesitant, she stepped into the boat and pulled the aluminum oars from under the seat. Found the rubber rings that would hold them on the gunwales.
But she had to guess how to fit the oars into the rings. She had to hold the oar right at the end, with most of it out over the water, and she almost dropped the first one before she got it in. Then she realized that the rings would turn, and that she could slide the oar in from inside the raft. The second one went in easily.

Now she untied the rope.

She dipped one oar into the water and pulled gently. The boat moved slightly. She pulled harder and the boat turned its stern to the tree. Looking over her shoulder she saw that it now pointed toward the three people who waited for her. She dipped both oars into the water and pulled.

And fell off the seat. One oar gripped the water but the other was turned sideways and did not resist. Flustered but unhurt Maria climbed back to the seat and saw that the boat now pointed away from the tree where the people waited.

Watching over her shoulder, she used one oar to turn the boat back.

She tried again with both oars -- gently this time, and making sure both blades caught the water. The boat moved ahead. Concentrating on her rowing, Maria watched the oars until the bow of the boat bumped into something and she slid backward off the seat again. She sprawled on the floor of the boat, then sat up and looked round.

She had reached the tree. A man wearing faded blue denim shirt and trousers, with a machete hung on a rope round his waist, knelt to hold the bow of the boat.
Maria recognized him as she climbed back to her seat. A fisherman from San Felipe -- she had seen him in her father's store. The husband of Carmine Ortega. Manuel? He was said to be a good man, even if he did sometimes drink too much. Carmine spoke well of him.

He smiled in recognition but he did not speak her name and may not have known it. He held the boat while the other man and the woman clambered in and stepped past her to sit on the back seat.

Maria knew the second man too, and she shrank away from him as he stepped past her. A schoolteacher from Rio Blanco who came to San Felipe on weekends, he was a pompous little man who wore fine clothes when there was no occasion for them. He had been born and raised in San Felipe and now he came back to strut about the village and ogle the young women.

Now the fisherman stepped into the boat and stood in front of Maria. He motioned her to move and she looked up at him. He smiled.

"You did well, muchacha, but there is no need now. I have used boats all my life and it is no work for me to row one."

Maria wanted to protest but she could not find the words. With a hand on her arm the fisherman helped her to her feet and pushed her gently toward the single seat at the bow. Sitting, he grasped the oars.

Maria looked at him. "Where is your boat?"

With the flick of an oar the fisherman spun the boat toward the life-raft. As it turned he nodded his head toward the center of the floating island.
"It's part of the island now. Even if I could get it out it would be of no use because the trees have crushed it. It still floats, but it is no longer a boat."

With powerful strokes of both oars he drove the inflatable across the gap, then turned his head to watch the approach to the floating tree. He dipped the oars into the water to stop the boat just before it hit.

He rose and stepped easily past Maria and onto the tree. Picked up the painter and flipped it over the stub of a small branch. Kneeling, he steadied the boat as Maria and the others got out.

Pedro's boat was nearing the tree now, and Pedro was watching them. Had he seen her trying to row the boat? Maria hoped not. She had succeeded, after a fashion, but she hoped the senor had not seen her mistakes. That would be worse than if the tall man with the moustache had been watching!

But Pedro watched the fisherman, not Maria. He watched him as Maria fetched cans of water for her passengers, and while she carried three cans to his boat as it landed. He watched the fisherman as she handed cans of water out to Pedro's two passengers. He barely flicked his eyes to her as she stepped into the boat with a can of water for him!

"Gracias, muchacha." Pedro climbed out of the boat and walked toward the fisherman who looked with interest at the rafts.

"You handle a boat well," Pedro said.

"Gracias, Senor, but it is nothing. I have worked in boats all my life." He held out his hand. "I call myself Manuel."
"Pedro accepted the hand and shook it. "I am Pedro. What work do you do?"

Manuel snapped the tab on his can of water as he spoke.

"I am a fisherman senor." He spoke with pride. "I had my own boat!"

"Do you know outboard motors?"

"I had one on my boat, Senor. It was not quite the same as yours" -- Manuel turned to look at the motor on the stern of the inflatable -- "but I think it is not very different."

He lifted the can to his lips and tipped it to drink as Pedro answered.

"All outboards are about the same. Come and look at this one."

Manuel lowered the can and followed as Pedro stepped into the boat. He sat on the stern seat to inspect the motor as Pedro watched, then he looked up.

"I could run this, Senor." He touched the controls. "Here is the rope for starting, here is the choke. This is the throttle and here is the gearshift. They are not quite the same as they are on my motor but they are the same controls." He lifted the can and drank again.

"Good," Pedro answered. "There is an airplane coming soon with supplies for us. It will drop them into the sea with parachutes and someone has to go out to pull them in. Will you help?"
"Seguro, Senor. I would be glad to help." Manuel drained the last of the water from his can and threw it into the sea. He glanced at the ropes that held the bundled raft to the branch.

"I could help now perhaps, senor." He pointed to the mooring. "That is not good -- it will not hold for long."

Pedro looked at it. "You're right," he said. Will you fix it?"

Maria blushed with shame as Manuel knelt to untie and re-tie the mooring. She blushed again as she realized that Pedro was looking at her.

"Ramon? have you see Ramon? The man who came with me before?"

Ramon! So that was the big man's name. But what did he want Ramon for? Maria turned and saw Ramon sitting in a cave-like hollow among the roots of the tree, staring at the sea. She pointed, then watched as Pedro walked away from her.

***

CHAPTER NINE

The huge tree on which they floated had been torn out by the roots and the root-ball that came with it was several meters in diameter. Root-balls, Ramon knew, had little cave-like hollows between the buttresses.

Franz had showed him a cave like that the first time he took Ramon out to the woods with him. Those caves were a place of
safety, Franz said, and safety was important to Ramon in those
days. Ever since, he had sought a cave among the roots of a tree
when he needed time to think.

Franz was Ramon's foster father, and the only father Ramon
remembered. He had found the boy on a beach just south of
Panagra where a friend had loaned him the use of an isolated
cabin for a week. Franz made an arrangement with a young lady
of doubtful reputation and a taxi had dropped them on the road
that passed about a kilometer from the cabin. As they walked to
the beach they saw the bow of a fishing boat that had been
wrecked and washed ashore.

The girl ran ahead for a closer look, and her screams brought
Franz.

Ten-year-old Ramon was the only survivor, and his survival
was in doubt. He was more dead than alive from sunburn, thirst,
exposure, a few cuts and -- mostly -- fear. Franz had had to pry
his hands from the stanchion to which he clung, and carry the
near-catatonic boy to the cabin.

They should have taken him to a hospital but the taxi would not
come back for a week and there would be no other traffic on the
road. Instead of the sensuous pleasures they planned, Franz and
his friend spent three days tending the little boy until he
regained consciousness, then two days restraining him until his
sanity returned. The last two days of their vacation both Franz
and the young lady became fond of Ramon, and Franz decided
to take him back to the camp where he worked.

Franz was a powderman -- an explosives expert -- and he
worked as a splitter for a big company logging the coastal
forests of Costa Grande. Many of the trees they cut were too big
to be loaded on a truck in one piece, and Franz' job was to split
them with carefully-placed charges of dynamite. There was no place to leave a boy in camp while he worked but Franz took Ramon into the woods every day and set him among the roots of a tree to watch the work.

He would be safe there, Franz said. Nothing could hurt him while he stayed between the roots.

At first the boy just watched but he wanted to help and soon Franz let him help cut the greasy sticks of dynamite into smaller charges. Later Ramon learned to insert the thin brass detonators and to spool out the wire and make connections.

He was sixteen years old and the assistant powderman when he made his first mistake. After one look at Franz' remains, Ramon ran and hid in a cave among the roots of a tree.

He came out three days later and wandered for three weeks before he stopped to work on a construction camp more than fifty kilometers away. That was fourteen years ago and Ramon had held a half dozen jobs since --- the last four of them as a foreman.

He was a good foreman, but considered moody by many of the men he worked for and those who worked for him. When he was confused, they learned, he would retire to a cave among the roots of a tree and sit, legs drawn up and arms wrapped around his knees, to consider the problem.

He was sitting like that, gazing out to sea, when Pedro approached.

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"Ramon!" Pedro said. "How are you?"
Ramon looked at him. "Well enough, I guess, senor." He glanced at the corpsman, then turned his eyes again to the sea.

"What's wrong?" Pedro squatted near the mouth of the cave. "You don't look happy, my friend!"

"I am not." Ramon looked at Pedro.

"I heard what the man in the plane said, senor. We are a long way from land, and drifting farther -- and they cannot send help to us."

"Cannot send it yet, my friend."

"And do not know how to send it later. They will try, but..." Ramon shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know, senor. I do not like this." He gazed out over the sea for a moment, then turned again to Pedro.

"And the man in the plane was angry with you. Why, senor?"

Pedro grinned. "I disobeyed orders when I jumped. He told me not to."

"But you jumped. With a parachute?" Ramon looked at Pedro with interest.

"I have heard of your rescue corps, senor. It is like an army, no?"

"Not quite -- we don't fight wars. But we're better equipped than most armies, and better trained."
"And you disobeyed orders. If you go back -- they will shoot you?"

Pedro grinned. "No, we don't shoot people in the Corps. Besides, I was right. I said there were people down here, and that we could help them."

"But you disobeyed orders."

"Yes -- but they will forget about that if I come back, and if I don't come back it doesn't matter.

Ramon considered this for a moment. Then -- "What is a beacon, senor?"

"A beacon is -- oh my god!" Pedro scrambled to his feet. Looked toward the raft then back to Ramon.

"A beacon is something I forgot!"

Turning, he ran to the raft and jumped aboard. Pushed people out of the way so he could reach a package tied to the side-wall. Maria followed and watched through the door as he opened the package and pulled out a red plastic box a bit bigger than a loaf of bread.

He opened the lid and pulled out a telescoping antenna that reached almost to the peak of the roof of the raft, then flicked switches and waited until a light on the control panel glowed green. Maria heard a burst of static as he turned a knob, then words she could not understand.

"Ramirez -- that you?"
Pedro unclipped the microphone from the side of the radio, held it to his mouth and pressed a switch before he spoke.

"It's me," he said. "Just got back to the raft."

"You took your time about it," the voice from the radio said. "Message center has been trying to reach you for half an hour. This is CRC 968, with some goodies for you."

"Is Johnston with you?"

"No, you're in luck this trip. I don't know whether he wants to bomb you or jump down there himself -- what did you do to him, anyway?"

"Punched him in the gut."

"Punched Johnston? My God! No wonder you had to jump! You don't plan on coming back, do you?"

"Sure do."

"Oh well. Nobody will believe it anyway. If you give him a week, Johnston won't believe it himself."

"Just get me back, then I'll worry about it."

"Seems to me I heard something about that at headquarters, but fortunately it's not my problem. We'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"Good, I'll be waiting. Pedro clipped the microphone to the side of the radio, then stood and thought for a moment before he turned toward the door of the raft where Maria waited."
"Muchacha?"

"Si senor?"

"Can you write, muchacha?"

"Si senor."

"Good. Would you do something for me?"

"Of course, senor."

There was a ball point pen and a small note-pad clipped inside the cover of the radio. Pedro pulled them free and handed them to her.

"We have to know who is here, muchacha. The names of the people here and the names of the towns where they used to live."

"Si senor." Hesitantly, Maria accepted the notebook and pen.

"That way, muchacha, we can send a message back to let people know who is safe. Other people are doing the same all over the country -- so people everywhere will know who is safe and who is not."

"Si senor." She held the book and pen protectively, in both hands.

"Will you do it?"

"Of course, senor. And when I am finished, senor, I will give the book back to you, no?"
"No, muchacha. Give it to Ramon. He knows how to use a radio and I will show him how to use this one."

He didn't notice the look she gave him as he stepped past her and onto the tree.

Ramon still sat in the hollow among the roots but he was watching the raft now. Pedro put his hands to his mouth like a megaphone and called.

"Ramon!"

"Si?" The foreman began to stand as he answered.

"Aquí, por favor!" Pedro beckoned with his hand as he spoke. Ramon trotted the length of the tree-trunk and stepped down onto the branch.

"Si senor?"

"I want you to run the radio, Ramon. The muchacha is getting the names and addresses of everyone here, for a message center my friends have set up on land. When she has the list complete, I want you to call it in for me."

"Si, senor."

"Come. I will show you the radio." Pedro stepped back into the raft, Ramon followed, and both knelt by the radio.

"This is simple to use." Pedro said. "You will have no trouble."

"Si senor." Ramon looked over the controls. "It will be no problem."
"That light means the beacon is on," Pedro said. It stays on all the time, now I've set it. The message center is on channel three -- here is the channel switch. When the muchacha has the list of names, you will call them in."

"Si, senor."

"And then," Pedro twisted a knob as he spoke. "You can listen to the regular broadcasts if you want. Turn this and the radio will receive regular commercial frequencies -- am, fm and short wave. I guess you'll want am or short wave out here."

"I see, senor. We need listen for only a few moments -- to save the batteries."

"No need. These," Pedro indicated the solar cells inside the lid, "make electricity from sunlight. We'll leave the radio open tomorrow and the sun will charge the batteries for us."

"I see, senor. Could we listen to it now?"

"Sure. Let's see if we can get the news." Pedro began to twist the dial but then the radio squawked.

"Guess we'll have to wait for that," he said. "That's my call signal -- it means someone is trying to get through on a communications frequency." He flipped the switch again and picked up the mike.

"Ramirez."

"CRC 968 here. Five minutes out."

"Right. We'll be waiting." Pedro put the mike down and looked at the people who crowded round the door of the raft.
Manuel, the fisherman, spoke. "You were talking on the radio, senor. Do we go now?"

Pedro stood and stepped out onto the branch. "We go," he said.

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He turned back to Ramon.

"Any questions?"

"No senor." Ramon still knelt by the radio, his hand resting on it. "You go ahead, senor. I will take care of things here."

"Right." Pedro stepped down the branch and stooped to untie the boat. He stepped aboard, then held it close to the tree and waved the fisherman into the stern.

"You run the motor," he said.

It started on Manuel's first pull of the rope. Pedro pushed off from the branch and Manuel rested one knee on the stern seat, reached down and put the motor into gear. Slowly, the boat pulled away from the tree.

"Where do we go, senor?" Manuel craned his neck as he spoke, looking for the best route through the floating debris.

Sitting sideways on the middle seat, leaning back against the side of the boat, Pedro waved his hand toward the south.

"Out there," he said. "About half a kilometer. We have to get out to some clear water, so the bundles don't get tangled in trees when they land."
"Si senor." Manuel grinned. "And we must get there without getting our propeller tangled in the trees!"

Pedro looked up at him. "Is that why you're going so slow?"

"Of course, senor. If I hit anything it may sink us or damage the motor. I am not used to rubber boats and I don't trust them."

"You're right to be cautious," Pedro said. "We could be bounced out if we hit something -- but don't worry about the boat -- it's stronger than the boats you're used to. The motor is safe too -- it's built for this sort of work."

Manuel glanced at the motor then looked again to see where he was going.

"Built for this, senor? Water like this is not good for an outboard -- for any motor. The propeller is so delicate!"

"Not this one, it's protected. We use these boats in flood areas, and there's a steel cage around the propeller."

Manuel glanced down at him, curiously, then turned his eyes back to the sea ahead.

"A cage, senor? The propeller will not hit things? Would not tangle if I ran over a rope?"

"No. You speak as though you've had experience with motors that were not protected."

"I do, senor. I ran over a floating rope one night, and I nearly lost my boat because of it!"
"Nearly lost your boat?" Pedro took a package of gum from the pocket of his T shirt and offered it to Manuel. The fisherman shook his head, and Pedro took a piece for himself. He unwrapped it and put it into his mouth, then looked curiously at the fisherman.

"The rope tangled in the propeller," Manuel said, "and that broke the gears. It was very expensive, and I had to borrow money to pay for it. Then I had bad luck fishing, and I had trouble paying the loan. I was afraid I was going to lose the boat."

He glanced back toward the island, then forward again.

"Now I have lost it, and it doesn't matter. Nothing matters very much now."

Pedro caught the glance and looked back himself. Then turned to Manuel again and spoke.

"Your boat is in there somewhere?"

"It is. It is lost. I am afraid my house is also lost, and my wife and my son." His voice remained calm.

"Your house -- it would have been on the coast?"

"In San Felipe, senor. It is a little village ...", Manuel paused, the corrected himself, "it was a little village near the mouth of the river."

"I know -- I saw it from the air. We dropped a field hospital near there."
"You saw San Felipe, senor?" With a catch in his voice Manuel leaned forward. "Was there much damage?"

"Very much, I'm afraid."

Manuel leaned back, hope gone from his face.

"My house was on low ground -- near a little creek. I thought it was a good place with the water nearby, but I don't suppose there's any chance it survived."

"No, I'm afraid not. Your family was in the house?"

"My wife and my son, senor. I am sure they must have been there. I can hope, but I know the hope is foolish, no?"

"Hope is never foolish."

"Perhaps not, senor. It is a hard thing to lose one's family."

"I know."

"You have lost a family, senor?"

"Yes. when I was six years old. An earthquake in Costa Grande. A landslide swept my father's house away. My parents and my sister were killed, and I was trapped for three days."

"That is sad, senor. And how were you rescued?"

"The Canadians."

He smiled at the memory. "I was a village boy of six years old, and I saw the bright red planes, the bright red uniforms. I
thought I was dead, and that the Canadians were devils come to get me! I've had dreams about it ever since."

"But they were not devils. And when you grew up you joined them, senor?"

"They were not, and I did."

"And now you are here. Nobody could have saved my Carmine and Manuelo, senor, but you can save some people here. It is enough."

Manuel scanned the water ahead. Pedro turned sideways on the seat, leaned back and rested his head on the soft gunwale.

Glimpsing something in the water Manuel cut the throttle and turned the boat slightly. A minute later he dipped his hand, scooped up a coconut and dropped it into the boat.

"That will be a good one, senor."

Pedro sat up. Looked at the coconut, then looked around as he spoke.

"Are there more of those around here?"

"Si, senor. Many of them. Sometimes we call them the fishermen's friends, because we may find them anywhere. I think there are many of them now, because of the flood. Look over there."

Pedro stood and looked while Manuel turned the boat to the south. Manuel scooped another coconut out of the sea and dropped it in the boat before Pedro realized there were a dozen or more floating around them.
"It takes practice to see them, senor. Do you want more?"

"All we can get." Pedro moved to the bow of the boat and sat by the right side. Manuel covered the left and they had half a dozen coconuts in the boat when the Manitou roared overhead, seeming to clear them by only a few meters.

"Hola!" Manuel ducked, then turned to watch as the plane passed on. The radio crackled.

"Hello the boat. How's the fishing?"

Pedro lifted the radio. "It was fine until you scared them off. Who are you -- the game warden?"

"No, the postman. Seriously -- were you getting anything there?"

"Coconuts. The sea is almost covered with them."

"Sounds good." The plane had climbed a few hundred meters as it pulled away from them, and now it circled over the island. "You have a bit of a wind down there now, have you?"

"A bit," Pedro agreed.

"And it's blowing toward the island?"

"Yes. You going to drop a streamer?"

"No, we don't need it for a low-level drop. There's a clear spot about fifty meters to the west of you -- just the other side of that floating tree. We'll put it there."
"Okay." Pedro lowered the radio and turned to Manuel.

"They're coming in the other side of that tree," he pointed. "We might as well get around it, so we can watch."

"Seguro, senor." Manuel shifted into gear and twisted the throttle. The boat lifted slightly and plowed ahead.

The plane came back low over the water and the drifting debris. As it passed about a hundred meters from the boat a yellow drag chute popped out of the open back door pulling a string of three yellow bundles -- each one nearly as big as the boat. Parachutes blossomed as they left the plane and, seconds later, they splashed into the sea as the plane began to climb.

The boat was past the end of the tree when the bundles splashed down Pedro and Manuel watched as, one by one, three of the four parachutes collapsed.

But the drag chute retained its canopy. It bellied out in the breeze, dipping one edge in the water but still up and pulling the string toward the island.

Manuel looked at Pedro. Pedro lifted the radio to his mouth again.

"Hello the plane. Is that it?"

"That's it. Better get them back quick -- there might be some weather coming."

"We know, thanks." Pedro clipped the radio back on his belt as Manuel steered the boat toward the floating bundles and opened the throttle slightly.
"We'll have to get that parachute first." Pedro pointed to the one that had not collapsed.

"Si Senor." Manuel had already turned the boat toward it. Now he opened the throttle farther and the boat lifted, half planing and weaving slightly as Manuel steered around bits of floating wreckage.

In minutes they arrived at the first bundle and Manuel throttled back and pulled the boat close so Pedro could reach to release the steel clip that held the drag-chute. But Pedro didn't release the clip -- instead he reached up and grabbed the rope with one hand, then held it while he motioned Manuel to turn toward the chute.

"If we let it go," Pedro explained, "we'll never see it again -- and we can use the cloth."

The chute settled into the water at Pedro's pull and in a moment he had bundled it into a dripping mass that he pulled into the boat. Now Manuel turned back toward the bundle and moved close so Pedro could release the clip. Then he maneuvered so Pedro could release the clips that held the main parachute to the bundle.

It took about a half hour to remove and recover the four parachutes and to fasten tow lines to the bundles. The sun was beginning to set as the boat, like a tug with a tow of barges, began the slow trip back to the group that waited on the tree.

***

Maria was moving the spare radio, the water and the food from the second raft into the first. Ramon and two other men were
helping but one young man sat on the edge of the raft and watched.

Maria knew him from the village. He was called Pablo, she recalled, and he worked as a helper on one of the big fishing boats.

She laid the bag of water cans she had been carrying with the others, along the edge of the raft away from the branch, then glared at him.

"You might help, Pablo!"

"But why, move them senorita?" Pablo remained where he sat on the edge of the raft. "They are better the way they were," he said. "Spread about, with some on each raft."

"No they're not. The senor left me in charge of all the food and the water, and I want it stacked where I can see it."

"But it is wrong. If they are all in one place they will pull the raft off balance! It is dangerous!"

"No matter. The raft is tied to the branch. You saw what happened this morning, when it started to tip over?"

"I was not here this morning, senorita."

"Well we found out then that it will not tip. Not if all the weight is on one side. So there is no reason to worry -- and it is better this way."

"It is not safe, senorita. I work in boats and I know about these things."
"The boy is right, muchacha."

Maria turned. It was the schoolteacher with the fine clothes who had spoken. She had not noticed him sitting there in the shadow.

"Quiet!" Ramon's voice boomed from the side. Startled, the three of them turned. He stood at the door of the raft with a bag of water in his hands.

"The senorita is in charge of the food and water and it will be stored where she wants it stored!

He glared at Pablo.

"You will stop talking about it and help with the work! Here -- take this bag!"

"But senor..."

"Quiet, I said. Stop talking and help. Take this bag!"

"Si senor." Cowed, Pablo stood. Walked to the doorway and took the bag Ramon handed him.

"And you." The foreman turned to the little man with a sneer.

"A city man! I bet you can't work, but at least you can stay out of the way!

"When it's time for you to speak, someone will tell you what to say!"

***
Peter Steiger was watching TV when his phone rang. He used his remote to mute the sound before he picked up the receiver.

"Collect call from Mr. Bill Forsay in Portland. Will you accept the charge?"

"Sure. Put him on."

"Thank you. Go ahead please."

"Pete?"

"Bill?"

"I got hold of Alex Foster, and I got the name you were looking for."

"Great!" Steiger pulled a pencil from his pocket and found an envelope on the table beside him. "Shoot."

"His name's Clive Jonas and he's in Vancouver, Canada. His company is Jonas Recovery."

"Great! Got a phone number?"

"No, but Alex says you don't need one. It's a big company and he's easy to find. It's easy to reach Jonas too -- he's a big shot but he takes every call that comes in. Just ask for him and you'll get through any time of the day or night.

"Great. I'll do that."

"Got something for him?"

"I think so. Something big."
"Care to let an old buddy in on the secret?"

"Okay -- but don't talk it up too much. You know that flood in San Cristobal?"

"Don't I! The papers are full of it."

"Well, the sea's full of it too. There's a fortune in logs floating off the coast down there."

"Sounds good. How do you know about them?"

"Saw them in satellite pictures. You say this guy takes calls day or night?"

"Twenty four hours a day, Alex says."

"Okay, I'll try him now then. Thanks for the help, Bill."

"You're welcome. Just remember me when you're rich and famous."

"I'll do that. G'bye."

"Bye."

***

CHAPTER 10

Dark fell as Pedro and Manuel worked the boat and the bundles slowly through the scattered debris. Pedro used his portable radio to keep the boat heading toward the radio beacon that
pulsed aboard the unseen raft. Manuel used a flashlight to help pick a route around the drifting trees.

The wind was picking up now and Manuel found he had to compensate for it with his steering. The mass of logs suppressed the swells but the slap of wavelets against the bow of the boat was clearly audible over the drone of the motor. Some of the trees were drifting as fast as the boat with its tow of bundles.

***

In the rafts Maria had handed out food bars and cans of water for supper nearly a half-hour before. After dinner Ramon had shared the last of the cigarettes with the men and the two women who smoked, and had used the radio to send Maria's list of names and addresses to the message center.

Then he switched it to receive news broadcasts from Hidalgo and most of the people were now crowded into the raft, or at the doorway of the other, listening. Maria sat to one side with her feet drawn up, her arms wrapped about her knees and her chin resting on her arms. While the others listened to the radio she listened to the grumbling of the trees as they rubbed and bumped together.

She tried to visualize Pedro in his red shorts and T shirt, in the boat somewhere out there in the darkness. The fisherman had been running the outboard motor when they went out but surely the senor would be running it now. He would be half-kneeling on the stern seat as he had when he had brought her here.

She had seen the big plane circle overhead and swoop low to drop the bundles. She remembered the way the senor had stood in the back of the boat and held his parachute to guide the plane
before, and she wondered if he had done the same this time. She could have seen him, she thought, except for the floating trees.

But the plane had come and gone hours ago. The senor and the fisherman would have tied the bundles to the back of the motorboat -- as he had tied the raft that first time -- and would be on their way back now. Maria remembered that the boat had been slow with the bundled raft in tow -- it would be very slow towing many bundles. That must by why he had not yet returned.

Still -- there was a wind now, and there had been only a light breeze in the morning. It was cold, and the senor had not taken his coveralls with him. He had left them with his red bag in the raft. Maria had taken personal charge of them and she sat now with them beside her. He must be cold without them, she thought.

***

Above the sound of the trees and the waves she heard a scrubbing sound, as though something were rubbing against the side of the raft.

What was it? The senor would know.

Maria sat up and listened, and now she noticed that the motion of the raft had changed. It had been rocking gently and bumping against the branch on one side. Now there was less motion now, but it felt as though the raft were bumping into something else, beside the branch. There was a strange sound -- almost like a pop -- and she realized that one of the tubes against which she leaned felt soft. She whispered toward the group that clustered about the radio.
"Ramon?"

He did not answer. The radio was louder than her voice.

"Ramon?" She spoke louder. And again, "Ramon?"

"Si senorita?" Ramon raised his head and looked at her. He stood and stepped carefully through the crowd that surrounded the radio, then knelt beside her.

"Ramon -- there is something wrong!"

"There is nothing to fear, senorita." Gently, Ramon laid a hand on her arm as he spoke.

"Yes there is!" She took his hand and pressed it against the tube that felt soft. As she moved she heard another pop, and felt another tube begin to soften.

Ramon squeezed one tube, then another. Maria couldn't see his face but she heard him catch his breath.

"Quickly, senorita!" He stood and pulled her arm. "The raft is sinking!"

He half dragged her to the door and lifted her out onto the branch. Then he turned and called to the group gathered around the radio.

"Get up! Go to the other raft -- go to the tree! This one is sinking!"
There was a moment of silence, of disbelief. Then a man leaning against the sidewall realized that it was no longer as hard as it had been.

He jumped to his feet, swayed a moment then stumbled over people as he ran to the door. Others scrambled, some to the other raft, some to the tree. Two more tubes popped and the floor of the raft began to sag at the outer edge, where the bags of canned water were piled.

A woman scrambled past Ramon to the low side of the raft.

"The water! Save the water!"

She picked up one bag and tried to carry it to the high side of the raft but she fell as the floor sagged under the piled supplies. Then she slid back, still trying to throw the bag of water to the high side of the raft.

There was a babble of voices in the raft now and Ramon had to shout to make himself heard.

"Senora! Forget the water. Get out of there!"

"I can't." The floor sagged farther under the weight of more than a dozen bags of canned water. The supplies were out of sight and the woman was waist-deep and sinking into the floor.

Then the battery-powered lantern fell and rolled into the hole with the woman. It still shone, casting some light and strange shadows on the roof, but the inside of the raft was dark now. Flashes of light lit the woman's face from below and Ramon heard feet and hands slipping on the rubberized fabric as she tried to climb out of the trap.
He moved to help her and bumped his head on something hard.

But there should be nothing there to bump his head on! Ramon felt for the rubberized canvas of the roof and found it pulled taut.

Felt something hard and sharp that pressed from the outside. Beside it was something else, also hard and sharp.

The sounds of panic were louder now, and the roof of the raft was sagging. Ramon dropped to his knees and felt the floor with his hands. He crept toward the bags of water that were dragging one side of the raft down.

A hand touched his forearm and clutched desperately. Fingernails gouged his skin and slipped off.

The roof was pressing down on him now but Ramon crawled forward, feeling ahead and below with one hand. He could sense the woman's struggles, transmitted by the fabric of the raft, but he could not reach her.

Fumbling, squeezed by fabric above and below, he unbuckled his belt and slid it out of his pants. Buckled it again in a loop and pushed it into the hole ahead of him.

"Find the belt senora. Hang on to it!"

He felt tension on the belt, then heard the woman's voice. "Yo lo tengo." I have it.

"Hang on!" Ramon pulled and felt resistance. He pulled harder and felt movement as the woman began to slide toward him.
"Gracias." The woman's voice. She was helping him now so she must have room to move. Ramon rose to his knees and backed toward the high side of the raft. Something hit his feet from behind and slid past him to settle into the pocket from which he was pulling the woman.

He felt the wall of the raft behind him, and pressure as the floor sank below water level. He fumbled with one hand and finally found the door. His hand reached fresh air and the edge of rubberized fabric as he pulled the woman up beside him.

Most of the raft was under water now, but it was still supported by bubbles of air caught under the roof and by the ropes that tied it to the branch.

"Hang on, senora!" Ramon guided the woman's arms around his neck. With both hands he grabbed the edge of the door and pulled.

He breathed fresh air as his head passed through the door and he could see the dim shapes of men on the branch. The other raft still floated beside them.

"Help me here. Take this woman." Ramon hooked one leg over the collapsed edge of the raft and placed his hands on the woman's waist. He lifted her to a man on the branch who bent to take the arms she held out to him.

Ramon let go as the other man lifted the woman to the branch and set her down. The man turned back to Ramon.

"And you?"
"Please." Ramon stretched his arm up and felt his hand grasped by two others. He felt them pull, and pulled himself until he could lift his feet to the branch.

There was enough light outside to show the silhouette of another huge tree pressing against the rafts. Sharp ends of broken branches must have punctured the first raft and more branches pressed against the other one. Over the confused babble of voices Ramon heard the pop as the first tube was punctured.

A dozen people were talking, but Ramon's voice drowned them out. He stood, made a funnel of his hands and placed it to his lips.

"Hola!" His voice roared. "The raft will sink! You must climb onto the tree! Get out of the raft! Get up on the tree!"

*||**

In a tent at the CRC base near San Felipe, radio-man Giles Plessy sat with his chair tilted back, his feet on a desk and a magazine in his lap. Plessy liked the night watch because it gave him time to read and because nothing happened, most nights.

When the beep sounded he raised his eyes to the instrument panel in front of him and saw one light blinking red.

He leaned forward and keyed his microphone.

"San Felipe, calling any CRC aircraft. Any CRC aircraft, San Felipe."

A few seconds later the speaker above him crackled into life.
"This is CRC 328, San Felipe. CRC 328."

Plessy keyed the microphone again.

"Where are you, 328?"

"328 is inbound to Hidalgo from Key West, San Felipe. We are at 6,000 meters, about to descend."

"Thank you, 328. Can you check a reading for me? Beacon CRC 0987. Should be --," Plessy paused a moment to check the map posted beside him -- "should be bearing about 250 or 260 degrees from Hidalgo."

A few seconds of silence, then the speaker came to life again.

"Negative, San Felipe. Negative. We get no reading from that beacon. Where is it?"

"Should be 150 or 200 kilometers out to sea now."

"That the guy that punched his centurion and jumped on the trees?"

"That's him."

"Still no reading, San Felipe. Radar shows some storm activity about 100 kilometers off the coast. Can't see from here how far it extends -- but it looks like a series of small squalls."

"Thank you, CRC 328. San Felipe, out."

Plessy ignored the aircraft's sign-off. He glanced at his watch and made an entry in his log.
Then he spun his chair to face a keyboard and tapped out a message to CRC group command. It would be transmitted automatically to a printer in the message center at Hidalgo, and passed on next morning to whoever had ordered the beacon monitored.

***

Pedro and Manuel were just a few hundred meters from the tree but they were making slow progress. The wind had blown the bundles sideways into the branches of a large tree and they had lost more than half an hour hacking them free with machetes. Now, sweeping the light back and forth, Pedro saw that they were surrounded by drifting trees.

"Where are we -- do you know?" He turned to Manuel who sat at the back of the boat beside the silent motor, one hand holding the end of a branch.

"Lost, I think." Manuel was silent a moment, then he pointed.

"The rafts should be over that way -- but it would be dangerous to move now and we may never find them in the dark. Perhaps tomorrow."

"We might find them tonight."

"And we might not. I am afraid to use this boat here at night, senor. The trees are moving and some of those branches are sharp. If we should bump into one of them... "

Pedro shone the light to the side. It caught the white end of a broken branch pointing like a spear at the side of the boat.
"You're right," he said. "Let's tie up for the night. I'll call Ramon and tell him we'll be there in the morning."

"Seguro, senor." Manuel caught a branch and pulled the boat in a bit closer to the tree. He reached to tie it up.

Then they heard the roar of Ramon's voice and the rising sounds of panic.

Pedro stood to listen. Manuel looked up, then finished mooring the boat.

Pedro thumbed the talk switch of his radio and lifted it to his lips.

"Ramon? Hola, Ramon?" He released the talk switch and listened. Nothing.

"Something is wrong, senor." Manuel dropped the rope and stood. "We should get back there!"

"We will. Pedro flipped the switch of his radio to direction finding and swung it back and forth, looking for the signal from the beacon. There was none.

***

The drifting tree bore down on the second raft now, and people scrambled to safety in the dark. Ramon heard a pop as the raft was punctured, and the hiss of escaping air.

He was standing by the doorway of the sinking raft, reaching into it with his looped belt to help people out, when Maria grabbed his arm.
"The boats, senor! The boats! We can still save them!"

He looked at her a moment.

"The boats!"

"Yes!" Leaving the raft Ramon felt his way along the branch on hands and knees, Maria at his heels, as he felt for the ropes that tied the boats. He found the one that held the inflatable motorboat and pulled.

But the boat didn't move. Peering through the dim light, Ramon could see the branch that held it in place.

"Too late, senorita. The boat is stuck."

"The other one senor. The wooden boat!"

Ramon moved farther down the branch until he felt another rope, and pulled again.

A branch bore down on the wooden boat too, but had not snagged it. Slowly, as Ramon pulled, the boat moved toward him until he could grasp the gunwale.

"Help me, senorita!" Struggling to keep his balance, Ramon tried to drag the boat out of the water and slide it over the branch. Gasping, he held it until Maria grabbed the other gunwale and added her weight to his own.

They strained as the boat slid up onto the branch. Then it passed the balance point and began to slide into the water on the other side.
But the mooring rope was not long enough to allow it to slide over the branch. As the rope came taut the boat swung sideways and pushed Maria into the water. She let go the gunwale, sank beneath the surface and came up spluttering between the boat and the branch.

"My hand, senorita!" Ramon dropped face down on the branch and reached his hand toward her. She grasped it and held on while he pulled her to the branch and she helped as he lifted her onto it.

Then she sat sideways on the branch, legs trailing in the water, and coughed. Ramon knelt beside her a moment, then stood and offered her his hand again.

"Come, senorita. We will join the others."

The others had climbed to the trunk of the tree and now they clustered about the base of the branch and looked down at the dim yellow smudges that were the remains of the rafts, now completely submerged. There were tears in Maria's eyes as she joined them.

"All our food was there," she said. "All our water."

"The radio was there," Ramon said. "The beacon!"

Maria turned to him. "Now," she said, "You must call Senor Pedro."

"Yes," he said. "I will call." He reached to his waist where the radio had been clipped beside his machete. Reached for the radio and found nothing. Felt for his machete and found nothing.
Then he looked at the folded belt in his other hand, and turned to Maria.

"The small radio is also down there, senorita," he said.

***

The babble of voices in the night was lower now. Manuel stood again in the bow of the boat and shouted.

"Hola? Aye hombres?"

"Hola! Aqui!" The answering shout was Ramon's.

"Donde estas?" Where are you?

"Over here." The voice came from the other side of the tree to which Pedro had moored the boat. Manuel felt for the branches he knew were there and climbed to the trunk.

"Where?"

"Over here!"

"I can't see. Have you a light?"

"No. Have you?"

"Momentito." Manuel began to climb down, then stopped as he felt the hand on his ankle. Pedro held the flashlight up to him. He took it and climbed back onto the tree. With the light he found a vertical branch off to the side, then climbed a couple of meters up it and locked his leg into a crotch. He switched the light on again and shone it at the branches above him as he shouted.
"Here is the light. Can you see it?"

Standing on the tree and craning his neck, Ramon searched for the light. Most of the other men looked too.

"There it is! Off to the right!" A voice from near the end of the tree. Ramon turned to the right where a pale glimmer of light shone in the distance, behind at least one other tree. It was perhaps a hundred meters away.

Hands funneled to his mouth, he shouted. "We see you now. About 100 meters."

"Can you show a light?"

"No. We have none."

"What happened?"

"The rafts sank."

"How?"

"Trees drifted in. They poked holes in them."

"Was anybody hurt?"

"No. I don't think so. But we lost the radio. And the food and the water."

Pedro had climbed out of the boat and now he stood on the tree-trunk at Manuel's feet. Looking down, Manuel could see him dimly in the light reflected from the branch above.
"You hear him?"

"I hear him."

"What now?"

"I don't know."

Ramon's voice boomed out again, over the floating trees.

"Senor Pedro. Are you there?"

Pedro cupped his hands to his mouth to answer.

"I am here."

"Can you come to us?"

"Perhaps." Pedro looked into the gloom, then shouted again.

"No. We cannot see well enough."

"Shall I come to you?"

"No. It's too dangerous. I do not think you would find us."

"What shall we do?"

"Are you safe there?"

Ramon looked around in the dim light at the people huddled on the tree, then shouted again.

"I think so. We are not comfortable, but we are safe."
"Can you spend the night there?"

"I guess we have to!"

Maria stood beside Ramon. She cupped her hands to her mouth.

"Senor Pedro! We lost the water."

"I know."

"And the food."

"Yes."

"I am sorry."

"That's all right. You can last the night without water, can't you?"

"Yes."

"We have water here. We'll see you in the morning."

"I hope so. Good-night, senor."

"Good-night, muchacha."

Pedro looked up at Manuel, still braced in the crotch of the tree.

"You might as well come down, my friend. We'll be all right here for the night. I'll take that light, if you want." He reached for it.

***
On the tree Ramon sat down. In a minute he felt a gentle hand on his arm and turned to see a woman sitting beside him.

"I am called Juana, senor," she said. "I want to thank you for pulling me out of there -- I think you saved my life!"

She was not young but she was not an old woman. About his own age, Ramon thought. She was thin, but she looked strong. A woman who had lived. She sat close, inviting contact but not quite touching him.

He reached his arm around her and she melted toward him.

***

Maria sat with her heels drawn up, her hands clasped about her ankles and her chin resting on her knees. She looked out over the sea where she had seen the senor's flashlight.

Muchacha! Little girl! The others -- even Ramon -- called her senorita. When would he learn?

She glanced to the side where Ramon and the woman he had rescued sat together. His arm was around her and her head rested on his shoulder. Maria shivered in her wet clothes, but she had no one to comfort her.

The movement of the trees bothered her too. The wind was still rising and the tree on which she sat was rocking like a boat. The whole island was moving, and the night was loud with the thuds of huge trees bumping together and the crack of branches breaking.

She was cold and wet all night, but not cold enough or wet enough to accept the suit-coat the little schoolteacher offered
her. She was lonesome, but not lonesome enough to appreciate the way he sat beside her and talked to her.

As she watched Ramon and the woman he had pulled from the raft she thought of looking for the fisher-boy -- Pablo -- then dismissed the idea.

***

It was past midnight when Manuel awoke and wondered at the sound -- almost like a puppy whimpering. No -- it was a man. The senor, having some kind of a bad dream.

Something to do with his mother. Among the whimpers Manuel heard the word "madre." Listening, he heard a phrase -- "I cannot help you, mother."

Above, the sky was dark. To one side was a slight glow where the moon shone above clouds.

Manuel pushed aside the parachute that covered him as he slept and sat up. Bumped his head against something as he came erect.

With his hand he felt the branch of a tree. Looking around he saw other branches -- some of them sharp, like spears -- closing in on the boat.

"Senor!" Urgently, Manuel shook Pedro's shoulder.

"Huh?" Pedro stirred.

"Senor!" Manuel shook the shoulder again.

"Huh? What?"
"Turn on the light, senor. There is a tree drifting in on us. We must move the boat or it will sink!"

Pedro sat up suddenly and bumped his head. Cursed. Found the light and turned it on. Then he saw the branch that pushed the boat against the tree to which it had been moored.

"Too late, senor." Manuel was pushing the branch now, trying to get the boat out from under. It would not move.

Pedro added his weight to Manuel's but the boat still would not move. Even as they watched, one air tube burst under increasing pressure.

"The boat is lost, senor." Manuel climbed to the tree as he spoke. "We must save what we can!"

Manuel stood on the branch, while Pedro dismounted the motor and passed it to him. Two more tubes burst as he passed the supplies and the equipment to safety. He was about to pass the radio when the last tube burst and he, and the radio, sank into the sea.

***

CHAPTER 11

Johnston was at breakfast in the mess at Hidalgo when Martin's call came through. He carried his coffee to the mess office, settled himself at the desk and picked up the field phone.

"Johnston here."

"Martin here. I've found a way to get your boy back."
"Pedro?" Johnston leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. "That's great, sir. How?"

"There's a Japanese freighter -- the Honshu Maru -- about 600 kilometers north of him. She's heading for Manzanillo but she will divert for a pickup.

"She won't be able to get right to them but we think she should be able to get within about fifteen kilometers, from the north. He's on the south side of those trees, isn't he?"

"Yes sir."

"Okay. Drop him enough boats and fuel to take everyone, and get him started to meet the ship.

"I don't know whether he'll want to go through the trees or around them -- you might want to scout a route while you're out there.

"Just make sure he gets there on time. The Japs will be off the north side of the island late tomorrow afternoon, and we can't ask them to hang around for long. If he's not there at least three hours before sundown they'll be stuck all night, because they can't move through that stuff in the dark."

"Right sir -- I'll make sure he's there. What about communications?"

"I don't have the ship's frequencies but you can get in touch with them from the plane. Tell them Pedro's frequencies and get theirs for him. They can set a beacon for him to home on."

"Right sir, I'll do that." Johnston glanced at his watch.
"There's a plane going out there in about an hour. I'll get the extra boats loaded on it now."

"Okay -- and send that son-of-a-bitch in to see me when you get him back. If he's bringing survivors in with him I can't put him on charge, but I can rake him over the coals a bit!"

"Will do sir, but I can guarantee he'll be well singed before you see him. I've got a few things to say to him myself!"

Johnston disconnected, then dialed quartermaster central. With the two boats he had dropped already, he figured three more and a couple of drums of fuel would be enough. He would stop at San Felipe and pick up some corpsmen from Pedro's own decade to handle the drop.

***

Pedro clung to a branch that cracked and swayed under his weight nearly ten meters above the boat. From here he could see people on the other tree -- about 100 meters away -- but he could also see that there was no way to float the bundles over to it.

Looking in other directions he could also see how floating trees had moved in during the night to surround them and cut them off from the open sea. The bundles below him were undamaged, but they were trapped in a closed space between two trees.

He pulled a fluorescent red bandana from his pocket, waved it and shouted.

"Ramon! Can you see this?"
"The red, senor? I see it."

Clinging to the branch with his knees, Pedro tied the bandana to a twig.

"See it now?"

"I can see it, senor."

"Okay. Have you got something you can put up? Something bright-colored?"

"One moment, senor."

Ramon had climbed a few meters up the tall vertical branch that stood alone below the crown of the tree. Now he locked his legs around it and looked down at the people below.

"I need some bright cloth" he said. Something for a flag..."

One of the men untied a polka-dotted red bandana from his neck and climbed the branch until he could pass it to Ramon.

"Gracias!" Ramon leaned down to reach it, then waved it above his head.

"Can you see this, senor?"

The bandana was barely visible against the dirty green and black of the trees behind it, but Pedro saw it. He waved.

"I can see it. Tie it there."

"I will, senor."
"And stay there, Ramon. We will come to you."

"We will be here, senor. The rafts have not sunk all the way -- they are still tied to the tree. I think we can still save the water and the food."

"Good. We have the bundles here anyway. We will be there soon."

Locking his legs around the branch, Pedro lined up the sights of his wrist-compass on the bandana. He took a reading, then slid down the branch. Manuel waited below.

"What now, senor. Can we reach them?"

"We will have to. They need water soon."

Holding a branch with one hand Pedro reached out, caught a corner of one of the bundles and pulled it toward him.

With his knife he slit the plastic cover and pulled out a small carton, then another like it. He passed them both to Manuel, on the tree trunk.

"Water, senor?" Manuel put the cartons down as Pedro stepped back to the tree.

"Water." Pedro tore loose a piece of one of the parachutes and knelt to tie it into a bag around the two cartons.

"You will carry it over to the other tree, senor? I will help you."

Pedro paused and looked at Manuel.
"How well do you swim?"

"Swim, senor? I swim well -- but you will not swim here."

"Swim, climb, everything. It would take all day to get over there on the trees -- and then we'd probably get wet anyway."

"But you must not swim, senor."

"Why not?"

"Because of the sharks." Manuel gestured at the sea around them. "Whenever there is stuff floating on the sea like this, senor, the sharks gather.

"And there were animals and people drowned in the flood -- they must have been swept out to sea too, and they will be floating among the trees.

"I think most of the sharks in the sea must be under us now, and they will hear you if you try to swim!"

"I was swimming yesterday."

"And you were lucky, senor. But that was yesterday -- when there were few sharks here. Now they have had a day and a night to gather, and there will be many of them!"

***

The plane was approaching San Felipe when Plessy's message was finally passed on. The radioman brought a print-out back to Johnston, and stepped back quickly as the centurion jumped to his feet.
"Where did you get this?"

"It was just passed on, sir." The radioman glanced again at the message, reading the top line upside down as Johnston held it.

"It was sent about ten o'clock last night, our time. It would have been received last night at headquarters and --- "

"Never mind that. C'mon."

Johnston strode toward the flight deck. He paused at the door to look back at the radioman who stood and stared.

"Come here, dammit!"

"Yes sir!" The radioman ran to the front of the plane and through the door to his equipment. The Centurion followed.

"Sit down," Johnston said. Can you read this beacon?" He looked at the message again. "0987."

"One of ours, sir?"

"It's not Peter Pan's."

"Yes sir." The radioman turned to his equipment, closed a switch. Spun a dial, paused, then spun the dial again.

"Can't find it sir."

"Should you be able to get it from here?"

"Is that Ramirez, sir?"

"Yes."
"Then it should be less than 200 kilometers away now. We could read it easy if it was working."

"So it's not working."

"I would say not, sir."

"He's got another raft out there. Can you find it?"

The radioman snapped switches and watched lights flicker.

"Scanning all our raft frequencies sir. No beacons."

"Try the hand-sets. He has a couple of those. Could you get them from here?"

"We might, sir -- it depends. Normal range is about fifty kilometers but we can do better from the air. Sometimes a lot better." The radioman spun dials and snapped switches. Lights flickered and numbers flashed on the screen in front of him. He watched for a couple of minutes.

"Hand sets in use all over the place sir, but none at sea."

Suddenly he reached out to slap a switch. The computerized display stopped, backed up, then stopped again. He touched another switch and another set of numbers appeared on the screen.

"No -- that's not it. It's in the right direction but it's not far enough. Either on the beach or just offshore." The radioman turned in his seat and looked up at Johnston.
"He might be using a hand set sir, but we can't find him from here if he is."

"Right." Slowly, Johnston walked back to his seat and sat down. Lit a cigarette, leaned back and closed his eyes.

***

Ramon and several other men pulled the sunken raft toward them with the rope that still tied it to the branch. Most of it was still near the surface but it was snagged on an underwater branch and it would come no closer.

"It's caught on something." Ramon peered into the water. "I see it -- it's on that branch there!" He pointed, then turned to the man beside him.

"Can you swim?"

"Si, senor."

"Well enough to go in and free that raft?"

The man looked. Shrugged. "Si, senor."

"Do it then." Ramon and the others watched as the man stripped and dived into the water.

***

Pablo had crossed to the tree that had drifted in on them and was now several meters above water level, creeping out to the branch that had punctured the motorboat. The boat was held in place by the branch and by the mooring rope, and he might be able to reach it.
He looked toward the others when he heard the splash, then shouted.

"Senor -- no!"

Ramon shot him an irritated look. "No what, boy?"

"Do not let anyone go in the water senor!"

"Why not? He can swim." Ramon turned back to watch the swimmer.

"Sharks, senor! There are sharks here!" Pablo crawled backwards now, back toward the trunk of the tree. He broke off a small branch and carried it with him.

Ramon paled, hesitated, then appeared to gain control of himself. He spoke with a deliberate sneer.

"Sharks? People swim in the sea all the time, boy. They don't all get eaten by sharks!"

"But there are sharks here, senor." Pablo was still above the water, looking down into it. He screamed.

"There! Look!"

"Quiet boy, we're working here." Ramon turned back to the swimmer.

He was over the raft now and, as Ramon watched, he dived and began to pull it clear of the snag. A red box floated to the surface as he worked. Ramon and the others could see him clearly against the yellow fabric.
They saw the shark too, as it passed over the raft and nosed the man's thigh.

He turned, saw it and swam frantically for the branch. The shark grabbed his leg just below the knee and the man thrashed about as he was pulled beneath the surface. Bubbles burst from his mouth as he tried to scream.

Then the lower half of his leg came off and the shark swam away with it -- but another was approaching with its mouth open as he broke the surface.

In panic he grabbed the box that floated beside him and thrust it into the shark's mouth. The jaws closed with an audible crunch.

Someone threw a rope. The man grabbed it and held on as two men pulled him back toward the branch until they could grab his hands.

They were lifting him out of the water when the second shark struck again. It took a chunk of meat the size of a football out of his waist and nearly dragged him back into the sea in a tug-of-war with the men who held him.

He screamed and moaned for several minutes after they carried him up to the trunk of the tree, then he fell silent. Maria knelt beside him and touched a tentative hand to his forehead.

Ramon put a tourniquet on the stump of the severed leg but could do nothing about the bite in the man's side. He stood and watched for a moment as the man's intestines oozed out of the hole and blood dribbled down the side of the tree trunk. Then, his face white, Ramon turned and trudged to the end of the tree.
People backed up and stepped aside as he approached, then watched as he passed them by. As he walked the length of the trunk to sit among the roots and look out over the sea.

Juana stood, glanced at Maria, then followed Ramon.

***

The Mother-of-all opened her eyes suddenly and struggled to sit up. With a little cry of alarm the small boy who knelt beside her reached to help.

A young man dropped from above to land on the branch beside the platform of woven sticks on which the old woman rested. He stepped onto the platform and knelt to slip his arm behind her.

"Mother," he said. "You must rest, Mother!"

The old woman turned her pain-wracked face to him. Spoke.

"I was resting, Hotan, but something happened! Someone is dying!"

The man was concerned. "One of our people, Mother?"

"No, Hotan. Not one of our people. But someone not very far away."

A look of wonder crossed the Indian's face as he looked at her.

"But there can be no other people near us, Mother! We are on the big water! You said we are very far from land!"

"There are others near us, Hotan."
"How can there be, Mother? They had no warning! They were killed by the water! You felt them die!"

"I felt many people die, Hotan -- very many people. But there must be others. One of them is dying now. Something bit him."

"A snake, Mother?"

"No. A fish. A big one. A shark."

"And he is near us, Mother?"

"He is not far, my son. I could not feel a white man very far away." She knitted her brows, concentrated.

"There are others, Hotan. They try to help the one who is dying, but they cannot. He is too badly hurt.

The old woman tried to smile.

"Worse than me, Hotan!"

Worry showed again on the Indian's face as he looked at her.

"You will not die, Mother! You must not!" He picked up the half-coconut shell beside her and offered her a sip of the milk it held. After she drank he laid her gently back on the pallet and watched as she closed her eyes.

Still kneeling, he looked again at the gash on her leg, and the angry red flesh that surrounded it.
He raised his eyes to the woman who knelt by the boy. Watched as she took a wad of chewed leaves from her mouth and spread them over the infected cut.

"Is there nothing more you can do, Yama?"

The woman glanced at him, then used a rag to wipe the sweat from the old woman's face.

"Nothing, Hotan." She said. She looked up at the man and made a gesture of helplessness with her hands.

"The leaves make it less painful, that is all.

"To stop the poison we need moulds and spiderwebs, and we have none. The moulds we need grow close to the ground on rotten trees, and those trees do not float. We will find none out here, and we will find no spiders here.

"We have not even water for her to drink!"

Frustration showed on the Indian's face.

"If we could get to land!"

"But you can't, Hotan. She says it is too far and she will not let you try.

"But she told me she will not die. That we will not die out here. She says help will come from the sky. A bird of some kind."

"We have seen the metal birds of the white men -- but they will not help us."
"She knows they will not, Hotan. She says another kind of bird will come."

The Indian looked at the old woman for a minute, then rose to his feet. Turned again to the younger woman.

"Watch well, Yama." He glanced to the side where three Indians sat on another platform weaving strips of palm-leaf into a mat.

"We will have a house for her soon," he said.

Turning, he stepped to the branch, flexed his knees and jumped. He caught the branch above and swung himself up to a higher platform.

***

Ramon had no memory of his father or of the two brothers he had lost when their boat was wrecked, and he know only what Franz had told him of the wreck. But the sight of the shark attacking the man in the water had been familiar somehow, and long-lost memories began to come back as he sat in his cave among the roots of the tree.

There were tears in his eyes when Juana knelt beside him. She gathered his head into her arms and pulled it against her breast.

Near the other end of the tree Pablo knelt on the branch and reached for one of the ropes that held a raft. Slowly he pulled it toward him.

As the raft came within reach he knelt and turned it so the open door was uppermost.
As the doorway came to the top a water bag popped out of it. Then another and another.

"They float!" The tone of Maria's voice betrayed her amazement.

Pablo turned his head, looked at her.

"The cans contain fresh water, senorita. It floats on salt water."

Lying flat on the branch, he reached down. Picked the bags one by one out of the sea and passed them to the man behind him.

***

CHAPTER 12

Pedro made crude packsacks of rope and parachute cloth so he and Manuel could carry one case of canned water each. He slung an extra length of rope around his shoulders, clipped his knife and his machete to his belt and crammed the expanding pockets of his coveralls with hundred-gram food bars.

Now the two worked their way toward the others -- walking and climbing over and through the criss-cross branches of floating trees. Several times they came to dead ends where they had to work their way back, then try another route.

The straight-line distance they had to cover was no more than 100 meters but there was no straight-line route. If they were lucky, Pedro thought, they might have to travel no more than a kilometer.
At one point they had to cross a floating log barely big enough to hold the weight of one man. Manuel went first, holding his arms out to each side for balance. He nearly made it.

But not quite. He was three meters from safety when the log turned under him and he fell with a splash.

He floated without a movement when he came to the surface. Drifted toward the floating log and rested a hand gently on it.

"Manuel!" Pedro began to edge out on the log. "Are you all right?"

"No senor -- stop." Manuel's face was tense, his voice little more than a whisper. "Please be quiet. Go back. Find a small branch, and beat the water with it."

"Why..."

"Please, senor."

Manuel's face was serious and his whisper intense. Pedro moved back to the larger log and knelt. Picked a branch the size of a baseball bat out of the water and held it up for Manuel to see.

"How about this?"

"That will do, senor. Now beat the water! Hit it many times, and as hard as you can!"

Bending, Pedro swung the branch at the surface of the water. Slashed back and forth.
As Pedro beat the surface of the sea, Manuel grabbed the small log with his hands and pulled himself along it until he could reach the branch of a tree. He pulled himself quickly onto the tree and stood, about ten meters from Pedro.

"All right, senor," he said in his normal voice. "You can rest now. Thank you."

Sweating from his exertion, Pedro straightened up and rested the tip of the branch on the tree at his feet.

"All right. Now can you tell me what that was about?"

"Sharks, senor. A small one right beside me when I fell in. He was nosing my leg to decide whether I was dangerous or not."

"And you just floated there?" Pedro's eyes opened wide.

"If I had moved, senor, he would have bitten me!"

"Eaten you, you mean."

"Not him, senor -- he was too small to eat anyone. But if he had bitten me I would have struggled and big ones would have heard it. While I stayed very still, I was safe for a while."

"And the branch? Beating the water?"

"Noise, senor. You scared the small one away -- you might have scared a big one if he had been close enough -- and you made more noise than I did when I moved. If a big shark had come he would have gone to where you were beating the water -- not to me."
"Okay." Pedro thought for a moment. "What now?" You're over there and I'm over here -- and there are sharks in between."

Manuel smiled. "Now senor, I think we wait. A shark might still come to see what the noise was, but in half an hour I think it will be safe for you to cross. I will have a branch ready while you do it."

"Wait? Here?"

"There is a big tree behind you where you will be comfortable, senor, and one over there that will be comfortable for me. I think it would be best if we went to them -- unless you would rather take your chances with the sharks?"

"I'll wait, thanks." Pedro turned and began to work his way back to the tree.

***

Pedro's crossing was easy enough. Arms spread, he edged along the log. Looking down into the water at the half-way point he saw the small shark -- perhaps six feet long -- that waited below. Looking up he saw Manuel ready with a branch.

But Pedro did not fall and in minutes they were on their way again. Manuel led from tree to tree and from log to floating log until mid morning when they came to a tree that rubbed up against the next, but was not tangled with it. Manuel stopped and pointed.

I think we have made it senor. That" -- he pointed to the next tree, "was there before. This" -- he pointed to the tree on which they stood, "has just drifted in. Look -- they are not tangled."
Pedro raised his arm and took a sight with his wrist-compass. Then he pointed to his right.

"That way."

"No senor." Manuel's face was sober. "Not that way. That would take us back onto the new trees. The ones that drifted in last night."

"But look. The compass shows...."

"The compass is wrong, senor, because the logs are moving."

"Moving -- yes -- but ..."

"Moving in a circle, senor. Spinning around." Manuel held his hand before him, forefinger pointed down, moved it in a circle.

"I noticed it while we waited senor. When I crossed the log, the sun was behind me. A half hour later, when you crossed it, it should have been to your left."

"I didn't notice."

"But I did, senor. The sun was on your right -- the left side of your face was in shadow."

"Then we are lost?"

"A little bit lost, senor, but not very much. It is not far to the others." He pointed to a near-vertical branch on the next tree.

"From that branch I think I will be able to see them."
Two big branches formed a bridge between the tree on which they stood and the one with the vertical branch. Manuel shrugged off his load of water and left it with Pedro before he crossed the bridge and climbing. About two meters up, he froze.

"Senor! His voice was soft, like a stage-whisper."

"Si?"

"Mira." Look.

Following Manuel's gaze, Pedro saw nothing. He looked again, and again he saw nothing.

"By the base of that big branch, senor."

By the base of a big branch on the tree beyond Manuel a man, wearing only a loincloth, stood with a short bow and a two-meter arrow. The bow was bent, held horizontal at waist level, the arrow pointed at Manuel.

Pedro spread his arms. Held his hands out, palms up, empty. Smiled and slowly stepped onto the branch that led to the other tree. The Indian turned to point the arrow at him.

"Buenas dias?" Pedro smiled.

"He may not speak Spanish, senor." Manuel's voice was soft.

Pedro kept his voice soft and his eyes on the Indian as he spoke.

"Who is he?"

"I think perhaps he is an Ayuba, senor. They live in the swamps near the mouth of the river."
"Are they friendly?"

"Some of them come to San Felipe to trade, senor, but they do not allow others to enter their swamp."

"And he thinks this is his swamp."

"It is where he lives now, senor."

"Then what do we do?"

"I think, senor, we move very slowly back to that other tree and find some other way to reach our friends."

"This man will need help too."

"He will, senor. But we cannot talk to him and he does not know you can help him. Step back senor, please."

"I will." Still smiling, hands still held in front of him, Pedro backed slowly down the branch to the tree he had started from. As he stopped, the arrow swung back to point at Manuel again.

Now the fisherman slid slowly down the branch and held out his hands to show that they were empty. Then, watching the Indian, he slowly backed to the bridge of crossed branches and edged his way back across it.

"Now we are safe, I think." Manuel knelt slowly to pick up his load of water and slowly swung it to settle on his back. He held out his hands again to show the Indian they were empty, then turned to head back in the direction from which they had come.
"One moment." Pedro reached back over his shoulder into the case from which he and Manuel had taken a couple of cans of water earlier.

From it he lifted out one can and held it so the Indian could see his hands. He popped the seal, lifted the can and took a drink from it. Then he bent to set the open can on the log at his feet. He reached again to remove six more cans from the case and set them beside the first.

Then he followed Manuel, keeping his hands spread with palms up.

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As the white men retreated Hayma relaxed his bow, squatted and tried to control the pounding of his heart. He closed his eyes and thought of the Mother but that didn't help him now. Even when she slept he could feel her comforting presence as long as she was well, but now he could feel only the pain of her swollen leg.

He opened his eyes again and looked after the white men. They were out of sight but he could still hear them, and they were still moving away. That was good.

On the tree stood the seven cans one of them had left behind. Hayma eyed them suspiciously. He recognized the cans -- they were like the ones Domec sometimes brought back from Rio Blanco when the trading had been good -- but for more than a hundred years his people had known better than to accept gifts from a white man.

Still, such cans usually contained drink and the white man had drunk from one of them. This would not be the water Mayta
said the Mother needed, but it might be better for her than coconut milk.

Like a ghost, Hayma faded back among the branches behind him. Silent and nearly invisible he searched for the trap he feared. It was nearly twenty minutes before he approached close enough to touch the cans.

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It was nearly an hour after they met the Indian that Pedro and Manuel heard the call -- faint at first and then louder as though the caller were coming closer.

Manuel called back and the two moved toward the sound. Another call and another answer.

Finally they were close enough to make out words through the screen of trees and branches that muffled them.

"Hola, senor. Where are you?"

There was a vertical branch nearby. Manuel climbed it and looked about, then turned his eyes down as a movement caught his eye.

There -- at the end of the tree. A small wooden boat, moved backwards through the branches. A young man sat in the bow, using an aluminum oar to paddle the boat like a canoe.

"Hola! You with the boat" This way"!

"I see you now!" the young man dug his paddle into the water and drove the boat ahead. A few more strokes and he rested.
The boat coasted to a stop beside Pedro while Manuel was still climbing down from the branch.

Manuel studied the boy's face as he approached.

"Don't I know you? Are you from San Felipe?"

"Si senor. I am Pablo Gutierrez. I worked on the Santa Anna."

"Now I remember. Your father is Gonzalez Gutierrez."

"Si senor."

Manuel turned to Pedro. "A boy from my own village. I know his father well -- he is a good fisherman."

He turned to the boy again. "And you were on the Santa Anna? Where is Sanchez?"

"The boat is gone, senor, I don't know about Captain Sanchez. We were just clearing the harbor when we were holed by a log. I was knocked overboard but there was another log and I grabbed it. I don't know what happened to the boat after that, senor."

"Well, we are all here now, anyway."
Manuel stepped into the boat and held it steady while Pedro boarded.

Pedro looked about the boat and recognized it.

"This is the boat the girl was in, isn't it?"

"I don't know, senor. It is from San Felipe -- I have seen it there -- and it was moored by the rafts when I came with you the
night before last. The big man -- Ramon? -- he saved it when
the raft and the other boat sank.

"Ramon? Did he send you to find us?" Pedro sat in the center
seat as he spoke. Manuel moved to the stern.

"Ramon did not send me, senor. I came because I knew you
would need a boat."

The boy backed water with his paddle, then dug in to turn the
boat and drive it ahead. Deftly, he guided it through the maze of
branches into clear water. Manuel picked up the second oar that
lay in the bottom and began to paddle along with Pablo.

"What is Ramon doing now" Pedro asked. "He was going to try
to get the rafts back -- did he do it?"

"The rafts are safe, senor. They have holes in them but we took
them out of the water and hung them on the tree.

"But Ramon did not get them -- he is sitting among the roots of
the tree now, wishing he was back on land."

"But the others have food and water?"

"Yes. Maria -- the senorita from the store -- has it all piled on
the tree and she gives some to people when they ask. Most of
the other things from the rafts are piled on the tree too."

"The radios?"

"The radios." Pablo's face showed distress. "One of them is on
the tree, senor. We hope you will be able to make it work."
"One of them. That will be the one that was still sealed, I guess. It will work. The other -- the one that was in use -- will have been ruined when the raft sank. Did Ramon throw it out?"

"No senor. That is the one on the tree. It is wet -- does that mean it will not work now?"

"No, it won't work. But the other one will. It floats, and it can float in the sea for six months and still work. It has to be there someplace."

"But it is not sealed, and it does not float. It was bitten by a shark, senor, and it sank."

"A shark? How did that happen?"

"When they were pulling in the rafts, senor. One of them caught on a branch, and a man jumped into the sea to free it. Sharks attacked, and the radio was floating beside him. He pushed it into the mouth of one of the sharks."

"Damn! Did he survive? Did the sharks get him?"

"Ramon and the others pulled him out of the water senor, but it was too late. He died in a little while."

"Shit!" Pedro hung his head. For several minutes he stared at the bottom of the boat.

"Senor?" Manuel touched his shoulder.

Pedro raised his head and turned to look at him.

"Yes?"
"Without the radios, senor, they will still be able to find us? We had no radio when you found us."

"Yes, they will find us. There were radar reflectors on the rafts -- those square things on top. We will have to hang them on the highest branches we can find."

"We lost one of them too, senor." Pablo spoke with regret. "It tore off when we pulled the raft from the water, and it sank."

Pedro turned and looked at him.

"There is still one left?"

"One, senor."

Now Manuel spoke.

"One is enough. Even without the radar reflectors -- you found us."

"Yes, but that was one chance in a million. We found you the first time because one man in the United States looked at the right part of a photograph with a magnifying glass. We cannot hope that will happen again."

"But they are looking for us now."

"They are, but the sea is very big, my friend, and with all this stuff floating around us it would be very hard to find anything. They cannot look forever."

"Perhaps not, senor. But we must hope."
"Yes we must." Pedro hung his head again and thought of the man killed by the shark.

"Senor?" Manuel's voice was soft. A whisper.

"Yes?" Pedro turned to look at him.

The fisherman faced straight ahead, but his eyes were turned to the side.

"We have company, senor. Don't look now, but in a minute take a look at that big tree to the right. In the shade of the third branch."

Pedro kept looking at Manuel.

"More survivors?"

"No, senor. An Indian. The one we met, perhaps. I saw him before too -- he is following us!"

"Oh." Pedro swung sideways on the seat and leaned back against the gunwale. The movement turned his face to the left and when he lay back, as though relaxing, he could study the trees.

"Third branch, you said?"

"Just to the left of it. Above that floating bush."

Now Pedro could make out the legs. The body and the suggestion of a head.

"Is that the same one?"
"I don't know for sure, senor. It might be."

"And why would they follow us?"

"To see who we are, senor, and where we came from and where we go. You gave him water, and it is very valuable here. He must wonder about us."

"But he wouldn't try to rob us, would he?"

"I don't think so, senor. One man in San Felipe accused an Indian of robbing him."

"What happened?"

"There was a fight, and the man from San Felipe was killed."

"And?"

"Two policemen went into the swamp to arrest the Indian. They did not come back."

"Oh."

"The others, senor. They have food and water now. They do not need what we bring."

"No, they don't. Not for a while."

"I do not like leaving the bundles out there. I think it is dangerous."

"The Indians?"
"Perhaps. But also remember that those trees drifted in last night. They may drift out again tonight."

Pedro looked at him. "You're right."

"We have the boat, senor. Could we go now to get them?"

"We couldn't get all of them in this boat."

"No senor. But we could bring some of them."

"Okay -- but I can't help you. I have to go to the others. Pablo?"

"Si senor?"

"Take me to the tree first and leave me there. Then go with Manuel and help him get the bundles."

"Si senor." Still paddling, Pablo nodded his head. "When I was looking for you senor, I got very close to the tree where you hung the marker. If I had a machete, I think I could reach it. Is that where you left the bundles?"

"A machete?"

"Si senor. There were only a few small branches between me and the tree."

"I looked this morning and I didn't see any way."

"There are branches to be cut, senor." Pablo stopped paddling for a moment and pointed ahead. "There is the tree where the others wait."
CHAPTER 13

The tree had been on the edge of the floating island when Pedro found it but it was surrounded by others now. The one that had punctured the rafts still floated end-on near the branch where the rafts had been moored and others crowded behind it, leaving a channel about ten meters wide half-full of branches, small logs and other debris beside the trunk.

About twenty people waited, most of them sitting or lying in small groups on the trunk. Some appeared to be trying to sleep, others were sitting up and talking.

The remains of the rafts were partly visible, draped like yellow tents over a couple of nearly-horizontal branches in the crown, and most of the supplies were stacked near the base of the tall vertical branch where Ramon had tied the polka-dotted bandana.

Someone shouted as the boat came in sight and most of the crowd stood to watch it approach. One slender figure broke from a group near the base of the vertical branch and ran the length of the trunk toward the approaching boat, waving and calling.

"Hola senor! Buenas dias senor!" Maria sounded almost like a child in her excitement.

"Buenas dias, Maria." Pedro was trying to see how badly the rafts had been damaged, and he kept his eyes on them as he spoke.
They were in the channel beside the tree now, heading toward the branch where the rafts had been moored. Maria kept pace, talking as she walked.

"You have a visitor senor!"

"Oh?" Pedro looked at her now.

"An Indio. An Ayuba, from the swamp at the mouth of the river. He says you met a friend of his."

"I did, muchacha." Pedro turned to look at the rafts again.

"He wants to speak with you, senor." There was a trace of resentment in her voice.

"I will speak with him, muchacha." Pedro spoke with patience, as to a child.

Two men waited on the branch as the boat approached. They caught it, swung it alongside and held it.

Pedro handed one of them the two cases of canned water he and Manuel had brought. The other survivors gathered on the trunk near the base of the branch as he turned and spoke to Manuel.

"You will go back for the supplies now, my friend?"

"I will, senor, in a few moments. But first I think we have another job to do." He pointed to the parachute draped over a shape on the tree trunk. Blood oozed from under it and stained the bark.

"It would not be good to keep him around too long, senor. The weather is warm."
Pedro looked at the shape and at the people who stood on the tree.

"You are right my friend. But what do we do?"

"Sink it, senor. That is the only way, at sea."

"How? Everything here floats!"

Manuel thought for a moment. "On a ship, senor, he would be wrapped in sailcloth and weighted. Here -- we have the parachutes, but I do not know about the weight."

Sitting in the bow, Pablo reached down and lifted what looked like an old paint can with a rope fastened to the handle.

"This is very heavy, senor. I think it is filled with sand or gravel."

Manuel looked up. His face brightened.

"The anchor. We will not need that!"

"Will it do?"

"It will do, senor. It is heavy enough to sink the body before the sharks find it."

"Won't they find it anyway when it's on the bottom?"

"Something will find it, senor, but we will not see it, and it will not be the sharks we see up here. It is not good to let sharks that hunt near the surface learn what human flesh tastes like."
"Okay." Pedro turned to the boy in the bow. "Give me the anchor, Pablo." He took it and set it on the branch at his feet. Then he turned to Manuel.

"I'll do the burial while you and Pablo get the water. Take a couple of others with you." He turned to the two men on the branch.

"I will go senor, if there is work to be done."

"And I, senor."

"Good." Pedro turned to the fisherman. "Manuel?"

"I will go, senor, but -- not yet." He pointed to the log where Maria and the others waited. Beside Maria stood a brown skinned man wearing only a gee string.

"You have a visitor," Manuel continued, "and I think it may be important that you speak with him. I will prepare the body for burial -- it will not take long."

"Okay." Pedro concealed his relief. He had helped with burials before, but he was not anxious to handle this one. He glanced at the Indian, then back to Manuel. As he turned toward the group on the trunk of the tree, a man scrambled down to the branch, slipped and nearly fell. He regained his balance and spoke as he approached.

"The Indian, senor. Do not trust him."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because, senor, he is an Indian." The man glanced at Maria.
"The muchacha, she talks to them. I think she is half-Indian herself!"

Pedro looked at the man. Saw the ragged clothes, the bronze complexion and the high cheekbones.

"And is that bad?"

"It is," the man replied. Indians are not civilized like you and I. You should not trust them!"

"I'll keep my eye on them." Pedro turned and walked to the trunk of the tree.

"Senor?" Maria called.

"One moment, muchacha."

Pedro stepped onto the trunk. Knelt and lifted a section of the parachute cloth that covered the body. Looked at the face beneath. Lifted the cloth further and saw where the chunk had been bitten out of the man's side.

He was about to lower the cloth when he heard Manuel's gasp behind him. His words.

"Pablo! What is this?"

He turned and saw Manuel and Pablo staring at the trickle of blood that dripped into the sea. Manuel's face was serious, Pablo's red with embarrassment.

"He tried to stop it, senor." Maria spoke from the tree. "He warned the men they should not swim."
"It's too late to worry about it," Pedro said.

"Too late to worry about the man, senor. But look."

Pedro looked where Manuel pointed and saw the dribble of blood.

"I don't..."

"In the sea, senor. Look into the sea!"

Under the trickle of blood, three huge sharks waited.

"You must be very careful now, senor. Warn the others to be very careful.

"They taste the blood. They will strike immediately if anyone falls in."

Pedro looked thoughtfully at the sharks.

"Is there anything we can do about them?"

"Not now, senor. Just be very careful."

Pedro turned his eyes back to the dead man, then lowered the parachute cloth. Looked about at the people who watched.

"I will," he said. "We all will."

He stood and walked toward Maria and the Indian, who offered a shy smile.

Maria turned half sideways and gestured toward the Indian. "This is Hotan, senor. He is an Indian. An Ayuba."
"Mucho gusto!" Pedro stepped forward smiling, with his hand outstretched. Alarmed, the Indian stepped back.

"They do not shake hands, senor." Maria remained calm as she spoke. "He does not speak Spanish."

"Oh." Pedro relaxed. He dropped his hand and stepped back a half-pace, then turned to Maria.

"You know them?"

"A little, senor. My mother was of their tribe. They came sometimes to trade at my father's store."

"Oh? What did they trade?"

"Leaves, senor. Bark from trees. Herbs. Things to make medicines from. Matte, for my mother."

"And you speak their language?"

"A little, senor. Not well."

"But you can interpret? Translate?"

"I can, senor. He says one of his friends saw you this morning. He is sorry his friend pointed an arrow at you" -- Maria looked concerned as she spoke -- "but he was afraid."

She paused. "They do not trust white men, senor. They still remember the Spaniards.

"But he says you gave his friend water, senor."
"I did."

"He thanks you, senor, and he asks if you have more."

"Tell him we have lots of water. He can have all he needs."

"He does not ask for gifts, senor. The Ayuba are traders, and he brings food to trade for water." Maria turned to the Indian and spoke a few words in a strange guttural language. The Indian stepped back, knelt and picked up a string of three fish. He held them up for Pedro to see.

"How did he catch those?"

"They shoot them, senor, with the bow and arrow. His friend was fishing when you met him."

"With a bow and arrow? I've heard of that, but I thought it only worked in shallow water."

Maria turned to the Indian and translated. The Indian spoke for a moment, moving his hands to illustrate something.

Now Maria spoke again to Pedro. "He says that is usually so, senor. But one of his friends noticed that some fish come close to the surface here -- to feed on things that float in the water. His friend began fishing. He says there are many fish around here."

The Indian watched them as they talked and worry crept into his face. He reached behind him again and brought forward six coconuts in a loose net of knotted fiber. He set them beside the fish.
Then a bundle of sticks, each about one the size of a baseball bat. He set them beside the fish and the coconuts.

"What are those?"

"Palmetto, senor. Part of the center of the tree is soft, and very good to eat."

"Did he get all that stuff out here?"

"He did, senor. Coconuts float -- the fisherman find them often. I have seen palmetto floating around here myself."

Pedro looked at the Indian, wonder in his face. "I know about the coconuts -- we found some yesterday -- but I didn't even think about the other stuff. I bet he could live out here forever!"

"For a long time, senor."

"Is he alone?"

"He came to us alone, senor, but there are many of his people near. They knew about the flood, senor, and they went out to sea in their canoes before it caught them.

"Some of the canoes were turned over and some were lost, but most of the Indians lived. Some are watching us now, I think, but we cannot see them."

"And they need water. How much have we?"

Many cans, senor. Enough for a week or more if we are careful."
"Okay. Give him one of the cases Manuel and I brought, and
tell him he can have more later. Tell him we have more water
over there" -- he pointed toward the tree where the bundles had
been left.

"Tell him we will bring them here soon, and that he can have
more then."

Maria turned to the Indian. Spoke and listened. The Indian
spoke for more than a minute before she turned to translate.

"He knows about the things you left, senor. When his friend
brought the water back to camp, some of the others went to see
where you had come from.

"He says the things you left are not safe, senor. He thinks they
may drift away.

"He says there is no need for you to bring the water here, senor
-- he can meet you there and trade. He says that is closer to
where his friends camp than we are here."

Pedro had been facing Maria as she spoke. He would have
replied to her, but she flicked her eyes to the Indian. Pedro
paused, then turned to face the Indian as he spoke the words
Maria would translate.

"Tell him we thank him for the warning, and we will bring the
water here soon. Tell him it would not be good for him to go
there, because it is very difficult to get there without a boat."

Maria didn't bother to translate this. "Not for him, senor. He
lives in the swamp and he can walk on water."

"Walk on water? How?" Pedro turned to face Maria now.
"It is something they learn, senor, from living in the swamp."

"What do you mean? People can't walk on water!"

"He can, senor. He did it to reach us, and you will see him do it again when he leaves."

"He could bring the others back here. This tree is big enough, and my friends will be looking for us."

"They will not come, senor. It is their way to live separate from white men."

"Okay." Pedro thought a moment. "But if they won't come here we'll have to find out where they are, so we can pick them up when help comes.

"Now what? Do we give him the water?"

"We do, senor." Maria turned to a woman who stood nearby and asked her to fetch the carton of water. Pedro turned to go for it himself, but stopped when he felt Maria's hand on his arm.

"Let the woman do it, senor."

"I can get it."

"Please let the woman do it, senor." Maria glanced toward the Indian. "He would be surprised if you went for it."

"Do they not carry things? Do their women do all the work?"

"We are in camp, senor. This is our home. Men carry things outside the home and some things in the home -- but food and
water are women's business among his people. In the home, men take them only from a woman."

"Oh." Pedro stood uneasily while the woman fetched the carton of water and handed it to him.

"You must put it down, senor, beside the goods he brought."

Pedro knelt, placed the carton beside the fish, the coconuts and the palmetto. Stood and saw the happy smile on the Indian's face.

"What now?"

"If he picks it up, senor, he makes the trade."

With a smile the Indian knelt and picked up the carton. He nodded his head to Pedro, then to Maria, turned and trotted toward the roots of the tree.

Pedro watched in amazement as, carrying the carton, the Indian turned and jumped from the tree to a small log that floated about two meters from it. Pedro would have sworn the log would not support a man and his judgment was confirmed as the Indian sank knee-deep on it.

But as he sank he ran the length of the log and jumped to another small log, then another and another.

In seconds he had crossed twenty meters of water, leaving a half-dozen small logs -- none of them big enough to bear his weight -- bobbing behind him when he jumped to another tree.

Something moved among the branches at the far end of the tree and Pedro thought he saw a human form.
The Indian stopped just before he reached the branches. Turned, lifted the carton to arms' length above his head. Lowered it, turned again and disappeared.

Pedro looked after him in wonder until he heard Manuel at his shoulder.

"Senor?"

"Yes?" Pedro turned.

"Yes?"

"The body, senor. The dead man. He is ready for burial now. Will you watch?"

Behind Manuel the body lay wrapped in a parachute. A rope from the boat anchor was fastened to one end. Most of the people of the tree waited.

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The funeral was simple. Manuel spoke a few words, then Pablo and Ramon slid the dead man's body off the side of the tree. There was a splash as the anchor hit the water, a bubble of air was forced out of the parachute, and the body was gone.

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CHAPTER 14

Manuel stood silent a moment, hat in hand and head bowed, then turned to Pedro.

"And now, senor, the bundles. Pablo told me what he found while we were wrapping the body, and I think I can bring them today if I can take some men to help."

"How many?"

"Many men, senor. As many as I can. He glanced at the boat."

"The boat would carry ten men."

"But not ten men and a load of supplies."

"No senor, but it doesn't have to. The motor we left on the tree -- we could use it on this boat, could we not?"

"Yes -- But you still won't be able to carry all the bundles in that boat."

"No senor, but we don't have to. With ten men we can lift them over the tree, and when they are on this side of the tree we can tow them here!"

"You think you can." Pedro was dubious. Pablo didn't get to the tree -- he just thought he could."

"He got very close, senor, and look -- the channel beside us is wider now than it was when we came in. I think the trees are
opening up a bit. If Pedro could get close this morning, we should be able to get closer now.

"If we cannot, then with ten men and machetes we could cut many branches. If we cannot cut the branches, we can lift the bundles over them."

"Okay, give it a try. Pedro looked out over the drifting debris to his red bandana that marked the tree where they had left the bundles.

"Who do you want with you?" he asked.

"Pablo, senor, and Ramon, -- the one with the loud voice. He said he would talk to the others.

"Ramon?" Pedro looked around the tree, searching for the foreman. "I thought Pablo said ... ">

"I know what Pablo said, senor, and it is true. Ramon is afraid of the sea. But many men are afraid of the sea until they become used to it. He is afraid but he is a good man, and he will come.

"He has a machete, and I have one. If we could borrow yours we would have three."

"Okay." Pedro unclipped the machete from his belt. He was handing it to the fisherman when Maria shouted.

"The plane! Listen -- it comes!"

Pedro had not been aware of the sound of twenty people talking among themselves until they fell silent. As one they turned to
listen to the sound of jet engines from the east, faint but growing louder.

"There it is!" One man pointed to a tiny speck, low over the ocean. It was heading directly toward them, and it grew and took the shape of a plane as they watched. People who had been sitting jumped to their feet and they all clustered on the open section of tree trunk, where their view was unobstructed. A crowd of shouting people formed between Pedro and the pile of supplies.

"Let me through!" Pedro charged the crowd from behind. He pulled one man roughly aside and tried to push past him.

"See senor!" The man grabbed his arm and pointed excitedly. "The plane! It comes back!"

"I see!" Pedro pulled his arm away and waded into the crowd. Fought his way through to the pile of supplies.

Where was the signals box? Near the bottom of the pile was a yellow box with orange stripes. Pedro pushed other boxes roughly aside -- not caring that some of them fell into the sea -- and pulled it out. He tore it open and pulled out three rockets, then looked for a place to fire them.

Not here, with all these people. He fought his way through the crowd again and ran to the end of the trunk.

There he tore the wrapper off one rocket, looked up and saw that the plane was only about five kilometers away. He pulled a tab, cocked his arm and threw the rocket into the sea.

***
"Got it!"

The navigator's shout brought Johnston to his feet. Smithers and Peters turned away from the open door and lowered their binoculars.

Johnston ran forward to the flight deck and leaned over the navigator's shoulder.

"What have you got? Where?"

A finger stabbed at a bright spot on the radar scope.

"There! That's a radar reflector like the one they have on those rafts!"

"You sure?" Johnston leaned forward to inspect the blip. "It doesn't look very bright."

"It isn't. They're usually brighter than that. But it's a radar reflector all right -- no way I could mistake it."

The navigator looked at the screen again.

"There's a lot of clutter. I guess there's a tree or something in front of it.

"But it's one of our reflectors, sir. I'm sure of it."

"Okay, let's go." Johnston straightened up, took his hands from the back of the seat and lit a cigarette.

The navigator picked up the phone beside him, squeezed the handle and spoke.
"We've got it, skipper. Bearing 268 degrees, distance just over 10 k's."

Johnston turned to the corpsmen who watched from the open door. He held his clasped hands high in triumph as the plane began to bank.

***

The rocket hit the water sideways with a splash. Then the weighted tail sank, turning the head upward. Bubbles from the burning fuse rose about it.

It rocked slightly but countless tests had shown that it would stabilize, pointing straight up, before the 75-second fuse burned out and it fired.

Pedro and the others on the tree got an excellent view of the plane's belly from less than half a kilometer away as it turned onto its new course. Then the rocket soared hundreds of meters into the air, leaving a trail of colored smoke, before burst into a brilliant fireball that could have been seen from a plane twenty kilometers away -- had anyone been looking.

***

"What happened? Where did it go? Did they not see us? Did they not see the rocket? Will it come back? Why does the airplane fly away? Twenty people with a thousand questions clustered about Pedro as he stood on the tree with two unused rockets cradled in his arms. Accusing faces turned to Pedro as he watched the Manitou disappear.

"Radar!" He shouted aloud as the realization struck him. "They must have seen something on radar!"
He looked at the one remaining radar reflector hanging near sea level from the peak of the raft draped over a branch. He pointed to it and shouted.

"They look with radar! We must get the reflector -- move it out where they can see it!"

"Reflector, senor?" Questioning looks from several men.

"That metal thing from the top of the raft!" Pedro ran for the branch. "We must move it out into the open! Hang it up high!"

A dozen others were ahead of him. Five men ran out on the branch and pulled the raft from the higher branch on which it rested. There was a splash as the raft slipped free and the radar reflector dropped into the water.

A foot below the surface it glinted in the sunlight. It shimmered as eager hands pulled the raft toward the trunk of the tree.

Pedro saw the four-meter torpedo shapes that arrowed toward the shining reflector. Caught a glimpse of the jaws that opened, then closed on it.

One man lost his balance as the raft was pulled away from him. He stood for a second, his arms windmilling, while others reached to help him.

Then he fell with a splash among the sharks that were tearing the raft to shreds.

Someone dived from the tree into the water. A head surfaced beside the struggling man. A woman screamed but Pedro kept
his eyes on the men in the water as a hand reached to grab the rope that moored the wooden boat.

Then another hand lifted the man who had fallen and threw him bodily toward the branch, where three men grabbed his arm and pulled him to safety.

Two hands were on the rope now, dragging the second man toward the branch. Other hands reached to lift him from the water inches ahead of snapping jaws.

Ramon lay on the branch gasping for breath, his face white. In the sea beneath him the shreds of the raft and the remains of the radar reflector sank slowly into the depths.

***

Ten kilometers away the plane circled, two hundred meters above another floating island. Johnston braced both hands against the sides of the open door and leaned out to look past Jeffers and Peters.

Below, a yellow life raft hung among the branches of a huge floating tree. The radar reflector, hanging below it, twinkled in the sunlight.

"Shit!" Johnston's knuckles turned white and he tightened his grip on the door frame.

"That's the first one we dropped! Before he jumped!"

***
CHAPTER 15

Ramon turned and waved just before the boat rounded the end of the tree. Juana, watching from the trunk, waved back. She kept on waving for a minute after the boat disappeared.

On the branch Pedro turned and nearly bumped into Maria, who stood behind him. He would have stepped past her had she not spoken.

"They will bring the supplies back, senor? The food and water?"

"Yes."

"And you, senor. What will you do now?"

Pedro hesitated. He looked round the tree at the piled supplies, at the remains of the inflatable boat still floating by the branch and at the people who watched. Then he turned back to Maria.

"I'll take a look at the radio first, I guess. Then maybe try to fix the boat and the outboard motor. Why?"

"Can I help you, senor?"

Pedro looked at her. Smiled and shook his head.

"I don't think so, muchacha. It's not much of a job anyway."

"You can fix the radio, senor?"
"I doubt it, but I'll take a look." Pedro patted her shoulder as he stepped past her.

***

Three wrenches, a pair of locking pliers and a double-bladed screwdriver were strapped to the inside of the hood of the outboard motor. The screwdriver was too big for serious radio work but Pedro wasn't qualified for that anyway. It fitted the screws that held the control panel to the front of radio, and that was enough.

Pedro lifted the panel off and set it aside, then tipped the plastic case gently and drained a half liter of water out of it. He looked at the maze of circuit-boards, wiring and transistors inside.

He was half-aware, as he worked, of the small crowd that watched.

"Can you fix it, senor? The little man in the suit stood beside him. Pedro glanced up, then turned back to the radio.

"I don't know." He looked again into the maze of wires and transistors. "I don't know much about radio but I know this one is pretty tough. It might work if it gets a chance to dry out."

The radio lay on the trunk of the tree in full sunlight, face up with the control panel leaning against the side. Pedro sat back and looked at it.

"I'm afraid not, senor." The man knelt and looked into the radio as he spoke.

Pedro looked at him.
"Do you know radio?"

"A little, senor. The theory, not the practice." He offered his hand.

"I am Alfredo Alvarez. "I was a teacher of science at the collegio in Rio Blanco and I know a little of such things.

Pedro accepted the hand. Shook it.

"Mucho gusto. I am Pedro Ramirez. You say the radio will not work?"

"I don't think so, senor. If it had fallen into pure water -- distilled water -- there might be no problem. Then you could dry it out and it might work.

"But water that is not absolutely pure will leave a deposit when it dries, and that deposit may cause a short circuit.

"And salt water -- seawater -- is very bad, because it leaves a film of salt. Salt is very bad for electricity, senor."

Pedro looked at him. Looked at the radio again, then turned back to Alfredo.

"You may be right," he said. "But it's worth a try, anyway. Anything's worth a try now."

"You're right, senor. I was thinking of trying something myself, if you approve."

"Oh? What?" Pedro settled back on his heels and turned to listen.
"The radar reflector, senor. It worked because it was made of aluminum, no?"

"Partly. The material and the shape.

"It makes a very strong image, and most radar operators can recognize it."

Alfredo considered a moment, then spoke.

"The material more than the shape, senor. Any big piece of metal would help, would it not? We could tie it up there," Alfredo pointed toward the top of the branch to which Ramon had tied the bandana, "and they could see it from a long way away.

A radar operator could tell it was metal, and there is no natural metal out here. If he saw something made of metal, he would come to see what it was, would he not?"

"True." Pedro looked round the tree. Saw the outboard motor tied to a nearby branch.

"But that does not help us." He pointed to the motor. "That's the only big piece of metal we have, and it's not big enough."

"I was not thinking of the motor, senor." Alfredo pointed into the water beside the tree where more than a dozen empty water cans still floated.

"The water cans, senor. They are made of aluminum, no?"

"Yes." Pedro looked. Thought. Then his faced lighted.
"They are! If we could flatten them out and fasten them together ...."

"No need to flatten them, senor. We could just tie them together -- make a big bundle of them. That would give us a big enough surface!"

Pedro considered. "It might work," he said.

"It will work senor! I am sure of it! May I try it?"

Pedro looked at the man. Noted the soft hands, the remains of the suit and the eager look on his face. Almost refused, then changed his mind.

"Why not? Okay -- do it if you want. Tell everyone to save their cans from now on -- that you're in charge of them."

He looked at the cans that floated beside the tree.

"Get a stick or something -- and see how many of those you can fish out."

He looked at the cans that floated farther away, then glanced at the inflatable boat.

Three of the seven air chambers were still intact and Pablo had not bothered to haul it up onto the tree. He had just removed the outboard motor and the fuel tank, then dragged the boat over the branch to float in protected water between the branch and the tree. There was a patching kit in it, Pedro knew, and he might be able to repair the torn rubber.

He turned again to the teacher. "Alfredo?"
"Si, senor?"

"You get started on the cans. I'm going to see if I can fix that boat."

***

"Senor?"

Pedro had the boat up on the tree and turned over, and he was on his hands and knees to find and mark the punctures when Maria reached him again. He turned and found her kneeling beside him.

"It is late, senor, and people have not eaten yet. May I give them food bars, or the food Hotan brought?"

Pedro straightened up and looked at his watch. It was 2:30, but he had not felt hungry until she mentioned food. He looked at her and smiled.

"I guess we forgot lunch, eh?"

"We have had no breakfast either, senor. Ramon started the men working very early."

"Oh." Pedro stood and watched as Maria stood beside him.

"Then I guess we should eat," he said. "Are people getting tired of food bars?"

"The food bars are good, senor, but they are not what we are used to."
"What are you used to?" Pedro started to walk toward the piled supplies now. Maria followed.

"Rice and beans, mostly. Corn, fish and some meat, senor."

When they reached the supplies Pedro stood and looked down. He moved his foot and pushed one of the fish aside.

"Fish. What do we do with them?"

"Eat them, senor." Maria was puzzled.

"How?"

"Why senor. We cook them and ..." Her voice trailed off.

"Exactly. How do we cook them here?"

Maria could have answered but she hesitated. The senor might have a reason for not lighting a fire, and she did not want to appear foolish. She looked at him a moment before she spoke.

"Do you eat them raw?"

"I have never done it, senor."

"Well, now's your chance." Pedro bent down and picked up a coconut and hefted it.

"Do you like coconuts?" Maria looked up at him.

"Huh? Oh yes -- I like them well enough."

"I will open it for you senor, if you wish."
Pedro looked at the coconut, then at Maria.

"That might be an idea. Do you like them? Do the others?"

"I like them, senor. I think the others do. Most people in San Felipe eat them."

"Would coconuts make a good lunch?"

"Good enough, senor. We have nothing else except the fish and the food bars and the palmetto. I think many people would prefer coconuts to food bars. I could open them."

"Okay -- let's have coconuts for lunch. But how do we open them?"

"I will do that, senor, if you will let me use your knife."

"Sure." Pedro slipped the orange-handled knife out of the sheath at his belt as he spoke, and handed it and the coconut to her.

Maria laid both on the tree, walked to the branch and climbed down the side to where Alfredo was fishing empty water cans out of the sea. She spoke to him briefly, he looked at Pedro then handed her a half-dozen cans from the pile he was building on the trunk. She and brought them back to the piled supplies and, kneeling, she used the knife to cut the top off one of them.

Pedro watched in admiration. He had cut the top off many cans, but not as quickly or as neatly as she did.

Holding the coconut between her knees, Maria used the point of the knife to dig out the three soft spots, called "eyes" at one
end. Then she poured the milk into the empty water can, handed it to Pedro and watched as he tasted it.

"Do you like it, senor?"

"Yes, thank you. It's good."

"I am glad, senor."

Pedro drank again as Maria forced the point of the knife into one of the holes and raised the nut in front of her with both hands. Then she slammed the butt of the knife down on the tree-trunk.

The coconut split in half. The knife fell free and began sliding down the side of the log.

Desperately, Maria pounced on it, and nearly slid into the sea herself as she caught it. Then she climbed back to her feet and contritely offered the knife back to Pedro, her eyes lowered.

"I'm sorry, senor. I almost lost your knife. I will find another way to open the other coconuts."

Pedro did not accept the knife. He smiled and spoke gently. "You wouldn't have lost it, muchacha. It floats."

Maria looked at it curiously, then offered it to him again.

"I was careless, senor. I didn't know it would float."

"But it does. And you won't be careless again. Use it, muchacha."

Maria looked at him, surprised.
"Thank you, senor. You are very kind." She knelt again and locked half the nut between her knees. Dug chunks of meat out of it, piled them in an empty section of empty shell and handed it to him.

Pedro accepted it and moved down the trunk of the tree. He watched as Maria waved two other women to join her, and as they opened more coconuts. He sat and rested his back against the stub of a branch as she called the others to share in the milk and the meat.

***

Coconuts grow only on the seashore and Pedro never saw them while he lived with his family, but there was something comforting and familiar about the sight of three women kneeling together, preparing food. His mother and his sister used to kneel like that while they shelled the rice, corn and beans that were staples in his father's home.

As he ate the coconut he wondered whether his sister would have looked like Maria, had she lived. He lay back on the trunk of the tree and closed his eyes.

***

"Senor?"

Pedro was half asleep when Maria spoke, and he opened his eyes with a start. He had been dreaming something -- remembering something pleasant -- but he could not recall what it was.
Maria knelt beside him. Her body shaded his face from the sun, and sunlight formed a halo around her black hair as he looked at her. He rolled to his side and raised himself on one elbow to face her.

"Muchacha?"

"I am sorry to wake you, senor. I did not realize you were sleeping."

"I wasn't sleeping -- not really. Was there something you wanted?"

"To speak with you, senor, if I may."

"Of course, muchacha." Pedro drew his legs up and raised his body so he sat facing her. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Perhaps, senor, a small favor. This tree is very big, and there is room for all of us here."

"Yes?"

"But I did not sleep well last night, and I don't think anyone else did. Most of us are tired today."

"Of course, muchacha. So many things happened last night -- of course you are tired.

"But you can sleep now. Everybody can sleep now -- you don't have to ask me for permission."

"But senor...." Maria's confusion showed in her face and sounded in her voice. "That is not what I mean. I do not ask your permission to sleep -- I ask your permission to work!"
"Oh?" Pedro was curious and he listened more carefully as Maria continued.

"I could not sleep after the rafts sunk, senor, because I was cold and because I was afraid of falling off the tree."

"Oh." Pedro thought back on his own experience of the night before.

"Manuel and I used parachutes as blankets, did no-one use them here? You can tonight, anyway."

"They would keep us warm, senor, but I would still not sleep because I am afraid of rolling off the tree. It is round, senor, and it moves. I am afraid I may fall off, and I know the sharks are waiting."

Maria spoke of problems, but her voice held no tone of complaint. It was almost as though she stated the problem, Pedro thought, as a prelude to explaining the solution.

But it was a problem, because the top of the tree was round. Looking at it, Pedro realized that he had instinctively chosen the high side of a branch stub to lie on, and had counted on it to prevent his rolling off. He had been safe, but there were not enough branch stubs for everyone. He turned back to Maria.

"That will be a problem, muchacha. I will have to think about it."

Maria blushed and nerved herself to continue. "I have thought about it, senor," she said. "May I speak?"
"If you have any ideas, muchacha, of course I want to hear them."

Maria wasn't sure whether he meant it or not, and she regretted approaching him but could not see how to back out now. Nervously, she continued.

"Hotan spoke with me while we were waiting for you, senor."

"Yes."

"His people -- my mother's people -- live in a mangrove swamp. There is no land to build houses on."

"Yes."

"So they build them on the trees, senor. On the roots, and sometimes among the branches."

Pedro sat up and listened.

"Hotan says his people camp on a tree like this one now, senor, but they build platforms among the branches where they can sleep in comfort."

"Oh?" Pedro raised his eyebrows. "What do they build them of?"

"Sticks, senor."

"Just sticks?"

"Sometimes they use bigger sticks -- logs -- underneath, to support them."
"And they are building something like that out here? On a tree?"

"He said so, senor." Some platforms are finished already.

"What tools have they?"

"I don't know, senor, but the Ayuba do not use many tools. In my father's store they bought only machetes and a few axes."

"What about nails -- things like that?"

"They do not use nails, senor. They tie things together with a kind of rope they make of split vines."

"I wonder if they would let me come to their camp. To take a look at their platform?"

"I do not think so, senor. They do not like strangers in their camps.

"But it is not difficult to build things. Many people in San Felipe build their own homes, and all people on the plantations do."

Pedro looked round the tree. Most of the people were loafing, idle and bored. He looked back to Maria.

"You're right," he said. "We could build platforms, and it would be worth while."

He looked about the tree and recalled that almost all the men were away in the boat with Manuel.

"We can start on it tomorrow," he said.
"But you'll want to sleep tonight, too. Why not take some of those parachutes," he pointed toward the pile, "and make hammocks of them? All you have to do is tear them up and tie ropes to the ends. That would do for a while."

"But senor!" Maria was shocked. "They are expensive! They belong to your government! We should not damage them!"

Pedro grinned.

"Let the government worry about that, muchacha! If they're going to complain, they'll have to find us first, and take us back to land where we can listen to them!"

Maria smiled and nodded her head.

"You are right, senor. It would be foolish to worry about damaging the parachutes now.

She glanced at the women who sat by the supplies, the turned back to Pedro.

"We have eight women here. If we all work, there will be hammocks for all tonight!"

"Thank you, senor!"

She rose to her feet and turned slowly toward the others.

Juana was right, she thought. This one is different.

Maria's father had listened to her suggestions sometimes and had been willing to talk with her. But he was an older man, and even among older men he was unusual in San Felipe.
Giorgo had never listened to her and she had thought that perhaps young men did not approve of women thinking.

Her face was flushed as she knelt to speak with the other women.

***

One of the holes in the boat was about five centimeters across but the others were smaller and the patching kit -- supplied on the assumption that the boats might be used in water choked with the debris of floods -- was a big one. It would take hours of work with the foot-operated pump to re-inflate the boat, but Pedro was sure he could fix it. As he worked Manuel watched and, after a few minutes, found the repair kit from one of the rafts and began work on it.

Five meters away eight women sat in a circle, taking parachutes apart.

Several of them had safety pins in their dresses, and Maria used one to pick at the stitches that held one parachute together. One stitch, then another until she had enough thread loose to get the seam started.

She was going to tear it then, but Juana stopped her.

"Save the thread, senorita. There is no store here to buy more if we need it."

Maria saw that the other women were picking the seams stitch by stitch, and saving the thread. With Juana's help it took about fifteen minutes to open the first seam.
Juana coiled the thread and put it in the pocket of her dress while Maria counted two panels to the side of the open seam and started to pick at another.

Two panels will make a hammock, I think."

"Two will make a hammock for one, senorita." Juana picked up the parachute and counted four panels to the other side of the open seam. Lifted the cloth and bit the thread.

"I want a matrimonio!" She dropped the cloth in her lap and began to pick the seam apart.

"A matrimonio? For you and Ramon?"

"For Ramon, senorita, and I hope he will share it with me. May I use that pin for a moment?"

"Yes." Maria handed the pin over. Hesitated.

"You have been married, senora?"

"I was. For three years. My husband left me six months ago."

"Why did he leave?"

"He had no job, senorita. I found one -- cooking in a restaurant in Val Rita -- but he did not want me to support him. He went to the city -- to Rio Blanco -- and he said he would send for me when he found work."

"And he found no work?"

"He found work -- a friend told me that -- but he also found another woman."
Maria's face showed her sympathy. "I have heard that sometimes happens in the city, senora. I am sorry for you."

Juana smiled. "It happened, senorita. I missed him at first, but one does not miss a man forever. There are others."

Maria was shocked. "And you found one?"

"I found two, senorita."

"Two men! That is strange." Maria was not sure whether to believe Juana or not.

"I would have thought so, once. Now -- it is something one does, sometimes. Neither of them was willing to support me, so I gave neither of them rights over me."

"If one had been willing to support you?"

"Then I would have been his, and I would have been glad of it. I went with two because I thought one would make up his mind."

"And neither of them did?"

"I think one of them would have, but..."

"The flood."

"The flood."

"And now?"

"Now I think both of them are probably dead."
"So you will sleep with Ramon?"

"Ramon saved my life, senorita. I belong to no-one else so I am his, if he will have me.

"I don't know how long it will be -- if we ever get back to land he will probably leave me -- but while we are here I am his. It is good to belong to someone."

Maria glanced to the side, where Pedro worked on the boat, then looked back at her work.

"I have never belonged to anyone but my father and my mother," she said. "That is not the same."

"No, it is not the same." Juana glanced at Pedro, then looked at Maria again. "You would like to belong to the senor, no?"

Maria blushed, then smiled. "I would like very much to belong to the senor!"

"But you make a small hammock. One in which he will have to sleep alone."

Maria looked at her.

"We are not married, senora! And I am a virgin!"

Juana smiled. "Ramon and I are not married, senorita. And I wish I had my virginity to give him."

"You think I should sleep with the senor? What would he think of me?"
"That depends on how well you treat him, senorita. If you are 
virgin when you go to him, he will have no doubts about you. If 
you treat him well enough, he will not care about anything else.

"But we are not married, senora. It would not be right!"

"Right, senorita? What is right? Right is something you worry 
about in the village, where your parents and the priest and all 
your friends watch what you do -- and when you have to think 
of the future because you will live in that village for the rest of 
your life.

"Here," Juana waved her hands toward the sea. "Here you have 
no parents. There is no priest and you may have no future."

"But...." Maria had nearly finished ripping the second seam 
now. She stopped and listened as Juana spoke. She set the cloth 
down and looked at the other women. Saw the way they looked 
at her.

Then she picked up another section of parachute and counted 
four panels beyond the four Juana had chosen for herself. Lifted 
the thread to her teeth again and hesitated. Juana watched.

Maria looked at her, then bit the thread. Juana smiled and 
handed her the safety pin.

"Better finish the single hammock too," she said. "For yourself. 
Men like to think they are the ones who make decisions!"

***
They heard the buzz of the motor several minutes before the boat came into sight. Several women stopped work on the hammocks, stood and looked around, then sat down and went back to work when they saw nothing.

But the sound became louder and soon Maria's wooden boat, now with the motor from the inflatable on it, came into sight. With Manuel at the tiller and ten men aboard, the bundles and the remains of the second inflatable boat in tow, it churned slowly around the end of a tree and turned toward them.

Two women kept working but the others stood and waved to the approaching men.

Pedro stood and stamped his foot on the patch he had just applied, knelt to look at it and decided it would hold.

Then he walked to the branch to watch the boat approach.

He caught the bow and held it while Manuel shut down the motor and untied the tow-rope from the boat, then passed it forward. The bundles continued to coast toward the branch.

Pablo jumped from the bow and carried the tow rope to one side. He pushed the boat aside with his foot and the bundles drifted past it to bump gently into the branch.

"You got the motor I see." Pedro held the boat as the men began to climb out.

"Si senor, no trouble. And the bundles too." Manuel picked Pedro's machete up from the seat as he waited for the others to
climb out of the boat, and passed it to him as he stepped onto the branch.

"We had to cut a few branches," he said, "but it didn't take long. Ramon took some men ahead over the trees, and they cut from the other end."

Manuel knelt to tie the boat, then turned to Pablo.

"Just tie the bundles up to the branch for now," he said. "There isn't room to unpack them here."

"Seguro." We will do it." Pablo was already tying the tow-rope to the branch.

"I think there are cigarettes in the third bundle, senor -- we could just see them through the plastic.

"We wanted to cut them out and smoke -- but I didn't want to cut the bundle until we got back here. The bundles are not strong, after they are cut."

"You're right." As he spoke Pedro noticed that the men all watched him. "I guess the cigarettes are important."

"They are, senor."

"Then let's get them out."

"Si senor!" Manuel grinned then turned and waved to Ramon and the others, who waited by the third bundle. "Do it," he said.

Pedro and Manuel stepped out of their way as they dragged the bundle to the trunk of the tree and pulled it out of the water. Most of the women joined them as Ramon slit the plastic with
his machete and pulled out a carton of cigarettes. He opened it, and passed packages out to eager hands.

"Senor!" Pedro had never heard anger in Maria's voice before. She stood in front of him, hands on hips and eyes smoldering.

"Yes?"

"You said I was in charge of the supplies!"

"Yes I did but..."

"But this!" Maria waved a hand at the men who were smoking and talking among themselves.

"But they just got the cigarettes and the lighters out of the bundle, muchacha. You don't smoke, do you?"

"No I do not," she said, "but am I in charge of the supplies?"

Pedro wanted to grin but he kept his face serious as he looked at her. He hadn't really meant it when he told her to take charge of the supplies -- it was just something to keep her quiet when there was no big stock of supplies anyway -- but he had said it.

And she was doing a good job. She was the youngest woman there, but the others all looked up to her and followed her lead. A pattern had formed before he noticed it, he realized, but if he didn't back her now the pattern would break, and it might never re-form.

"You are right," he said. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking." He smiled at her, then looked at the bundle. One man knelt beside it, picking up packs of cigarettes the others had dropped. Pedro
took Maria's hand and led her to the bundle, and spoke loud enough for the others to hear.

"I think everybody who smokes has a package of cigarettes and a lighter now," he said. "You take charge of the rest. Give them more when they want them, but only one pack at a time."

As he spoke the man who had been collecting the extras set them by the bundle, stood and walked quietly away. Ramon had been sitting with a group of men to one side but now he stood and pulled a carton of cigarettes from inside his shirt. He walked to the opened bundle and, with an embarrassed grin, laid it on top.

"It will be better," he said, "to get them one pack at a time."

Juana and two other women now stood by Maria. She turned to Pedro.

"But we cannot lift the bundles onto the tree, senor. If some of the men could do that for us, we will be able to sort the supplies and see what we have."

"Seguro!" Paulo looked at the men. Two of them began dragging one bundle up onto the tree, then two more grabbed another.

Maria moved to the bundle that had been opened, and began to re-pack the cigarettes that had been spilled. She was furious with herself.

She had criticized the senor to his face! In the presence of other men! It was unthinkable! If she stayed on these trees too long, she would never be able to live in San Felipe again!
But the senor didn't seem to mind. He had apologized!

And he had been willing to listen to -- even to accept -- her suggestion about the platforms.

He was a strange one, she thought as she rejoined the women who worked on the hammocks.

***

"There's a wild one!" Manuel grinned. With Ramon he had followed Pedro to the piled supplies and both had overheard Maria's words. They stood with Pedro now as he opened the fresh package of cigarettes.

"Too wild, perhaps." Ramon was not impressed. "Those were not good words for a young woman to use to a man! A woman should not be critical!"

Manuel laughed.

"You have never been married, my friend, or you would not say that. Most women do nothing but criticize men in their hearts. But until they are married, they do not speak aloud."

"And after?" Pedro was amused.

"After the wedding, my friend, they criticize their husbands. Often!"

Manuel watched Maria as she seated herself by the parachute and picked up the section she had been working on.
"That one is starting a bit early, perhaps. She will have a hard job to find a husband, talking like that. But the man that takes her will know exactly what he is getting!"

He paused, lighted the cigarette Ramon gave him, then followed the others to a spot of shade near the crown of the tree and joined them as they sat.

"The girl is a good housekeeper too," he said. "She keeps the supplies well. How does she cook?"

"Cook?" Pedro looked at him. "How should I know?"

"But the fish, senor. Did she not cook them for lunch?"

"We thought of them while we were eating coconuts and food bars. We envied you!"

"And you have saved them! For tonight?"

"If you want. Maria says the Indians eat them raw, but I don't. Do you?"

"No senor. But the women can cook them. If they can't, I can."

"Cook? How?" Pedro's surprise echoed in his voice.

"With a fire, senor, how else?"

"A fire? Here?"

Manuel looked around curiously, as Pedro spoke, and realized he could not see a fire. He stood up for a better look around, then sat down with wonder in his face.
"There is none!" he said.

Pedro looked at him in confusion. "Of course not!"

"Now Ramon looked confused. "And why not, senor?," he asked.

Pedro looked at him, then turned to the wondering Manuel. He opened his mouth to speak, then paused.

Why not light a fire on the tree? He had dismissed the idea without thinking, because he had never seen a fire on a tree floating in mid-ocean. Because he associated fires with land. Because he had been trained to clear away underbrush and dead wood, and to light a fire only on bare earth or on rock.

But he had violated one of the prime rules of survival when he dismissed an idea because it was new to him.

He looked again at Manuel. Saw the worn denim and the bare feet. The face weathered by years at sea in a small boat.

He looked at Ramon's torn and dirty work clothes.

Maria still knelt to pick the seams of a parachute apart with a safety pin. Pedro remembered her surprise at his mention of raw fish.

He felt shame as he looked back to the men.

"Why not? I wasn't thinking, that's why not! But we can have one, and we will."

He glanced toward the work party, now relaxing with cans of water and cigarettes.
"I guess Pablo could do it as well as anyone." Pedro opened his mouth to call, but stopped as Manuel touched his arm.

"No senor. You must do it!"

"Light the fire?"

"Yes, senor!"

"Why?"

Manuel glanced at Ramon. The foreman shrugged and turned to Pedro.

"It is the custom, senor. The leader of the camp chooses the site for the fire and lights it himself."

"If you ask Pablo to light it, you make him the leader!"

"How?"

"By asking him to light the fire, senor."

"And what if I asked you or Manuel to light it?"

"Then there would be no fire, senor."

Pedro saw the expression on their faces and shrugged. He drew up his legs and prepared to stand.

"In that case," he said, "I'd better get the wood."

Manuel grinned and pulled him back to a sitting position.
"You don't have to gather the wood, senor. Just choose the spot and light the fire!"

He turned toward the work party and shouted.

"Pablo!"

***

The Manitou was nearing San Felipe and Johnston spoke by radio to Group Leader Martin in Hidalgo.

"No sir. We had a false alarm, but no sign of them yet."

"False alarm?"

"Radar found a reflector, sir, and we thought we had them -- but it turned out to be that first raft we dropped. The one that landed in the trees."

"Nothing else?"

"No sir."

"You checked the whole area?"

"Yes sir. Where they were last reported and up to about 200 kilometers to the northwest -- mets says they should be drifting that way."

"No radio? No rockets or flares?"

"No sir. But we'll find them tomorrow -- I'm sure of it."
"You'd better. The Honshu Maru will be there tomorrow afternoon, and I can't ask her to wait for people we can't find."

"He's out there, sir."

"You think he is. But he had four radios with him and there are no signals. He had two rafts with radar reflectors, and you can't find either one of them. And there was a storm last night that could have killed them all."

"We don't know they were in the storm, sir. It was just a series of squalls and we don't even know exactly where they were."

"No we don't, but mets says there was a fifty per-cent chance they got caught and you know there's a ninety per-cent chance they were killed if they were.

"And you flew twelve hours today without finding them."

"But sir -- there are more than twenty people out there!"

"If they're still there. But there are twenty thousand on shore, and we need the planes."

"So what do we do, sir? Forget them? Write them off?"

"Of course not, but we can't keep a plane on the job full time. If you don't find them tomorrow we'll get a satellite survey of the area -- long shots and close-ups of everything. If they're still out there you have a better chance of finding them in pictures anyway.

"We'll do that, sir."
"You can put a whole decade to work on it if you want to. Use the decade he was in -- they won't be much good for anything until they've found him anyway."

"Those people are out there sir -- I know that. We'll find them if it takes a year."

"You haven't got that long. Even if they still have all their supplies, they only have water for another week."

"Yes sir, I know. Send us the pictures and we'll find them in time."

"Will do. Martin, out."

"Thank you sir. Johnston, out."

***

Pedro had chosen a small depression near the base of the tall vertical branch where the bandana flew for the fire, and Manuel piled some cartons together to make a table for Maria and Juana to work on.

They cleaned the fish with Manuel's knife and Maria toasted them on sticks. Juana borrowed Pedro's machete to cut the hearts out of the palmetto and to slice them, while another woman used Ramon's machete to open the coconuts. She saved the shells for use as dishes, and used the machete to cut the meat into chunks.

The fire became a social center as the meal was prepared and most of the people on the tree gathered in small groups near it. Pedro, Ramon and Manuel sat to one side, Ramon and Manuel smoking and all sipping cans of water.
The Indian had not brought enough fish to make a meal for twenty four people but there was enough to make a welcome addition to a meal of food bars. Palmetto heart, sliced thin like cucumbers, was a tasty side-dish and there were chunks of coconut for dessert.

Juana put two pieces of fish and a handful of palmetto slices on a section of coconut shell. She smiled at Ramon, raised the shell and signalled with her eyes.

"I think she wants me to eat with her, senors." Ramon stood. "If you will excuse me?"

"Of course." Pedro watched the foreman leave.

Manuel smiled and nodded after them. "Our friend has a friend."

"Yes. She's the woman he saved when the raft sank."

"A good way to meet a woman.

"And you have a friend too, senor. Look!"

Maria had filled two sections of nut-shell with pieces of fish, chunks of coconut and slices of palmetto. Now she brought them to Manuel and Pedro.

With a smile she knelt and set the shells down, one in front of each of them. Pedro looked at them, then at the shares other people were getting. He glanced at Manuel, then spoke to Maria.

"This is a lot of fish. It looks like more than my share."
"It is, senor. I have been cleaning and cooking fish all day, it seems. I do not want to eat any now, so I give my share to you."

Manuel nodded and picked up a fillet of fish from the shell nearest him. He broke a bite-sized piece off and ate it, then looked at Maria and nodded.

"It is very good fish, senorita, and very well cooked."

"I'm glad you like it, senors. Please eat it." She spoke to both, but she looked at Pedro.

"Are you sure...?" Pedro hesitated.

"I am very sure, senor." Maria pushed his shell toward him.

"Thank you, muchacha." Pedro picked up a fillet of fish and broke it in half. Ate the halves, one by one. Nodded and smiled to Maria while he chewed.

"Thank you again, muchacha!"

"De nada, senor." Gracefully, Maria rose to her feet and returned to the fire.

Manuel ate another piece of fish and nodded.

"This is good." He turned to Pedro.

"I am grateful for your food bars, senor. They are good -- but they are not the kind of food I am used to. I would not want to live on them for very long."

Pedro nodded. Swallowed and picked up a slice of palmetto.
"I lived on them for a week once, and I agree." He glanced at the fire. "We don't have enough fish tonight, but perhaps the Indians will bring us more tomorrow."

Indignant, Manuel looked at him. Swallowed, then spoke. "I am a fisherman, Senor! Should I wait for the Indians to bring me fish?

Pedro looked up in surprise.

"You want to go fishing here? The Indians catch them with bow and arrow -- can you do that?"

"No senor -- but there must be fish-lines in the rafts! Are there not?"

"I don't know." Pedro looked at him in surprise. "I guess there should be -- I've never used rafts before."

"No boat goes to sea without fish-lines, senor. If there are none in the rafts -- there are some in my boat."

"But you said your boat was crushed."

"It was, senor, but it should still float. It has plastic foam in it, so it cannot sink."

"And could you find it?"

"Perhaps, senor, perhaps not. But I am sure the Indians could, and they would if you asked them to. You could offer them water for finding it and bringing the fishhooks."

"Yes -- I guess so." Pedro was thoughtful.
"And there are other things in the boat, senor. Pliers and nets -- and an axe!"

"An axe? Why does a fisherman carry an axe?"

"For sharks, senor. They get tangled in the nets sometimes, and we must kill them before they do too much damage. I carried an axe for that, and so do most other fishermen."

"So you have an axe -- if you can find it."

"I do, senor. And while we were cutting the branches I was thinking of it. We could have worked much faster with an axe, because some of the branches were too big for a machete."

"Yes."

"The fishing equipment is mostly nets and we could not use them here. They are the best way to catch fish, but they would tangle on the trees.

"But there are hooks and lines too, and with them we could catch our own fish."

There was just one scrap of fish left in Pedro's nut shell now. He ate it, then wiped his hands on the bark of the tree before he answered.

"I wonder if we should."

"Why not, senor?"

"Because of the Indians. They need water but they will not accept it as a gift. They wish to trade, and the best thing they
have to trade is fish. If we catch our own fish -- what will they trade for water?"

Manuel put his last piece of coconut into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed before he spoke.

"You can give them water for bringing my fish-lines and the axe senor, and for fruit and coconuts.

"But while you trade for fish they will have none for themselves."

"How do you know?"

"I know how they fish with the bow and arrow and I know they cannot get many fish that way. Not enough to trade and still have some left for themselves."

"You think we should catch our own fish then."

"I think we should. And I think we should tell the Indians to bring all the coconuts and fruit they can find.

"The fish will come to us, senor, and we can catch them better than the Indians. But we cannot move around on the trees the way they can, so we cannot gather our own nuts and fruit."

Manuel sat back and picked up his water can. Drained it and set the empty can in the empty nut shell while Pedro answered.

"I see what you mean. We will catch our own fish and I'll ask the Indians about your boat next chance I get."

"Good, senor. And if I may, I will look for fishing equipment with the things from the raft."
"Okay."

"But I will still be grateful if the Indians bring my own lines and the axe from my boat."

***

"Jonas Recovery." The voice on the phone was bright and musical.

"Hello. My name is Peter Steiger and I hear you're interested in materials that might be going to waste."

"We are. Do you know of some?"

"How would fifty million dollars worth of logs sound?"

"I think Mr. Jonas would like to speak with you sir. Where are you calling from, please?"

"Houston, Texas."

"Mr. Jonas is not in his office right now, but I can reach him. If you'll leave a number, I'll have him call you. Will you be in for the rest of this afternoon?"

"Sure. Until eight o'clock, Houston time. I'll be in all evening tomorrow."

"I'll ask him to call you before eight this evening, sir. Can I have your name again, please?"

***
CHAPTER 17

Clive Jonas had walked out of an assembly-line job years before, because he thought there should be more to life than time clocks and time payments. He took his pickup truck to the cottage country of mid-Ontario and began collecting garbage from vacationers for a dollar a bag.

He was supposed to take the bags to a township dump and he did take most of them, but he was setting up housekeeping on a budget and some of the furniture he collected was just too good to throw out.

He re-upholstered some pieces that winter and rebuilt a couple of outboard motors and a washing machine he had collected in the fall. He sold them the next summer -- one sofa and an outboard motor to the people who had thrown them away -- and by the end of the summer he had three trucks on the road, a dozen teen-agers sorting through three township dumps on a commission basis, two men rebuilding the goods that came in the back door of his shop and one woman selling them out the front door.

But the business was too good to last and he knew it, so he sold out the next year, before serious competition developed, moved west with a bankroll and an idea and built a multi-million-dollar business by turning other peoples' problems into his profits.

Eurasian milfoil was one of them. A water weed the British Columbia government considered an expensive nuisance, Jonas harvested as a profitable crop from which he made tens of thousands of tons of cattle feed every year. He was on one of his floating harvesters in Okanagan lake when his secretary
found him, and he took the call on a radio-phone in the wheelhouse of a tug-boat.

"Jonas."

"Call for you from Houston, Texas, sir. A Peter Steiger. He says he knows where there's fifty million dollars worth of lumber going to waste."

"Got the number?"

"Yes sir. He says he'll be there until eight tonight. That's about an hour and a half from now.

"Okay. Get him, and patch me through."

***

"What's that?" Pedro pointed to a small yellow box, with the black outline of a fish on it, among the supplies from the raft. Manuel picked it up and opened it.

Inside were a dozen fishhooks with steel snells stuck into a piece of cardboard, a square of plastic sponge partly cut so it could be torn easily into about two dozen cubes, a plastic bottle of viscous pink liquid and two coils of heavy fishline. Manuel looked them over for a moment, then turned to Pedro.

"This is it, senor. I was sure there would be one. Every boat should have fishlines!"

Pedro had been standing as he watched Manuel sort through the supplies. Now he squatted beside the fisherman and took the bottle of pink liquid from the box.
"I wonder what this is?" He turned it in his hands curiously as Manuel watched.

"Fish lure." He read the label. "Wet sponge with concentrate. Effective for all salt-water fish."

Manuel snorted. "Fish lure? Food is the best lure, senor -- and we have food."

"We have -- but I guess this might work if we didn't." Pedro put the bottle back as he spoke, then picked up the square of sponge and flexed it.

"Fishhooks!" Ramon had come and was now looking over Pedro's shoulder. The foreman sat beside them.

"Well fisherman," he said, "I guess you'll have to go to work tomorrow!"

"I hope so." Manuel smiled.

Ramon turned to Pedro with a question.

"The little schoolteacher, senor. What does he do?"

He pointed to Alfredo, now standing precariously on a branch and reaching with a stick for a can floating in the sea.

They watched as Alfredo hooked the can and pulled it toward the branch.

"I was about to throw an empty can away and he yelled at me," Ramon said. "He told me that can would help your friends find us!"
"It might, my friend." Pedro smiled.

"How, senor?"

"We lost the radar reflector this morning. The metal thing from the top of the rafts. Alfredo thinks he can make another one out of those cans."

Ramon's eyes opened wide.

"And can he, senor?"

"He might. He can make something that will look different from the trees on a radar screen, and if they see it from the plane they may come to investigate."

Ramon looked at the teacher with a new respect.

"He is a fool, wearing those city shoes out here. They are slippery and dangerous on trees, but he will not take them off.

"But if he can help us, I will help him gather the cans tomorrow."

"If he needs help, he will ask for it," Pedro said. I have another job for you tomorrow, my friend."

"Oh?" Ramon's look was quizzical.

"The Indian who came with the fish is from a tribe that lived in a mangrove swamp at the mouth of the river."

"The Ayuba, senor. I have heard of them."
"The muchacha says they make their homes in trees. They build houses on the mangrove roots and sometimes in the branches."

"That is true, senor. I have not seen their village, but I have seen pictures of such houses."

Pedro looked around at the hammocks that now hung from every near-vertical branch on this tree and several others, and at the raft that now served as a tent.

"Maria says the Ayuba here have done the same," he said. "They are on a tree like this one, but they have built platforms of sticks on the branches so they have a place to sleep."

Ramon glanced toward the crown of the tree and nodded his head slowly.

"That would be possible, senor. It could be done."

"She says the Ayuba use only axes and machetes for their work, and they tie the platforms together with vines. They need no nails."

Ramon smiled. "Nails are very expensive, senor, and they do not work very well in sticks. We use wire on the plantations, but I have used vines. You split the vines and soak them before you use them. They are soft enough to work with while they are wet, and they are very strong when they dry."

"Then you could build such platforms?"

"I could, senor."

"Will you?"
"I will, senor." He grinned.

"Juana asked me to tell you something, senor."

"Yes?"

"When they were making hammocks today, the little senorita made a matrimonio!"

"A matrimonio?"

"A hammock for two. For two who sleep together."

"Maria?" She's a bit young to be sleeping with anyone. Who does she plan to share it with?

Ramon and Manuel both smiled. Ramon spoke.

"Of course," Ramon said. "You do not know. The young lady -- the muchacha, you call her -- has done everything but rape you for two days now, but you have been too busy to notice.

"I have used the same technique myself, senor, and it is a good one. It is better to ignore them for a while -- but I have never done it as well as you do. I admire you!"

Pedro blushed violently. "Me?"

"But of course, senor. Who else?"

"But she is only a muchacha. A little girl! How could she want me?"

Both men stared at him, astonished.
"You mean you did not know, senor?" Manuel.

"But she's a child!"

Ramon spoke first. "She is no child, he said. She is a woman, and she thinks she has found her man."

Manuel looked at Pedro. "She was to be married next month, senor."

"No! How old is she?"

"Sixteen years, perhaps more. That is old enough for a woman."

"Not in Canada, it isn't. Canadian women don't get married until they're more than twenty years old."

"Too old." Ramon shook his head. "A woman who is not married before she is twenty will be sour," he said. "She will never trust her husband, or respect him."

Manuel spoke now.

"Did you not see the way she looks at you, senor? A child does not look at a man like that."

Pedro glanced at Maria and the other women at the fire, then turned back to his friends.

"She's still a muchacha to me." He looked at Manuel. "And you call her muchacha when you speak to her!"

Manuel's eyebrows rose in surprise and he opened his mouth to answer but then he paused. Glanced at Ramon and saw that the foreman grinned at him.
Manuel closed his mouth and slowly nodded his head.

"I do," he said.

Ramon smiled.

"I noticed," he said, "and I wondered. I thought it might be because the senor called her that."

"No." Manuel looked at the women a moment, then turned back to the men.

"But I knew her when she was a nina. I saw her ride her mother's hip around the village, and I saw her learn to walk. It seems like yesterday that I first heard her called muchacha!

"But she is a senorita now, and I must remember to call her that."

He turned to Pedro.

"She is a senorita, senor, I can assure you!"

Pedro avoided looking at the women as he answered.

"Maybe. But even if I thought she was old enough, I couldn't touch her."

"Why not, senor?" Ramon looked curiously at him. "She is ripe, and she wants you. She will care for you, and give you pleasure."

"But I'm on duty -- and she is in my care."
"Then care for her, senor. That is what she wants!"

"You don't understand. Young girls often think they're in love with rescue corpsmen who help them, but it's not really love -- they're just grateful for the help. The corps knows this, and we aren't allowed to sleep with any women who are under our protection.

Ramon looked at him curiously. "You are like a priest?" he asked.

"No, but I must act like one while I am on duty."

Ramon shrugged "As you wish senor, I would not pass her up!"

He glanced up as Juana walked toward the crown of the tree, hips swinging.

"Juana made a matrimonio too, and I will not pass her up -- or keep her waiting! Good night, my friends!" He stood and followed Juana toward the crown of the tree.

***

In Houston, the phone rang in Peter Steiger's apartment. He picked it up.

"Steiger here."

"Mr. Steiger? This is Clive Jonas. You called my office a few minutes ago."

"I did, but they said you weren't in."
"I wasn't and I'm not now, but all my calls get through somehow. My secretary said you were talking about a lot of wood going to waste."

"Yes sir. About fifty million dollars worth, I'd say."

"Sounds interesting. Where is it?"

"A friend tells me you pay for information like that."

"I do if it pans out."

"How much?"

"A hundred dollars if I do anything with it -- anything at all. Then ten per-cent of the profits if there are any. That's if you have something I'm not already working on."

"A hundred dollars? That doesn't sound like much for fifty million."

"It isn't. That's what you get if I don't make anything out of it. If I lose."

"And the ten per-cent?"

"That could work out to a few million dollars if we really are talking about fifty million."

"How do I know whether you're working on something or not? How do I know you'll pay off?"

"You have to trust me unless you want to come to Vancouver. If you came to my office I could prove it if I was working on
something -- we're a big company now and we have paperwork on everything.

"But the important thing, Mr. Steiger, is that I have my reputation to consider and it's worth a lot more to me than ten per-cent of any one deal. Most of the phone calls I get don't work out to much -- that's the way business is -- but I make my living on the ones that do. I can afford to pay ten per-cent for a good tip, Mr. Steiger, but I can't afford not to pay."

"You get ninety per-cent?"

"Sure. I do the work, I take the chances. I may lay out several million dollars for expenses on a big operation and I may lose it if things don't work out. Ten per-cent is the best deal you're going to get from anyone in this business."

"Okay. I guess that's fair."

"So -- where's the wood?"

"Floating in the Pacific Ocean off San Cristobal. You heard about the flood they had down there?"

"Yes I heard. What about it?"

"Well, that flood washed out half the coastal forest on it's way to the sea. Now the sea is half covered with trees -- it looks like the biggest log boom you've ever seen!"

"How do you know about this?"

"I've seen pictures. I work in photo files for NASA, and I looked at satellite pictures of it yesterday."
"And they show the logs. Okay. You said fifty million dollars worth. What kind of trees are they? Where did you get that number from?"

Steiger was silent for a minute.

"I don't know what kind of trees they are -- all kinds, I guess. There's a lot of hardwood there -- I'm looking at a picture now and I can see that from the way they float."

"You can tell that?"

"Yes. I used to scale logs for Oregon Consolidated. Half my job was looking at air photos of log booms and estimating what they were worth. It was all softwood that I checked there, but I can see that some of these logs float lower in the water so I think they must be hardwood.

"I just made a guess at fifty million, but it's a good guess. I've seen some pretty big booms, but this is worth dozens of them."

"This stuff is on the high seas, is it? Outside anybody's territorial waters?"

"Most of it is. The big boom is more than a hundred miles offshore now and moving out to sea."

"Is there some way I can get copies of those photos?"

"I have one here. I'll send it to you."

"Do that. Don't mail it -- send it by messenger. There should be a Jet Express office in Houston -- call them tonight and they'll pick it up. Tell them to put it on my bill."
"Got a pencil? Good. My account number with them is 6982-J."

"What about the address? All I have now is Jonas Recovery, Vancouver."

"That's all you need. They know me."

"Okay. It's on its way."

"Good. Will you be there tomorrow evening?"

"Yes."

"My secretary has your number. I'll call you after I've seen the picture. So long for now."

"Right. Thank you. Good bye."

When Steiger hung up, Jonas clicked the switch of his hand-set twice.

"Judy. You got that?"

"Yes sir. Tape and notes."

"Okay. Info. I want a credit check and all the usual stuff on Steiger. Then check on long-range seaplanes near San Cristobal -- there won't be any right there, but check everything that's available for charter on the Pacific coast from Mexico to Panama."

"Yes sir."

"The same for deep-sea barges and tugboats."
"Yes sir."

"Call the weather consultants, ask them what we can expect in that area for the next few months."

"Yes sir."

"Get Fawcett to check the legal side of it and call Jenkins in engineering. Tell him to start thinking about a floating sawmill. Maybe a chipper and a pulp-mill too. That's pie-in-the-sky for now, but maybe we could lease a log-carrier from Mac and Blo or something like that. See what he can come up with."

"Yes sir. Will you be in the office tomorrow?"

Jonas looked at his watch. "Yes, bright and early. Call Mary and tell her I'll be home tonight."

***

Manuel looked after Ramon as he left.

"Juana? She looks like a good woman. I envy him!

"And I envy you, senor, even if you don't plan to take advantage of your good luck tonight. I know a little about Maria -- she is a woman of San Felipe -- and I have seen how she looks at you. She won't trap you, but she won't give up."

"But she doesn't love me." Pedro blushed slightly as he spoke. Manuel grinned.

"Of course she does not love you," he said, "but she will if you let her!"
"No woman really loves a man until she sleeps with him senor. She may think she does, but she is not sure.

"But Maria is a virgin -- I am sure of it -- and if you accept her you will be her first man. That is very important to a woman, and if you accept her she will be yours."

"You believe that?" Pedro looked at him curiously.

"But of course, senor!" From the look on Manuel's face, he might have been explaining the facts of life to a child.

"If a woman is a good woman, her first man is her man forever. Why else would a man want to marry a virgin?"

Pedro glanced at Maria as she sat by the fire, then turned back to Manuel.

"Maybe," he said, "but I'm still stuck with the regulations. I guess I'll have to sleep in the boat tonight!"

"Never!" Manuel's face showed his concern. "You will sleep in her hammock, senor -- and you will sleep alone unless you invite her to join you. It would be a very great insult if you were to sleep in the boat! It would make her very unhappy."

"So I should use the hammock?"

"You should, senor. And you should thank her for making it!"

"Okay." Pedro rose to his feet. "And you, my friend?"

"I will sleep in the boat, senor. None of the women have chosen me -- and I'm not sure I want them to. My Carmine is probably
dead now, but I still remember her." With a wave, Manuel climbed down to the branch, walked to the boat.

***

Juana had stood and stretched languorously. Told Maria she was going to bed and walked back among the branches, hips swinging. Seconds later Ramon had left the men and followed her.

That was how it should be done, Maria thought, but she could not force herself to do it.

But she had to do something -- the sun was down now, and the dusk was fading fast. Most of the people on the tree had already gone to their hammocks or had found hollows in the trunk.

She rose to her feet and walked to where Pedro sat looking out over the sea. She knelt beside him and spoke softly.

"May I speak with you, senor?"

Pedro felt a tightness in his stomach as she spoke, but he tried to show no sign of it. He turned to her.

"Of course, muchacha."

"I am sorry I scolded you about the supplies, senor. I should not have done that."

Pedro smiled.

"I was wrong, muchacha. You were right to do it. I wasn't thinking."
Maria felt flustered now. She blushed.

"Perhaps, senor. But I should not have spoken like that while other men listened.

"That's okay."

"But I should not have done it, senor." Maria blushed. She nerved herself for what she had to say, but found she could not say it. She looked down at the tree, then at Pedro again before she spoke.

"I made a hammock for you, senor. It hangs near the end of the tree. Your coveralls hang beside it."

Pedro smiled, embarrassed.

"Thank you, muchacha." He rose to his feet and looked down at her.

"Good night, muchacha!"

He walked to the end of the tree, where the matrimonio waited.

Maria stayed where she was. Felt a tear trickle down her cheek.

Muchacha! Would he never learn?

***

A matrimonio is big but the edges are cut short and weight pulls it closed except for a narrow slit at the top. As Pedro climbed into the hammock it became a soft, dark, private cell.
But not completely private. Sounds from outside passed easily through the cloth and Pedro could hear murmurs and small gasps of delight from the hammock Juana and Ramon shared just a couple of meters away.

And both hammocks were hung from the same branch, so Pedro's hammock moved every time Juana and Ramon moved. He felt motion as they adjusted their positions, then a rhythmic movement it took him several minutes to identify.

Even after it stopped, he found it difficult to get to sleep.

***
CHAPTER 18

Juana's matrimonio was only a few meters from Maria's hammock and it was the first thing Maria saw when she opened her eyes the next morning and she lay for a moment, looking at it.

She had seen matrimonios in use before and had never thought about them. Now she studied the outline of bumps and curves, and found she could not tell which was Juana and which Ramon.

If it were the senor and herself in there, she wondered, which would be her and which him? How would he hold her?

She tried to guess but she had no experience to base a guess on. If she were in there with the senor, she thought, she would be happy. That was enough.

But she was not with him. He had gone to her -- to his -- matrimonio alone, and had left her to sleep alone.

But he had not slept well. Maria heard him as he talked, tossed and turned in his sleep -- as though he were having a bad dream, perhaps. Maria longed to go to him and to comfort him, but did not.

She wanted to go to him for other reasons too, but she could not have stood the shame if he had rejected her.

Now she turned her head to look at the matrimonio she had made. It hung empty!
Quickly she swung out of her hammock and looked about. Other hammocks hung among the branches and some were obviously shared, but there was no way to tell who shared them. Maria stepped over to the matrimonio and looked inside. Pedro's clothes were not there.

Then she smelled wood-smoke. The fire was lit!

Juana had hung a section of parachute the day before to shield a convenient forked branch at water level for a women's washroom. Maria walked out to it, straddled the fork and squatted. Then, pulling her dress straight and running her fingers through her hair, she walked to the fire.

There she stopped and looked around. There should be a woman nearby, she knew, but she could not see anyone.

A branch cracked at the end of the tree and Pedro appeared with three fish dangling from one hand.

Maria felt a flush of shame as he approached.

"Senor! You are awake already! Let me take those!" She ran to meet him and reached for the fish he carried. He smiled and stopped, then turned aside. As she reached for the fish he lifted them over his head, out of her reach.

"Please, senor!" Maria started to reach for them, then checked herself.

Pedro smiled again. "Please what, muchacha?"

"Please," she said, let me have the fish. I will clean them for you and cook them."
Pedro looked at the fish and spoke again. "I was going to clean one myself," he said, "and cook it for my breakfast."

Maria stepped back a pace and lifted her hands in consternation. "No senor. You must not!"

"Must not what, muchacha? And why must I not?" He lowered the fish as he spoke.

"You must not clean them, senor. You must not cook them!" Maria stepped forward and reached again.

"And why must I not, muchacha?" Pedro smiled and lifted them again above her reach.

"Because you must not, senor. Men do not cook their own breakfasts. Not when there are women to do it." Maria reached again, careless of the way her breasts pressed against him as she stretched.

"Why not?" Pedro stepped back and spoke with a smile. "In Canada, many men cook their own breakfasts."

Maria backed away from him and pleaded. "Please senor, let me have the fish."

Now Pedro realized that she was serious. He gave her the fish and followed as she carried them to the fire where she set them on a carton. Then she turned to him again.

"Senor. May I borrow your knife?"

He slipped it from its sheath and handed it to her.
Maria accepted it, then picked up a coconut. Knelt and braced the coconut between her knees. She looked up at him as she spoke.

"I am sorry senor. If you had told me you were going to get up early ...."

She hesitated, then dropped her eyes to the coconut. With the point of the knife she dug the eyes out of it.

"Why should I have told you?" Pedro was curious.

Maria found an empty water can and poured coconut milk into it before she answered.

"So I could get up to make your breakfast, senor!"

"And why should you do that, muchacha?"

"Because you are a man, senor, and I am a woman." She stood and handed him the can of milk, then knelt again at the carton where she had left the fish.

With the knife she cut just behind the gills. Flipped the fish over and cut again. She picked it up, broke the head off and turned to throw it into the sea.

"Don't do that!"

Maria started as he spoke. Pedro apologized.

"I'm sorry, muchacha. I did not mean to startle you. But please save the heads -- all the waste. It will make good bait."
"I will, senor." Maria set the head down beside her and began to gut the fish. Pedro stood beside her and watched.

"Are men not allowed to cook, muchacha?"

"They should not when there are women to do it, senor." She did not look at him as she spoke. "Why did you not tell me you planned to get up early?"

"Why should I tell you, muchacha? I wanted to go fishing -- but there was no need for you to get up."

"You should have told me, senor! You should have let me make the fire!"

She opened the fish as she spoke and dropped the guts beside the head.

The smell of smoke awakened Juana. She turned her head to look at Ramon then, careful not to awaken him, she sat up. Sniffed, to catch the smell of a man beside her, then looked at him again before she poked her head through the slit at the top of the matrimonio. She smelled the morning air and looked about.

No movement in the other hammocks. No movement anywhere except where Maria knelt by the fire.

There was no need to get up now and little work to do if she did, but a thousand generations of Juana's female ancestors had taken pride in being up and about before their men were awake -- and as early as any other women. Had Maria not been up Juana might have been able to go back to sleep -- but Maria was up and the fire was lit. Slowly, Juana pulled the side of the matrimonio down and swung her legs out. Minutes later,
dressed and with hair combed back by her fingers, she walked to the fire.

"Good morning." Maria was spitting a piece of fish on a stick of wood as Juana approached.

"Up before me, Maria. I am sorry!" Juana nodded to Pedro. "Good morning, senor!" Then she knelt beside Maria and picked up a fish. Reached for the knife and slit the fish's belly.

"The senor was up before me. He made the fire."

"The senor?" Juana was shocked. She turned to Pedro. "I am sorry, senor!"

"I'm sorry, senora. I did not mean to make anyone angry, but the world will not end if a man cooks his own breakfast."

"And it will not end if a woman gets up to make it for you, senor." Juana scooped the guts out of the fish. Looked at the fish-head and the guts on the tree and dropped the others beside them. She shook her hand to get rid of the slime, then wiped it on the rough bark of the tree. She sliced the fins off the fish, cut it in quarters and set three of them aside.

Manuel sat up now in the boat where he had slept. As he yawned and stretched, Juana reached for the coconut Maria had opened and an empty water can. She poured the can half-full of milk as Manuel stood with his back to the tree, opened his fly and pissed over the side of the boat. He buttoned his fly as he turned to climb onto the tree.

"Buenas dias, senor." Juana handed him the can of milk.
"Buenas dias, senora." Manuel squatted by the fire and looked curiously at the cooking fish.

"Fish! I thought we finished them all last night!"

"We did." Maria turned the first fish as she spoke. "Senor Pedro was up early this morning. He caught them."

"Senor? I didn't know you were a fisherman!"

"I'm not, but I have fished a bit. I thought I would try it this morning."

"And you caught fish. Good! What bait did you use?"

"A piece of food bar."

Manuel wrinkled his nose. "Not good." He looked at the fish guts and heads Maria and Juana had set aside.

"Those will be better."

"The senor told me to save them," Maria said.

Manuel smiled. "I'm sure he did muchacha."

The fisherman looked at the cooking fish, then at Pedro.

"That won't be ready for a few minutes, and this is a good time for fishing. If I may take your line, senor, I'll see what I can get."

"Your line, my friend. You are the fisherman. I left it hanging on a root down there."
Manuel stood. "Then I'll give it a try before breakfast." He picked up a handful of fish guts and a head. "And I'll take these for bait if I may, senorita."

Maria wrinkled her nose in mock disgust. "Please do, senor."

As Manuel walked toward the tree root Pedro hurried to join him.

"My friend?"

"Si, senor?"

"I need to talk."

"If you wish, senor." Manuel waited until Pedro was beside him, then continued his walk.

"I was up early this morning, my friend. To go fishing."

"Si?"

"Maria was angry because I did not tell her I would get up early."

"She would be." Manuel kept walking.

"And she was angry because I lit the fire."

"Senor!" Manuel stopped, looked at Pedro, then walked slowly on.

"But why should I not make a fire? yesterday, I had to make it."
Manuel looked at him. "You had to make the first one," he said, "because the fire is the center of the camp. You are the leader so you have to decide where that will be.

"But keeping the fire is woman's business. Once the camp is established, men do not light the fire. They do not have anything to do with it.

"And you certainly must not make it, senor, because you are the leader of the camp! Pablo might make a fire and it wouldn't matter much because he is only a boy and he can be asked to help with womens' work. A man should not make a fire but he might, if no woman is there to do it.

"But the leader of the camp must never do it, after the fire is established, because he is the leader. Even if he has no woman of his own, all women are insulted if he wakes up before they do, and if he makes the fire!"

Pedro looked at him curiously. "Or cooks breakfast?"

"Of course. Women cook, and if you cook your own breakfast, senor, it is as though you say you don't need them. Maria is your woman -- at least she thinks she is your woman -- and it is her right to cook for you."

"She is not my woman. I have not slept with her."

They reached the root ball now. Manuel reached for the coiled fish line that hung over the stub of a root, then hesitated. Left it there and turned to speak seriously to Pedro.

"She is yours, senor. You give her work to do and you sleep in the hammock she made."
"But I don't sleep with her."

"And that makes her sad, senor. She wants to sleep with you -- anyone can see that. You should tell her about your rules and she will accept them because she must -- but she wants you and she wants to make your breakfast. To keep a fire for you.

Give her this senor, at least. That is not against your rules, is it?"

"No. But why should she want to do it? Many men in Canada make their own breakfasts, and some of them make breakfasts for their wives."

"Then I would not want to live in Canada, senor, and I don't think Maria would like to live in Canada if she had to live like that. It is a woman's right to cook for her man."

"But men can cook! Men cook in restaurants and I was trained to cook in the corps -- it is something everybody should know."

"Many women know how to build a house if they have to, senor. They know how to catch fish -- and many other things.

"But how would you feel if your woman built a house for you to live in? What if she brought home the fish or went hunting for you? You would be shamed, senor -- and your pride would be hurt. Women have pride too, and you have shamed Maria before Juana."

"A lot of women complain about cooking. They don't all like it."

"No senor. And men don't always like to build houses or to catch fish. Cooking is work -- and it must be hard to do it every
day. Every meal. But it is something a woman does. It is part of her claim on her man.

"I was married to my Carmine for seven years, senor, and in that time I don't think I ate more than a few meals that she had not prepared for me, or served me."

"But you lived in the same village all the time, so that was easy for you. The rest of the world is not like that."

"I am a fisherman, senor. I was away on the water much of the time, and I had to travel to Rio Blanco sometimes. When I went fishing and when I travelled, Carmine made meals for me to carry."

"But didn't you ever eat with friends?"

"My friends were Carmine's friends, senor. When we went to visit, we both went. And if my friends' women did the cooking, Carmine served me my food."

"Every meal!"

"Nearly every meal, senor. We had an argument once -- about four years ago -- and she refused to cook for me for a week. Then I had to cook for myself, and I was shamed by it."

"And what happened?"

"We settled the argument, senor. I had to give in to her because I could not hold my head up in San Felipe when people knew my woman refused to cook for me!"

"But that was the only time?"
"That and a little while when I worked on a big fishing boat. Sometimes we were out for two or three days and we ate on the boat. But that was part of my work, senor, so it does not count. I had to be there, and a man cooked the meals for everyone on the boat."

"That makes a difference?"

"It does, senor. If it had been a woman, Carmine would have been insulted. If I had cooked my own meals she would have been insulted. It is a woman's right to cook for her man."

"But some women complain about it."

"True." Manuel smiled. "But it is also a woman's right to complain! Now, senor, our fish will be cooked soon. Please do not insult Maria by making her serve it cold!"

Pedro looked at Manuel for a moment, then turned and walked back to the fire.

***

As the men walked away, Juana glanced at Maria.

"How was your night, senorita?"

"Solo." Alone. Lonesome. Maria pushed a stick further into the fire. "And yours?"

"Very good, thank you." Juana's face showed concern as she knelt beside the younger woman.

"He did not take you?"
"No."

"He did not take anyone else? Not in your hammock!"

"No. He slept alone." Misery showed in Maria's eyes as she looked at Juana.

"Is there something wrong with me Juana? I have heard men say that I am beautiful. Am I doing something wrong?"

Juana reached out and patted Maria's arm. You are beautiful, Maria. Perhaps there is something wrong with him?"

"No!" Maria's voice was fierce. "There is not!"

Juana smiled. "So! He is perfect. I am willing to believe that, because you will not believe anything else. But even perfect men sometimes have to be trained. Perhaps we should train him."

"Train him?" Maria was shocked. Juana smiled.

"Think of it another way if you wish, senorita. Teach him, perhaps.

"But most boys don't know much about women until after they grow up, and many of them never learn.

"When they're growing up they are taught not to bother women. I think perhaps the senor does not know how you want him, or what you wish to do for him.

"It's something he wants but he has learned to pretend he doesn't want it because he thinks he cannot have it.
"And you can't tell him how you feel, because he would be shocked.

"So we find another way to show him what you offer, and we teach him to accept. We must show him that he needs you!"

Maria's face relaxed. She smiled. "Show me how, elder sister!"

Juana nodded toward the end of the log.

"Step one, senorita. You must never let him catch you by surprise. Look, here comes Ramon now!"

Juana dug the eyes out of another coconut and poured a half-can of milk. With it, she ran to meet Ramon as he approached the fire.

***

Pedro walked slowly back to the fire, lost in thought. The world had been so simple before!

He had jumped on more than a dozen disaster sites in his three years with the corps, and he never had problems before. Now he realized that the corps offered him more than technical support -- it also offered him isolation from the people he met in the field.

When he had jumped with his decade the problem was simple. Find survivors and give them first aid if they need it. Feed them, and move them to a refugee camp. It didn't matter much what they thought or what their customs were -- they were in the hands of the corps and the corps' procedure prevailed. If the people he helped before had any thoughts of their own they didn't offer them while he was digging them out of rubble,
splinting broken bones, handing out food or helping them into a helicopter. They were in his world, not theirs, and they did things his way.

But these people were in their own world. Not the world of their choosing, perhaps, but a world that was theirs as much as it was his. They had their own way of life and they expected him to live by -- or at least to respect -- their rules.

And what rules! He was not allowed to carry any food around the camp, or to prepare a meal for himself!

He must make a fire one day, because no one else is allowed to do it. The next morning he is not allowed to do it.

Because he allowed a girl to serve him a meal one day, he was not allowed to cook his own breakfast the next!

He paused to watch Maria and Juana working and talking by the fire -- their fire. Then he saw Juana hurriedly pour a can of coconut milk and run with it to meet Ramon as he approached.

He saw the look on Ramon's face as she greeted him.

Perhaps, he thought, these people have something after all.

***

In Vancouver, a taxi driver delivered an envelope to the front desk of Jonas Recovery while the night guard was still on duty. The guard signed for the envelope and he waved it as Jonas walked in.
Clive took it, tore it open and pulled out the picture. He laid it on the desk, turned on the reading light and leaned over to look at it.

Then he glanced at the guard. "Got a magnifying glass here?"

The man opened a drawer and rummaged through it. Closed it, opened another. Closed it too.

"No sir. He stood. "I'll find one."

Jonas straightened and picked up the picture.

"Never mind, there's one in my office. Bring me a coffee, will you? And call Judy -- see if she has the information I asked for."

***

CHAPTER 19

Pedro and Ramon met at the fire and sat down together. Ramon took a sip of coconut milk, swallowed, turned to Pedro and spoke.

"So. Today we build the platform, senor."

"Wrong. You build it, my friend. It is your job."

"If you wish, senor. But may I have help?"

"All you want. Manuel will take some men for fishing, and the teacher will be working on the reflector, but you can use everyone else."
"I'll help too, when I can. Have you planned the job yet?"

"I have, senor." Ramon pointed to the branch to which the rafts had been moored and to another, also nearly flat on the water, about ten meters from it.

"If the Indians bring the axe, senor, I can cut logs to build a platform across those two branches. That would give us plenty of space."

"But can you find the logs?"

"I think so, senor, with the boat. I saw some when we went for the bundles, and there must be others."

Manuel spoke from behind them.

"You will find the logs, my friend, but I don't think you want to build your platform that way."

Ramon turned. "Oh? Why not?"

Manuel carried a fish. He handed it to Juana before he turned back to the men.

"It would be too heavy, my friend. Don't forget this tree is floating in water." He squatted beside Ramon and pointed.

"See. Even now those branches slope down to water level. If you build your platform with logs it will be very heavy, and they will slope down farther."

He turned to Pedro.
"And I wonder, senor, how it will change the stability of the tree."

Pedro looked up. "How so?"

"I have been thinking, senor, and I am not sure this tree is stable. It might roll over in a strong wind or if we get big waves."

"Roll over? How?" Ramon was incredulous. "Look at those branches lying on the water -- they will keep it steady."

"Perhaps, but look." Manuel pointed to the high vertical branch nearby.

"How much does that branch weigh? And all those other branches sticking up?"

"How much wind do they catch? Very much, my friend -- as much as the sail on a big boat.

"And with that wind, they could tip the tree. Just a little bit."

"A little bit of tip won't hurt."

"No? Think again." Manuel pointed down. "Think of the branches under the tree -- the ones we can't see. How many are they, and how big?"

"Those branches are trying to float -- they are pushing up. For now, they do us no harm.

"But if the tree leans a bit -- then what? It may try to find a new position to float in and it may roll over."
"And the sharks are waiting." Pedro said.

"The sharks are waiting, senor."

"So what do we do?" Ramon asked. "Is there anything we can do?"

"I think so, my friend. You have seen an outrigger canoe?"

"I haven't seen one, but I have seen pictures."

"They are very stable." Manuel pointed to the branches Ramon had chosen for his platform.

"If you were to push a big log -- perhaps a meter in diameter -- under those branches, it would lift them out of the water a bit and make them level.

"And then if you tie the log to the branches very securely, this tree would be stable like an outrigger canoe. It could not roll this way" -- he moved his hand in a circle -- "because the log would hold the branches up. It would not roll this way" -- he moved his hand in a reversed circle -- "because the log would hold the branches down."

"Yes."

"You might even be able to get two logs under there. One at the tips of the branches and one beside the tree. They would be only a few meters apart."

"Yes!" Ramon's interest showed in his face and in his tone of voice. "Then it would be easier to build the platform because we would have only a few meters to bridge, not ten."
Ramon glanced at Pedro, then turned back to Manuel.

"But there is a problem, my friend. How do we get the log under the branch? We have no tractor."

"And you don't need one. You could use levers to push the end under, no?"

"We could. But then?"

"Then -- do you know a Spanish windlass?"

"Ramon nodded. "I know it, but we need ropes."

"I think you have them, my friend." Manuel turned to Pedro. "The small ropes from the parachutes -- they are very strong, no?"

"They are."

"And the parachutes are gone now -- the women used the cloth and some of the rope to make parachutes. Could our friend not use the rest of the ropes?"

"Of course -- but what's a Spanish windlass?"

"A fisherman's trick," Manuel explained. We use it to haul heavy boats up on the beach."

"You run two lines very close together -- or you double one line. Then you push a stick between the lines and twist them, one around the other. It is hard on the ropes, but one can pull very big loads with it."
"It's a logger's trick too," Ramon said, "for moving heavy logs when there is no tractor. I have never done it, but I seen it done."

"But," he turned to Manuel, "it works best with very thick ropes. The ropes from the parachute may be strong enough, but they that very thin!"

"There are very many of them," Manuel said. "A bundle of thin ropes works just as well as a thick one."

"True." Ramon nodded his head slowly.

"We could put three logs under the branches, perhaps. That would be better still for the platform."

"Three logs would be better, my friend, but don't forget that someone must cut them!"

"Senor?" Maria spoke as she approached.

"Yes?" Pedro turned as she knelt beside him with some chunks of coconut and a fillet of cooked fish on a piece of coconut shell in one hand and an open can of water in the other.

"Your breakfast, senor."

As Maria returned to the fire she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. Hotan, the Ayuba, splashed across some apparently-open water and jumped onto the tree with a bunch of plantains balanced on one shoulder and a string of coconuts hanging from the other hand. Maria watched him approach and wondered if he had ever left a woman to spend the night alone. She was sure he had not.
But as the Indian neared, his pace faltered. He sniffed the air, hesitated, then walked slowly forward and spoke to her.

"Good morning, lady." Hotan's language sounded guttural but the words were more courtly than Spanish. But Hotan did not look courtly now -- his face was troubled.

"Good morning, Hotan."

"Your gentleman, lady. He is eating breakfast?"

Maria glanced to the side where Pedro sat about two meters away. Pedro had stopped eating and waited for the Indian to turn to him, but Hotan appeared to be unaware of his presence.

"He is eating, Hotan."

"I am sorry, lady. I am late. I did not know he had fish and I thought to bring him plantain for his breakfast." He broke a plantain off the bunch he carried and handed it to Maria.

"Thank you, Hotan. I will cook it for his lunch." Maria took the plantain and set it beside the fire.

"I came to speak with him, lady. May I wait?"

"Please do, Hotan. Would it please you to sit while you wait?"

"Thank you, lady. It would." Crossing his legs, Hotan sank to a sitting position on the log and closed his eyes. The women continued their cooking and the other men continued eating as though the Indian were not there. Pedro waited a minute, then spoke to Maria.

"Muchacha?"
"Senor?"

Pedro nodded toward the Indian. "Did he come to see me?"

"He did, senor."

"But ... " Pedro hesitated. "But why doesn't he speak to me?"

"Because you are eating, senor. He will not interrupt."

"But I can't just ignore him! Should I speak to him?"

Maria glanced at the Indian and shook her head.

"While his eyes are closed, senor, he pretends he is not here. He would be offended if you noticed him."

"Then what should I do?"

"Finish your breakfast, senor. When you are through I will tell Hotan and he will open his eyes."

"What does he want to talk about?"

She nodded toward the plantains and the coconuts now resting on the tree beside Hotan.

"He wants to trade, I am sure, and I think he wonders about our fish."

"I'd better speak to him."
"He will be offended if you notice him before you finish your breakfast." She shot a glance at the Indian. "He wonders what we are speaking about now, senor."

Pedro looked at Hotan and saw the look of worry on his face. He gulped the rest of his fish, drained the can of coconut milk and stood.

"Okay. I'm done. What now?"

Maria grimaced. Perhaps the senor did not care for her cooking! She kept her thoughts to herself and answered his question.

"Now I tell him you are finished, senor." She spoke a few words to Hotan. The Indian opened his eyes, jumped to his feet and spoke.

"He greets you, senor. He hopes you enjoyed your breakfast."

"I did, thank you. And tell him I'm glad to see him. He glanced at Ramon and Manuel, who continued eating, then turned back to Maria.

"Can we offer him anything? Should we?"

A cigarette, senor. All Indians smoke when they can, but cigarettes are very expensive and they do not have much money."

"It would be good to offer him a can of water too, senor."

"Give him water, of course. From the corner of his eye he saw a movement and turned to see Ramon, without looking at him, take a pack of cigarettes and lighter from his pocket and hold them up. Pedro took the pack, pulled a cigarette from it and
offered it to Hotan as Maria translated. He smiled, and spoke as
Maria brought the can of water.

"He hopes, senor, that you are keeping enough cigarettes for
yourself and for the others here. He sees there are not many left
in the package."

"Tell him we have more.

An eager look came over Hotan's face as Maria translated.

"He asks if you have matches, senor. He says it is very difficult
to make fire out here.

"They make fire with stones," she explained.

With Ramon's lighter Pedro lit Hotan's cigarette. As Hotan
watched he lit the lighter a couple of times, to demonstrate how
it worked, then handed it to the Indian. Hotan accepted it
dubiously and set it down on the tree.

"Please apologize to him. Tell I should have thought about a
lighter."

Maria spoke. Gravely the Indian bowed his head.

"He thanks you, senor. But he wonders what he can offer in
exchange for it."

"Would he accept it as a gift -- with no exchange?"

"Not from you, senor. He would accept a gift only from a
member of his family or a very close friend. Never from a
stranger, and especially not from a white man."
"Why not?"

"It is his way, senor."

"Okay." Pedro thought for a moment, then continued. "Tell him that Manuel left a boat among the trees somewhere. The boat is no good now, but there are things in it that we want. Tell him we will give him another lighter and three packages of cigarettes if he will find the boat and bring these things to us."

The Indian looked worried as Maria translated. He hesitated before he answered.

"He knows where the boat is, senor. He asks what things you want from it."

"Everything, but we don't need it all at once. The axe is most important -- we need that first. There are also fish-hooks and lines, ropes and nets."

The Indian's face fell as Maria translated. He spoke slowly, obviously embarrassed.

"He says he is sorry, senor. When they found the boat, his friends thought it had been abandoned. They have used the axe, they have used the fishline and the rope to make things with, and they have cut some of the nets to make hammocks. They will bring you the axe, senor, and the hammocks they made from the nets."

"That's all right. The boat was abandoned, and we don't mind them using things. Tell him to keep the nets, the ropes and the line -- anything they have made from them. We want the axe and the file though -- tell him we need them to make platforms with. The other things don't matter."
The Indian's face brightened as Maria spoke.

But the smile did not last. It faded. The Indian spoke again.

He is still sorry about using the tools, senor. He cannot accept the lighters for bringing you what is already yours.

The lighters still lay on the trunk of the tree in front of Hotan. He pushed them toward Pedro as Maria spoke.

He knows that we catch our own fish now. He wonders if we do not wish to trade for water any more, and he is worried."

"Tell him we still wish to trade for water, but we don't need fish. He brings coconuts and fruit now -- we will trade for nuts and fruit."

He would rather trade for fish, senor."

Why?"

"Because they need much water, senor. "Fish are expensive, and coconuts and fruit are cheap. They know the water is expensive, and they offer us more expensive food in trade for it."

Pedro took a long, slow drag on his cigarette, then flicked the ash from it before he spoke again.

"Why does he think the water is expensive?"

"He knows it is, senor, because it is in cans."

"Does it have to be expensive because it comes in cans?"
Maria looked at him curiously. "Does it not, senor?" "Why should it?"

"Because of the cans. Everything that comes in cans is expensive, even if it is very cheap without the cans.

"In San Felipe the children throw fruit at each other for play -- but fruit in cans is very expensive."

"Tell him that fruit and nuts are very valuable to us. More valuable than fish.

"Tell him it is easier for us to catch fish than to find coconuts and plantain and palmetto, because the fish will come to us but the nuts and fruit will not."

Maria spoke, the Indian answered.

"He is glad, senor, because they have no fish for themselves when they trade fish with us. He says fruit and nuts are easy for the Indians to find, for now.

"But he wonders what they will do when fruit and nuts become harder to find. He says the fruit will be spoiled in a few days, and he is afraid the trees will not stay together very long. He is worried."

"Tell him I am worried too, but my friends are looking for us. Tell him he will have water as long as we have water, and that he and his friends will be able to return to land with us when my friends come."

"He thanks you, senor."
Now Pedro heard Manuel's voice off to the side. Manuel faced Ramon as he spoke and Hotan did not realize that Manuel had joined the conversation.

"The fuel, senor! I had three or four hours' fuel in the boat -- that would be five or six hours for your motor, because it is smaller than mine. They could not bring my motor but they could bring the fuel. Tell him the tank will float -- he doesn't have to carry it while he walks on water."

Pedro turned to Maria. "Can you translate that as though I said it?"

She nodded and translated.

Hotan nodded, and answered. Maria turned again to Pedro.

"He will do it, senor."

"Does he know about fuel and fuel tanks?"

"Of course, senor. They had a motorboat of their own."

"I'm sorry. I don't know anything about them. Will he bring the axe now? Ramon needs it soon."

"Maria spoke. The Indian stood and waited."

"He will, senor. But he came with plantains and fruit to trade -- he would like to make a trade before he leaves."

"Of course." Pedro stood. "What should we offer him?"

"A case of water, senor?"
"Okay." Pedro watched as Maria stepped to the fire and picked up one of the cases of water stacked beside it. She handed it to him and he placed it on the tree beside the plantains and the coconuts.

The Indian smiled and picked up the case. Nodded and turned. Ran down the tree and splashed across the water on three small logs.

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CHAPTER 20

The trees that had punctured the rafts had drifted away, and left nearly fifty meters of open water. Pablo was running the boat and he had dropped Ramon and four others on the drifting trees, where Ramon planned to cut a supply of poles while he waited for the axe.

Alfredo had gone with them, still dressed in the remains of his suit and still wearing his hard-soled shoes. He had collected every can within reach of the tree and piled them on the trunk, but many had floated away and some now drifted around the trees on which Ramon's crew would work.

Now the boat carried five fishermen to other trees where they would try their luck for the day. Manuel stayed on the home tree to fish from the branch to which the rafts had been moored.

Pedro stood near the base of the vertical branch where the polka-dot bandana still waved, patiently pumping up the boat he had repaired. He didn't see Maria approach and he was startled when she spoke.

"Senor?"
Pedro looked up.

"The radio senor. The schoolteacher said it would not work."

"Yes."

"And he was right. You tried it this morning, and it did not work."

"Yes."

"But the schoolteacher has been collecting cans, senor. Why does he do that?"

Pedro looked at her. Saw her curiosity.

"He hopes to make a radar reflector, muchacha. To replace the one we lost to the shark."

"He can do this senor? He understands these things?" Maria was impressed.

"He understands, and he might be able to it. Do you know about radar?"

"I have heard of it, senor. It finds things in the dark, and in storms when men can't see."

"Yes -- but it can't find everything. It could not find the life rafts."

"No, senor? Why not?"
"Because they are made of rubber and air, and rubber is like glass to radar. It will not reflect a radio beam.

"Even these trees do not show well on radar. They are just a blur.

"Radar works best on metal. That's why the reflectors on the rafts are made of metal, and they are shaped to reflect the radar beam very well."

"So the radar can find them, senor?"

"Right. Radar can find a reflector like that from a long way away. It makes a signal that is very easy to see."

"But the plane that was looking for us before had no radar, senor?"

"It had radar and it was looking for our reflector. But the reflector was down here among the branches, so the signal was weak and the radar couldn't see it. That's why I wanted to get it out into the open."

"And the shark ate it."

"And the shark ate it, muchacha.

"But Alfredo thinks he can make another one. If he ties a lot of cans together into a big bundle and hangs it up high, the radar will be able to see it. The man watching the radar will know it is metal, and the plane will come."

"Alfredo will make a bundle of those cans and hang it up high, senor?"
"He will." Pedro pointed to the vertical branch, it's top about fifteen meters above the trunk of the tree.

"Up there. Where it will be out in the open so the radar can see it."

***

A scream of pain rang over the sea. Pedro jumped to his feet. Pushed past Maria and ran to the open part of the tree trunk. He looked across to the trees where the wood-cutters had landed, and saw the boat with four men in it heading that way.

Pedro shouted but the boat did not turn.

"He cannot hear you over the motor, senor." Still holding his fish-line, Manuel joined Pedro.

"We've got to get him." Pedro funneled his hands to his mouth and shouted. "Pablo!"

Manuel's hand caught his arm. "Wait, senor, the fisherman said. When he reaches the tree he will stop the motor. Then he will hear."

Pedro looked at the fisherman and nodded.

"You get him back here then."

Pedro dashed back to the piled supplies and found his jump bag. He heard Manuel's shout and saw the boat start to return as he turned back to the fisherman.
The boat came at full power, then slowed and swung a sharp turn to coast past the tree. Pedro jumped and landed on one of the four men still in it.

He heard a thump beside him as Manuel landed in the boat. The fisherman stumbled and caught himself on the gunwale. Then Pablo opened the throttle again and the boat surged forward.

Pedro stood with one foot on the gunwale as the boat approached the other tree and jumped as it swung alongside. He sensed that Manuel and at least one man had jumped with him and were keeping pace as he ran toward the screams. He jumped the gap to the next tree and turned to where four men with poles worked at the tree beyond.

Pedro skidded to a stop beside them and saw that the next tree over lay directly beside this one, leaving a gap of a few centimeters between trunks three meters in diameter.

In the gap was Alfredo, one leg caught at the knee and the other raised at an un-natural angle with the foot almost pushed into his face. His screams were weaker now and his face was white and beaded with sweat.

Ramon sat above him on the tree-trunk, feet braced against the other tree. He was trying to lift the injured man out of the gap while the others pried the trees apart.

"He slipped, senor." One of the men spoke as he leaned against his pole.

Pedro set his jump-bag down and opened it. Pulled out a sealed paper packet which he slipped into his shirt pocket, then turned and spoke to the men with the poles.
"Lay off that for now."

As the men relaxed Pedro slid down the sloping side of the tree trunk and caught himself with both feet on the far tree when he was within reach of the injured man. Through his legs he could feel the gentle movement of the trees as they rubbed, one against the other.

He pulled the packet from his pocket, tore the paper and lifted out a one-shot hypodermic needle. Caught Alfredo's flailing arm with one hand but could not hold it still.

Then Ramon caught the arm with both hands and held it while Pedro tore the shirt loose at the shoulder, pushed the needle in and pressed the plunger.

They both watched as the screams stopped and Alfredo's face relaxed.

"Hold him!"

"Si senor." Ramon slid his hands under Alfredo's arms as he slumped.

Pedro looked at the men who stood on the log above him. The fishermen had arrived now, and the wood-cutters were explaining the problem to them in graphic detail.

"Manuel?"

"He is not here, senor." One of the wood-cutters interrupted his tale of horror to answer. "He went back to the boat."

Another voice. "Here he comes now, senor. He has rope."
"Good. You others -- there are more of you now. Someone cut more poles."

"Si senor." Four men moved off toward the branches.

"Two of you," Pedro spoke again. "Get ready to help lift him out!" Two men slid down until they could straddle the gap.

Manuel jumped across and stood on the tree at Alfredo's back. He held a coiled rope in one hand.

"I have rope, senor. We can pull from above!"

"Okay. Throw it down."

Manuel dropped the end of the rope behind Alfredo. Pedro caught it, slipped it under the man's arms and around his chest, then passed the loose end back to Manuel.

"His chest, senor. He should have something to pad it." Manuel stripped off his shirt as he spoke.

He looked across to the men standing on the other log.

"Your shirts," he said. Manuel threw his own shirt down to Pedro and watched as Pedro wadded it in under the rope.

The others took their shirts off and threw them down, and Pedro stuffed them in too.

There were eight men above them now, each with a three-meter pole jammed into the gap. As they leaned on the poles the trees moved a few centimeters apart. Manuel strained on the rope, but Alfredo did not move.
Pedro looked up at Manuel, then turned to The foreman beside him.

"Ramon," he said. "Get up there and help Manuel!"

"Seguro." Ramon climbed out of the gap and grabbed the rope. Pedro stayed with the injured man and watched as Alfredo rose slowly free of the trap.

Manuel had Alfredo laid out on the tree and Ramon was already cutting one of the poles into shorter lengths when Pedro climbed out of the gap and knelt to cut the pants from the crushed leg.

Manuel looked at him. "Senor?"

Pedro looked up. "It's bad, but I'll do what I can. Do you know how to make a stretcher with shirts and poles?

"I do, senor." Ramon set the shorter sticks, cut for splints, beside Pedro as he spoke.

"Do it then." With his knife, Pedro began cutting Alfredo's pant leg into strips.

***

Hotan was waiting with Maria and the others when they returned to the tree. Alfredo, his leg carefully splinted, rested on a stretcher made of poles and shirts slung sideways across the gunwales of the boat as Pablo eased it carefully up to the trunk.

Under Manuel's direction two men held the boat in place with ropes while four others gently lifted the stretcher onto the tree and carried it into the shade of a leafy branch.
The women followed and one, about thirty years old, stepped forward to kneel by Alfredo and use the hem of her skirt to wipe the sweat from his face. Then she turned to Pedro.

"He sleeps, senor."

"Yes. I gave him a shot." Pedro mimed squeezing a hypodermic with one hand.

The woman looked at Alfredo, then turned back to Pedro.

"And he will wake?"

"Yes. Probably in about two hours."

"But he will not be well?"

"No. His leg is broken. I've done what I can, but it is very bad."

The woman nodded sorrowfully, then turned back to Alfredo and stroked his face gently. She looked at Pedro again.

"I will stay with him, senor," she said. She sat beside Alfredo and gently stroked his face.

As Pedro turned he saw Maria standing close behind him, Hotan at her side. The Indian carried an axe, pliers, a machete and a packet of leaf tied with fishline.

Maria spoke first. "Senor?"

"Yes?"

"Hotan is here, with the tools from the boat."
Pedro turned to Hotan. Maria spoke.

"He says there are fish-hooks too, senor."

Hotan offered the packet. Pedro hesitated but the Indian smiled and pushed the packet forward. Pedro accepted it, untied the line and opened it.

Inside were four lead sinkers and a half-dozen fish-hooks stuck into a piece of twig. Pedro turned to Maria.

"Thank him for the tools. And tell him we thank him for the fish-hooks, but we don't need them. We have some of our own. Would he like to have these ones?"

"They don't use fish-hooks, senor. They fish with the bow and arrow."

"But bow and arrow is not very good for fishing out here. They could catch more with these." He picked the twig with the fish-hooks out of the package.

"He would not use them, senor."

"He could. Manuel could show him how."

"He knows how, senor, but his people do not use them."

"Ask him."

Maria spoke to the Indian.

Hotan smiled and looked down. Shifted from foot to foot, then looked up and answered.
"He does not want to talk about fishing, senor. He asks about Alfredo. He hopes he will live."

"He will live, but he may have trouble walking."

The Indian's face was somber as Maria translated.

"He is very sorry to hear that, senor, but he is not surprised. One of his friends saw the way Alfredo was trapped.

"He wonders why Alfredo stopped screaming after you climbed down to him."

"Say it's because I gave him some medicine that made him sleep."

Hotan looked at the injured man as Maria translated, then spoke again to her.

"He thought that, senor. He wonders whether the medicine will hurt Alfredo."

"No. It will just make him sleep so he feels no pain."

The Indian spoke again.

He wonders whether you have more of this medicine, senor, and whether it is very expensive."

"Does he need some?"

"A friend of his is very sick, senor. If the medicine is not too expensive, he would like to buy some for the friend."
"The medicine is not expensive but he would have to bring the friend here. I would have to give it to him myself."

The Indian's reply was a long one and he gestured as he spoke.

"He was afraid of that, senor. He says his friend is too sick to come here. He wonders if you will come to their camp?"

"Could I get there?"

"He will take you, senor."

"What is wrong with the friend?"

"It is a woman, senor. She has a bad cut on her leg. It is infected, and he is afraid she will die.

"I think the woman is very important to him, senor. He speaks of her as the Mother-of-all."

"The Mother-of-all?"

"The Ayuba are different from us, senor. Their women are very important among them. Their chief is a woman -- a very powerful witch. I think it is this woman he speaks of."

"A witch?"

"Their chief. The Mother-of-all."

"And she's dying."

"He thinks she is, senor."

"Okay -- tell him I'll come if he can help me get there."
"I will, senor."

She turned to the Indian and spoke. He smiled and answered, then turned and ran down the tree. Splashed across to another tree and disappeared. Maria turned to Pedro.

"He thanks you, senor. He has already asked some of his friends to bring a canoe. He goes to get them."

"A canoe?"

"They had canoes, senor, when they left their village. He does not use one here because he can travel more easily without it, but he knows you cannot walk on water."

Maria turned and walked to the fire. Picked up four cans of water and brought them to Pedro. Watched as he put them in his jump-bag. Then she sat beside him.

"The teacher, senor. He is badly hurt?"

"Very badly. I think he will live, but I don't think he will be able to walk again."

"You have seen such injuries before, senor?"

"I have. They're part of my job."

"And you know what to do about them. You are a doctor?"

"Not a doctor, muchacha. I have been taught what to do about injuries when there is no doctor."

"Are there doctors in your rescue corps, senor."
"Yes. Every medical student in Canada has to serve in the corps before he is allowed to practice."

Maria had been watching the other tree as he spoke. Now she pointed as a dugout canoe crewed by four Indians emerged from among the branches of the tree to which Hotan had run.

It crossed the open water quickly, sliding right over a couple of the small logs Hotan had used as stepping stones, and glided to a stop at Pedro's feet. Hotan, riding near the middle, waved him into it.

Carefully, Pedro stepped into it and stood while Maria passed him his jump-bag.

But he held his hand to stop her when she would have climbed into the canoe with him.

"No! You're not coming."

Maria stopped with a look of surprise on her face.

"Why not, senor? Who will translate for you?"

"No one. We'll get along somehow!"

"But senor...."

"No!" Pedro sat in the center of the canoe and nodded to Hotan.

With a grin the Indian braced his paddle against the tree and pushed off. Four paddles dug into the water and the canoe shot away from the tree.
Maria watched until the canoe disappeared among the branches. Then she stood and looked round the tree.

Pablo and most of the men were back in the boat, slowly crossing to the other tree. Three women sat by the fire cleaning fish and cutting the hearts out of palmettos. Beside them were stacked cases of canned water, and another stack of empty cans the schoolteacher had collected.

Alfredo lay among the branches, sleeping quietly under the morphine. Beside his improvised stretcher the woman -- Carla -- sat and watched.

Maria had scorned Alfredo in San Felipe and had resented his attentions on the raft. But she had begun to feel respect for him after the senor told her about Alfredo's plan to improvise a radar reflector.

Maria did not believe in magic but she thought of radio, radar and of most technological devices as superstitious people think of magic. She believed in them and knew that they worked, but she assumed that it required more than human wisdom to understand them.

The senor had such wisdom, of course. He was from a far country where such things were known.

But the schoolteacher? Alfredo? Maria had seen only his clothes as he strutted around the village. She had not realized that he shared the sort of knowledge that people like the senor had.
And it was so simple the way the senor explained it. There was a secret shape to radar reflectors -- that was obvious -- but it was more important that they were made of metal. The same metal the cans were made of. The teacher had known that, and Maria knew it now.

Hesitantly she turned toward the pile of empty cans and wondered how she might bundle them.

***

Hotan turned to Pedro as they approached the crown of a tree and signalled him to lie down. Then ducked himself as the canoe speared through the screen of leaves, bumped over a nearly-submerged branch, and passed out into clear water again -- headed for another tree.

They pulled alongside the trunk of this one and the four Indians sprang out to hold the canoe while Pedro climbed out. Then they lifted the canoe over the tree and into the water on the other side. They held it while Pedro climbed in, then jumped in themselves and set off again.

They made several more portages, skimmed through a couple of barely visible channels, then coasted to a stop under the branches of one tree that looked no different from the others.

Hotan smiled, and signalled Pedro to alight.

Now Pedro realized that they had stopped beside a platform of sticks supported on the crotch of a large branch. A teen-aged boy wearing only a loincloth knelt on the platform to steady the canoe and a second watched from another canoe that floated nearby. Pedro stepped gingerly onto the platform and found it solid.
They were near the center of the floating island here and the trees were packed tightly, their branches forming a maze so close that it was hard to tell where one started and another stopped. Hotan led the way along one branch to the trunk of the tree, then across a bridge of sticks to another branch which led to another tree. Indians on several other platforms smiled and nodded their heads at Pedro as he passed, and the paddlers and others followed behind.

Now they approached a platform shielded by two walls and a roof of woven sticks. On a pallet of sticks under the roof lay an old woman, clad in a ragged gray dress, partly covered by a light blanket. Wisps of white hair framed a face contorted in agony. Beside her, the tiny butts of a half dozen cigarettes had been stubbed out on the platform. A naked boy, perhaps six years old, squatted beside her and fanned her face with a large leaf.

Standing on the platform, Pedro looked around. A dozen hammocks -- some made of fish-net, others woven from some kind of fiber -- hung from nearby branches and men, women and children sat in some of them. Hotan stood behind him and the three others who had paddled the canoe stood to one side.

The woman moaned softly as Pedro knelt beside her and rested a hand on her forehead. Her fever was high and she was barely conscious -- probably delirious. Pedro lifted the blanket aside and saw that the skirt of her gray dress was pulled up and a rough bandage of dirty cloth wrapped her right thigh.

With his knife, Pedro carefully cut the bandage from the wound and scraped the poultice of chewed leaves aside. The festering cut under them had originally been a puncture, from the look of it, but it was torn about twenty centimeters to one side.
And it was badly infected. Pedro felt a familiar nausea as he looked at the angry red flesh and the dripping puss, and the feeling of helplessness he knew in the face of tiny microbes he could not see, but which he knew could kill.

Any infection bothered him but for some reason this was worse than others. He felt dizzy for a moment, and thirsty. His leg hurt too now, with a dull ache. He might have banged it on something on the way to the camp but it felt more like an old injury -- as though he had hurt it some time ago.

Usually Pedro felt himself turn cold and methodical -- machine-like -- as he started to work on a patient but this was different, somehow. Something about the old woman and her injury disturbed him.

He opened his bag and took out two sealed hypodermics. Tore the paper wrappers from them and gave the old woman a shot of morphine and an antibiotic.

Then he sat back and watched. In about two minutes her breathing slowed and her face became less flushed. Around him, Pedro felt an electric air of tension relaxed. Behind him, the watchers murmured among themselves.

Pedro felt better now. He was still conscious of the dozen or so Indians who watched every move he made, but he no longer felt as though he were being watched.

There was a water can on the platform beside him. He picked it up and saw that it was empty. Lying flat on the platform, leaning over the edge, he could just reach to fill it with seawater.
He dipped his knife into the water then scrubbed the blade on
his pants to clean it. Then he opened an antiseptic swab from
the jump bag and used it to polish the knife blade.

With the edge of his knife, he gently scraped the pus off her leg.
He could see now that the wound had not started to heal.

Setting the knife down, he gently pulled the edges of the wound
apart. Behind him, he sensed the movement of the watching
Indians. Someone stepped forward and knelt beside him.

Pedro turned his head and saw Hotan, his face gray and sweat
beaded on his brow. The boy with the fan fell sideways in a
faint and Pedro grabbed his arm just before he slid off the
platform. A woman stepped forward, lifted the boy in her arms
and carried him away.

Pedro touched Hotan's shoulder and pointed to the woman's
face, now relaxed. The Indian smiled faintly and seemed to
relax a bit.

Now Pedro opened a third antiseptic swab and used it to scrub
his hands. He opened another and set the paper wrapper on the
platform beside him, then set the swab on the paper.

With his hands he pulled the wound open and held it with two
fingers while he used the swab to wipe the pus from inside the
hole. He looked into it.

There was something inside. He found a pair of forceps in his
jump bag, unwrapped them and set them on the sterile paper in
which they had been wrapped. Then he took Hotan's hands in
his own and placed them one on each side of the wound. He
used Hotan's hands to pull the wound open, then took his own
away.
The wound closed.

He put his hands on Hotan's again, used them again to pull the wound open. He looked at Hotan until the Indian met his eyes, then took his hands away. This time the wound stayed open. He picked up the forceps, reached into the wound and probed.

Hotan's eyes were shut tight now and his lips were contorted as though he was in agony. The woman slept peacefully.

Pedro probed again and found something hard at the bottom of the wound. A sliver of wood, perhaps. He pulled, and felt it pull apart.

He drew out a piece of wood perhaps six centimeters long by two in diameter and set it beside him on the platform.

Hotan's eyes were still closed but he still held the wound open.

Pedro probed again and found the rest of the sliver. Pulled it out and set it on the platform.

He probed again but found nothing this time.

He didn't even notice the wail of the Manitou as it passed over.

When he could not see or feel any more foreign objects he opened a packet of antiseptic powder and sprinkled it into the wound.

Then he looked at Hotan again and saw that the Indian's eyes were still closed tight, the sweat beaded on his forehead.
Gently he took Hotan's hands and lifted them from the woman's thigh. Heard the Indian's sigh of relief and saw him open his eyes again.

Pedro reached for another antiseptic swab and wiped the area around the wound.

Unwrapped a suture and stitched the gash closed. Wrapped a clean bandage around the thigh. Looked again at the woman's face.

Then fainted.

***
CHAPTER 21

Ramon ran out from among the branches and looked across the jammed logs to the home tree. The tall branch where Alfredo would have hung his home-made radar reflector was empty.

He turned to look at the plane that had passed almost directly overhead, then back to the tree.

The eight women stood in the open, holding a ragged bundle above their heads. Ramon stared in disbelief. It looked like a hundred or so tin cans, tied together with bits of string. As he watched, one can slipped loose and bounced off the tree trunk and into the sea. Then another and another.

He put his hands to his mouth and shouted.

"Senor! Senor!"

There was no answer and no sign of Pedro. The women still held their bundle as they turned to watch the receding plane. Then slowly -- as though sagging -- they lowered it as the plane disappeared.

"They did not see us, senorita!" Juana was almost in tears. "We were too late!"

"Not yet!" Maria's voice was fierce.

"The radar can see for a hundred kilometers! The senor said so!"
"But we'll never get this done in time!" One of the women was looking at the bundle they had spent the last hour tying together.

"No." Maria let go her end of the bundle, stepped back and looked at it.

Then she turned to Juana and spoke excitedly.

"We don't need a bundle! A bag will do!"

She ran to the crown of the tree and took down the first hammock she came to. Brought it back to where the women were collecting the cans they had dropped.

***

Ramon watched and wondered. Then he began to understand as three women held the hammock like a bag while the others filled it with empty cans. When it was three times the size of a man, they tied it closed with riser cord.

They carried it to the base of the tall branch and tied more riser cord to it. Maria took one of the cords between her teeth and approached the branch.

She turned her head to drag the improvised bag behind her as she began climbing but she could not take the weight. It pulled her head back and twisted her neck.

She backed down. With Juana's help she tied the cords in a loop which she slung over her shoulder like a knapsack, then tried again.
Ramon looked round in despair. Pablo and four other men had lifted the boat over the tree on which they stood, and were now searching the trees behind him for logs they could use. They had stopped when the plane passed, and the boat now drifted on the other side of a clump of debris about thirty meters away.

Ramon funneled his hands and shouted. Shouted again and saw Pablo wave and start the motor. He turned back to watch the women.

The branch was slightly off vertical and Maria had started on the high side. About three meters up she passed the polka-dotted bandana Ramon had tied to a twig two days before.

Caught between her arm and the tree it tore loose and Maria slipped sideways, part way round the branch. Trying to get back to the high side she slipped further, until she was hanging from the underside of the branch with the bag of cans hanging beneath her.

Ramon watched as she tried to work her way back, but could not. Each move she made she slipped a bit further and finally, clinging desperately, she slid back down.

Three women at the bottom caught her and lowered her to solid footing.

She moved around to the high side of the branch and started up again.

Ramon watched, then turned as he heard the boat approach. It moved slowly as Pablo eased it around a tangle of small logs. Ramon shouted.

"Hurry Pablo!"
Then he paced back and forth looking now at Maria in her struggle with the branch, now at the boat, until Pablo reached him.

Maria was about ten meters up when Pablo and the others jumped out of the boat. They grabbed it and hauled it onto the tree trunk.

Then they spun it round, to clear the motor, and let it slide again into the sea.

All six jumped in. Pablo started the motor and opened the throttle.

Near the top of the branch, Maria clung desperately. She tried to pass a rope around it but each time she reached with her arms she began to slip and had to grab for support again.

As the boat came closer, Ramon saw how the rough bark had scratched her arms and her legs.

Maria was tired now and she knew she was beaten. She looked at the sun-dappled water below and saw the dark shadows cast by several branches. There were also several shadows that seemed to move and which might not be branches, and Maria remembered the screams of the man who had been killed by the shark.

She saw the boat approaching and, in despair, she called to Ramon.

"I cannot do it, senor!"

"That's all right, senorita! Let go the bag! Let it drop!"
"But senor --"

"It will float, senorita! Let it drop!"

The bag dropped into the water, settled a bit, then floated.

Maria clung to the branch, tears and terror on her face. Blood ran from cuts on her arms and legs.

The boat was almost below her. In the bow, Ramon held up his hand and Pablo cut the motor. As the boat drifted, Ramon stood and called to Maria.

"Come down, Senorita. It will be all right.

Maria clung desperately.

"Come down. Move slowly. You will be safe."

"I can't," she wailed. I will fall!"

"We are here, senorita. You will be safe!"

"There is a shark!"

Ramon peered into the water. There were shadows down there, but he could not tell what caused them. He looked back to Maria and called again.

"Come down senorita. There is no shark! We are here!"

Maria started to climb down, and slipped.
The motor roared as she hit the water. Ramon leaned low over the bow as the boat moved forward, and caught her under the arms as she surfaced. He lifted her aboard.

***

A few minutes earlier and nearly a hundred kilometers away, the Manitou had reached the end of one sweep and banked into a turn to begin another. Leaning over the navigator's shoulder, Smithers watched him twist a knob and saw the range-rings change on the screen.

"What's that for."

"Quick check on long range, just to see what's around us. I get nervous with it on short range all the time -- I like to know if there's other traffic about."

The navigator scowled at the scope. "Shit, look at all that clutter."

"What's that? Smithers finger stabbed at a brilliant spot on the screen. The navigator looked at it.

"Don't know. Something strange."

As they watched, the spot disappeared.

"Gone now. You see things like that, sometimes."

"What could it be?"

"Don't know. It has to be metal to show so bright -- an oil drum or something perhaps. When they're at the right angle they sometimes flash like that."
"Could it be a reflector?"

"No way. A reflector is brighter than that, and it reflects from any angle so you get a steady blip. Besides -- we just flew over that area and we didn't get anything. If there'd been a reflector there, we couldn't have missed it."

"What about going back to check?"

The navigator turned in his seat and looked at him.

"We could. But we'd lose a half hour at least -- maybe more -- and we'd screw up the search pattern. That would cost us another hour to make sure we didn't miss anything. Would you rather spend the time checking one random flash that I know isn't them -- or would you rather cover the whole area?"

He leaned back in his seat and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. Shook one out into his hand and put it between his lips. Set the pack on the ledge in front of his console.

Smithers looked at him, then turned his eyes to the scope again. Saw the clutter of drifting logs, but no bright blips.

"Okay. Do it your way."

"I guess I'm a bit up-tight," he said. "The corpsman out there is a friend of mine."

"They're all somebody's friends," the navigator said. I know that. And we'll find him if he's out there.

"But we'll find him because we're a professional search crew, not because we're his friends." He waved a hand at the scope.
"Friends waste time on things like that, because they grasp at straws. They waste so much time on straws that they never make a proper search. Professionals lay out a search pattern and they cover the whole thing."

"I guess so. Thanks." Smithers stepped back from the scope. "I'd better get back to my post." He turned and walked slowly back to the observation port.

The plane was in level flight now, starting another run. The navigator switched his radar back to short range and Smithers and the other spotters peered out of their bubble windows. A hundred meters above the sea they passed over the floating trees with human and electronic eyes searching a path about five kilometers to each side of its course.

Maria and the others saw it from the tree as it passed about eight kilometers from them.

Ramon was more than half-way up the tree by then with the bag full of empty cans well above the surrounding branches. Desperate, he held it out toward the plane and waved it.

The radar in the plane showed nothing, because the branch with it's bag of cans was beyond the designated sweep. Less well-trained searchers might have seen Ramon and the brilliant hammock of parachute cloth, but the corpsmen kept their binoculars on the area they were supposed to cover -- within five kilometers of the plane's flight path.

As the plane flew into the distance Ramon and the others on the tree watched it. Then Ramon continued up the branch and hung the bag near the top before he climbed down.
Slowly, head hanging, he trudged to the end of the tree where he sat in the little cave among the roots. Juana followed and sat with him.

***

Six Indians carrying four big machetes and two axes splashed across to the tree about an hour later. Surprised and frightened, Carla let out a little cry of fear when they jumped onto the trunk near where she sat beside Alfredo's stretcher.

She jumped to her feet and backed away from them. The Indians turned toward her, smiled in apology and nodded their heads, then turned away. One of them spoke, and all six marched toward the fire.

The five women working there jumped to their feet as the Indians approached. Four of them scuttled toward the crown of the tree, where the men were working, but Maria walked forward to meet the Indians.

They stopped about three meters from her, then one man stepped forward and nodded his head. Maria nodded hers in return, and spoke.

"I do not know you, gentleman."

"I am called Hayma, lady."

The men who had been working on the platform clustered on the trunk now, about six meters behind Maria. Ramon stepped forward to stand beside her.

"The senor is not here," Maria said. He went with Hotan to your -- to Hotan's -- camp. I expect them back soon.
"He is at our camp," Hayma answered, "and he is well, lady. He
sleeps now, but I think he will be back soon."

"He sleeps?"

"He performed great magic on the Mother-of-all today, lady. He
was tired when he finished, and he went to sleep."

"He is well, but he sleeps in the daytime. I do not understand
this, Hayma."

"I do not understand it either, lady, but there was great magic.
We all felt it."

Ramon did not understand the words, but he recognized the
tone of concern in Maria's voice, and the look of worry on her
face.

"What is it," he asked. "What has happened, senorita?"

"I don't know, senor." Maria turned to him as she spoke. "He
says senor Pedro performed magic in their camp, and that he
sleeps now."

Hayma turned his eyes to Ramon as the foreman spoke again.

"Why are they here? Do they want water?"

"I don't know, senor. He didn't say." Maria turned to the Indian
again.

"I thank you for the news, Hayma," she said. "But I wonder
why six of you come, when one can carry news."
The Indian smiled and spoke. Maria nodded her head, turned to Ramon and translated.

"They come to help us, senor. He says senor Pedro has helped the Mother-of-all -- their chief -- so they will help us build platforms to sleep on."

"Do you believe him?"

Maria looked at him curiously. "I do, senor. If the senor helped their chief, of course they would want to help us."

Ramon looked at the six Indians suspiciously, then spoke again to Maria.

"We could never get Indians to work on the plantation. I wonder how much help they'll be?"

Maria felt anger, but she kept her answer courteous. "They do not like to work on plantations, senor, and they do not like to work for money.

"But they are used to building platforms, and they want to pay their chief's debt. They will be very unhappy, senor, if we do not accept their help."

"Ask him when the senor will return."

Maria spoke. Hayma answered and Maria translated.

"Soon, senor. He does not know. Senor Pedro was sleeping when they left their camp."

"So what should we do? You think we should accept their help?"
"I know we should, senor. I think we should thank them and that you should drink water with them. I will translate, and you will tell them how they can help us."

***

In the Indian camp, Pedro recovered from his faint with his face pressed against something warm and soft. He opened his eyes and realized that he lay against a woman's bare breast. Pulling back, he saw a broad, flat face with friendly eyes.

He raised his head and looked about. It was mid afternoon, from the position of the sun, and he was still on the platform beside the old woman. A small fire burned on the tree beside him and four Indians sat around it.

The boy who had been fanning the old woman lifted a water can from the fire and set it beside Pedro. Pedro looked at the old woman, now covered again with the gray blanket. He laid his hand on her forehead, and found it still hot.

He lifted the blanket that covered her and looked at the bandage. There was no drainage and he unwrapped it carefully. He lifted the gauze pad that covered the wound, and inspected it.

The angry red color had faded, there was little swelling, and the stitches looked good. The woman would be all right if she recovered from her fever. His jump bag was still open and he used a fresh gauze pad to cover the wound before he rewrapped the bandage.
Now he looked at the can the woman had set beside him -- a water can with the top cut off, half filled with a dark liquid in which tiny bits of bark floated.

Curious, he glanced at Hotan and saw the Indian pick up a similar can and drink from it. The Indian smiled and beckoned Pedro to join him and the others at the fire.

As he approached, the woman who had held him while he slept took another water can from beside the fire and stirred something into it. As he sat, she took the cool can from his hand and set the hot one beside him. Hotan lit a cigarette at the fire and offered it to him. When Pedro shook his head, the Indian took a puff, then passed it to another who stood nearby.

Then the Indian took another sip from his own can, smiled, and nodded to Pedro. Pedro picked up the can beside him and found it almost too hot to hold comfortably. Lifting it to his nose he sniffed, and almost sneezed at the pungency.

He tasted the liquid, and found it surprisingly good. He smiled at the Indians and nodded his appreciation. They nodded and smiled back.

Now the woman picked up two sticks and used them to pull something out of the fire. It looked like a partly burned stick as she laid it in front of Pedro, but as she peeled it with the sticks he realized it was a fresh-baked plantain. He reached to touch it and she caught his hand.

As he looked at her she mimed touching something hot and jerking her hand away in pain. Then she smiled and patted his arm.

He smiled and turned to face Hotan again.
The Indian pointed to the old woman and raised his eyebrows in query. Pedro spread his hands, palms up, trying to indicate hope, but not certainty. Beside him the woman spoke, with certainty in her voice.

Hotan smiled, and Pedro glanced at the woman in surprise. She smiled at him and nodded her head, as thought she were certain the old woman would recover. He hoped she was right.

***

"CRC San Felipe. CRC San Felipe, this is Honshu Maru. Honshu Maru calling, do you read?" The first mate was Japanese, but his English on the radio was crisp and precise.

"CRC San Felipe here." The corpsman on radio watch barely had time to get the words out before Johnston grabbed the mike from his hand and repeated the answer.

"San Felipe here, Honshu Maru."

"Good afternoon, San Felipe. Honshu Maru is now standing by, as close as we can get to the trees. Have you found your party, San Felipe?"

"Just a second." Johnston looked at the radioman. "What plane are they in?"

"392, sir."

Johnston lifted the mike again.

"CRC 392, 392, this is Johnston in San Felipe. Do you read?"
"We read you, San Felipe."

"What's the word?"

"No word, San Felipe, no word."

"CRC 392, this is Honshu Maru. Are you nearby? We have a lot of clutter and we cannot see you."

"We are nearby, Honshu Maru, but flying low. Hang on, we'll squawk."

The pilot flipped a switch on his control panel. As the ship's radar beam swept over the plane a radio responder flashed a strong signal on radar frequency, making a huge blip on the ship's main radar scope.

"We see you now, 392, thank you.

"Honshu Maru has an unidentified echo from something about 15 kilometers from us -- about 75 kilometers to the west of you. It looks like a large object made of light metal. Could that be your party, 392?"

The plane climbed slightly. The pilot turned and signalled the navigator who flipped switches to scan a circle about 100 kilometers around the plane.

"Got it, skipper." The navigator inspected the blip produced by the section of parachute filled with cans. "It's metal all right, but it's fuzzy. Not a reflector."

"Have we covered that area?"

"We did, sir." The navigator checked his log, then continued.
"Got it. It's pretty close to where we saw that raft they lost in the trees. That could be it."

"Okay." The pilot keyed his mike again.

"We have identified that echo, Honshu Maru. Echo identified. Not our party."

"Anything else, 392?" Johnston.

"Nothing sir. No sign."

"How much longer will you stay out there?"

The pilot glanced at his fuel gauges, then thumbed his mike again.

"We can spend another 20 minutes on station, sir. Just long enough for the sweep we're on now, then one more on the way back."

"Okay." Johnston paused a moment, then spoke again.

"Guess we have nothing for you, Honshu Maru. Thank you for stopping."

"You're welcome, San Felipe. Honshu Maru returning to course now. Out."

The mate clipped his mike back in its holder and signalled the helmsman to resume slow ahead.
He stood for a minute studying the strange blip on his radar screen -- almost within sight of where he stood on the bridge, nearly twenty meters above water level.

A man at the masthead with binoculars could check it visually, he thought. He reached for the inter-com phone to call the bosun.

Then the door opened behind him, and the captain spoke from his cabin.

"Are they coming?"

"No sir." The mate turned as he answered. "They've lost track of them, and they can't even find them now. They think they may be lost."

The captain walked to the window and looked out over the mass of drifting trees, then glanced up at the sun.

"A pity," he said. "But we can't help look for them and we can't wait. It will take at least three hours to get to clear water, and we have barely that long 'till sun-set. We'd better get moving."

"Yes sir." The mate cast one more glance at the strange blip on his radar, then turned his eyes to the tricky business of picking a course through the floating debris.

***
CHAPTER 22

Pedro was eating a second baked plantain when he heard the murmur voices behind him. He turned and saw the young woman helping the old one sit up, and placing a framework of small branches tied together with fishing line behind her to support her back. Hurriedly, he moved to her side.

The old woman's Spanish was poor but he could understand her words. "Thank you, my son."

The other Indians nodded their heads as she spoke, but Pedro did not. He stared, wondering about his feelings for her. She looked at him, curious.

"You are surprised at the way I speak, my son? Please forgive an old woman.

"I am the oldest woman of the Ayuba, and they call me the Mother-of-all. I get used to calling men "my son." Please forgive me if it offends you. White men like to be called by their names -- have you a name I can use?

"I am not a white man, Madre, I am half Indian. I am called Pedro." He spoke mechanically, his mind in a daze.

The Mother smiled as she spoke. "You are half Indian, my son, but you think like a white man. No matter -- I thank you, Pedro. You have given my children water, and you have saved my life."

"It is nothing, Madre."
"But it is something, my son. I am shamed to admit it, because I have some small reputation as a healer myself -- but you have saved me. There are no moulds on the trees out here and no spiders to spin webs. I could not have cured myself.

"That is my job, Madre. That is why I am here."

"No, my son. It is your job, but it is not why you are here." She studied his face carefully, closed her eyes for a moment then opened them again.

"No, I cannot see. Among my own people I can see thoughts -- I can see some people's future through their thoughts -- but it is harder to see the thoughts of a white man."

"It is not important, Madre."

"Yes it is, my son. It is important to you, though I do not know why. It is important to me too, because I must live to lead my children back to land again."

"That may not be so easy, Madre."

"Not for a white man, my son. Difficult even for me. But I know some things that you do not. Some of the old ways. We will see."

"Yes, Madre."

"But first my son you must tell me what you know about where we are, and why you are here, and about your friends who look for you with the airplane."

"It is a long story, Madre." Pedro looked at her curiously, wondering how much she would be able to understand.
The Mother-of-all reached forward and rested her fingertips on his arm.

"If you have trouble telling it, my son, there is no need. I must know, but if you don't want to speak just think about our problem. I may be able to understand."

Pedro looked at her. Saw her eyes gaze into his. He looked around the camp and saw the Indians frozen in place, watching him.

Then he felt a tingling in his arm where her fingers rested and he turned back to the Mother. As he looked at her a feeling of calm came over him and, without conscious effort, he closed his eyes and thought about the earthquake in Costa Grande. About the death of his mother and his own rescue.

About the dream that had haunted him ever since, and about the hours of extra study he had put in as a student. About his determination to be accepted as a corpsman.

He thought about the corps, too, and about his life in it. About the red alert in the middle of the night, the flood and his parachute jump to the island of trees. About the people he found there, the lost radios and the search plane that had not found them.

"Thank you, my son." Pedro opened his eyes when the mother spoke again. The camp came to life again as she lifted her hand from his arm.

Her eyes were soft. "I am sorry about your mother," she said. "And about your dream -- but you will not dream again."
Ignoring his look of surprise, she glanced at the sun and continued.

"You are tired now, and you have time to sleep before you return to your camp. Then you will eat, and Hotan will take you back."

Afraid, and not quite sure what he was afraid of, Pedro tried to get up.

"No Madre," he said. "I must return."

But he found he could not stand. Her eyes held him, and as he settled back again onto the platform beside her, she reached out to touch his arm again.

"You are tired," she said. "You will sleep now. Then you will go back to your own people -- there is a woman there who waits for you.

He was tired, and there was no rush to get back to the others. He lay down and went to sleep.

***

Maria took time from her cooking to cut one special piece of fish from the tender part just ahead of the tail. She cooked it separately and carried it on a flattened water can to Manuel.

He smiled as she knelt to place it beside him.

"Gracias, senorita."

"De nada, senor."
Manuel broke off a small piece of fish and put it into his mouth. Chewed and swallowed, then looked at her with approval.

"It is very good, senorita. Thank you."

"Thank you, senor." From habit, Maria started to rise to her feet as he spoke but then she remembered her purpose and stayed where she was. Manuel had expected her to rise too, and he was surprised when she didn't. He looked at her curiously.

"Can I help you, senorita?"

"I hope so, senor. May I speak with you a moment?"

"Of course, senorita, please do." Manuel put another piece of fish into his mouth and chewed slowly. Maria stayed, but she did not speak. Twice she opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again in silence. Then Manuel swallowed and offered her an opening.

"I think you knew my Carmine, no?"

"Si senor." Maria nodded her head. "She used to shop at my father's store and we spoke, sometimes."

Manuel looked out over the sea. His eyes glazed and his voice softened.

"She went shopping three times a week. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. Saturday she shopped early, because she spent most of the day preparing dinner for Sunday."

"Si senor."
"And little Manuello used to go to the store with her. You remember Manuello, senorita?"

"Si senor." Maria's voice was soft with compassion for the man rather than with memories of Carmine and Manuello. The woman had been a customer, but not a friend.

"But I talk too much, senorita." Manuel smiled and turned to her again. "You did not come to listen to my memories."

"No senor."

"Then what do you want to talk about? My success as a fisherman? I had none. My plans for getting back to land? I have none. What else, senorita?"

"I wish to ask questions, senor."

"Yes?"

Maria's eyes turned down to the log. She blushed slightly as she looked up again.

"You have spoken with senor Pedro, senor. You know him a little, I think."

"A little. Yes."

"I have seen him, senor, and I have heard him speak. But I have not spoken with him. Only a little -- when he first jumped out of the airplane. He landed beside my boat."

"Yes."
"And I wonder about him, senor. Who he is. Why he comes here.

"He is not married, is he senor?" Maria blushed as she waited for his answer.

"No, senorita." The fisherman smiled gently. "I don't think he is married. I don't think he even has a novia."

Maria dropped her eyes before she spoke again.

"That is good, senor. It would be very sad for his wife with him away so long."

"Manuel smiled but did not speak. He watched as Maria stared out over the sea. The she turned and lifted her eyes to him in distress.

"Am I ugly, senor?" Pain showed in Maria's eyes. "Am I not attractive to men?"

Manuel's look of amazement turned into a grin, then softened into a look of concern as he answered her. "Surely, senorita, you make a joke. You must know you are beautiful."

"I am not joking, senor. I have heard men say that I am not ugly -- Giorgo used to say I was beautiful -- but I do not know. I do not know what men see, and I know people may say one thing out of kindness when they mean another."

"This is not kindness, senorita. You are beautiful."

"But he calls me muchacha, senor! Little girl, not young woman!"
Now it was Manuel's turn to stare at the sea. His voice was soft.

"You are not a muchacha, senorita. I used to call you muchacha because I remembered the little girl I saw at your father's store a few years ago. But I know you are a senorita, and I know you like senor Pedro very much."

"But he does not like me, senor. And he never saw the little girl in my father's store, but he calls me muchacha. He does not look at me -- does not know I am here."

She blushed violently and looked down as she continued.

"I made him a matrimonio yesterday, senor. Last night he slept in it -- alone. And this morning, he did not tell me he would wake up early. He lit the fire himself and he would have cooked his own breakfast!"

"I know, senorita."

But why, senor? If I am a senorita -- if I am not ugly -- why does he not even notice me?"

"He has insulted you, senorita. He should have told you he would get up early, and he should have asked you to cook his breakfast.

"But he does notice you, senorita. He does!

"Who did he put in charge of the food and water? You. Who interprets when the Indians come? You do. If he were to come for a meal -- ask for a drink of water -- who would he ask? You help him, senorita, and he knows that."
"But you must understand that for years he has lived in barracks, like a soldier. He knows many things, but there are many things he does not know. We spoke this morning, senorita, and he is sorry he insulted you. He will not do it again."

"I want to do more for him, senor."

"I know you do, senorita. But -- senor Pedro was raised in an orphanage by priests and nuns. Did you know that? His mother died when he was six years old, and most of the women he knew when he was growing up were nuns."

"He told you this, senor? I did not know of it."

"We have spoken, senorita. He lived in the orphanage until he was a little older than you are now -- and then he joined the rescue corps and he moved to Canada."

"He had no home?" Maria's voice was sad.

"He had none, senorita, and he does not know about women. He told me once that women in Canada are not considered women -- that they do not marry -- until they are more than twenty years old."

"So old?" Maria was shocked.

"So old, senorita. Ramon says it is a very cold country -- perhaps women take longer to grow up there."

"But I am grown, senor."
"You are, senorita." Manuel let his eyes rove over her body, then forced them to return to her face. "But senor Pedro may not think so.

"And there is another thing."

"Senor?"

"Senor Pedro is like a soldier in some ways -- that is why he wears the uniform. But when he is working, senorita, he must care for people. He does many of the things that a priest does."

Maria was thoughtful. "He does. And does he live like a priest?"

"While he is working, senorita, it is a rule he must follow."

"Then I should stay away from him, senor? I should not tempt him?"

Manuel smiled. "But why not, senorita? It is a foolish rule, and there is no one here to know or care if he breaks it." Manuel took another bite of fish and chewed as he continued. "And he will not wear that uniform much longer, senorita. It is like the army -- men wear the uniform for a while, and then they take it off.

"Senor Pedro has worn that uniform for three years now, and if he were in Canada he would take it off in a very few days."

Maria looked at him carefully, not sure whether he was teasing her or not. "And what do you think he will do then, senor?"

"I don't know, senorita. Get married, perhaps?"
Maria's face was reddened as she stood.

"Thank you, senor," she said. "I will leave you now."

"De nada, senorita."

Manuel watched her walk away. He had never noticed the slow swing of her hips before. Perhaps, he thought, she had not had it before.

***

Pedro was six years old again in his dream, and he was again trapped in the ruins of the hut. Again he watched the bright red planes fly down the valley, saw the corpsmen jump to the ruined village.

But this time it was different. As the boy watched, one of the planes swung away from the village and flew low over the mountainside, its cargo door open. At the door, two men fought.

Now the plane swung back and circled again. One man jumped from it to a perfect landing beside Pedro's mother.

As an adult Pedro would have expected the man to roll and to collapse his parachute, but to a six-year old it did not seem strange that the parachute disappeared as the man landed.

With one hand he flicked the boulder from Pedro's mother's leg as the ground on which she lay turned into a pallet of sticks.

Young Pedro was free now too, a six-year-old Indian boy who watched in wonder as the corpsman knelt by the woman and swabbed the injured leg.
He plucked the spear of wood that had punctured it, then dusted antibiotic powder into the wound and sewed it up. As the boy watched, the swelling subsided and the angry red color faded.

His mother's eyes opened. She sat up and looked -- not at the corpsman who had helped her but at the six-year old who watched in a mixture of terror and fascination.

Was it his mother or the Mother-of-all? The six year old was not sure, but he heard and understood the words.

"Thank you, my son. You have saved me."

***

In Vancouver, Clive Jonas was on the phone to his wife Mary.

"You been following the news, girl?"

"Of course. Someone has to."

"I know -- but why should I when you know everything?"

"Flattery got you this far. What now?"

"That San Cristobal flood. Do you hear anything about the trees that are floating off the coast?"

"Just that there were some people on them, but I think they're given up for lost now. One corpsman jumped to try to help them, but there was a storm and they think the life-rafts probably sank. Anyway, some of the planes have been called back to those fires in the Yukon, so there isn't much of a search now."
"No talk of what the trees are worth? Nothing about recovering them?"

"Not public, anyway."

"What do you think?"

"I think you should go for it."

"It'll mean two or three weeks away. Maybe more."

"From here, not from me. I could use a tropical vacation so I'll set up a shore base in Panama, or rent a yacht or something."

"You like it then?"

"I like it."

"Okay -- you're on. See you tonight."

"You mean you want the lights on again? Bad boy!"

Jonas grinned. "See you."

He hung up the phone and turned to the secretary who stood beside him.

"Okay. Get hold of this Hernandez guy and charter his plane, starting tomorrow. Get a couple of seats on the first plane to Costa Grande tomorrow and call Jim Cosby. Tell him to go home and pack, then meet me at Sea Island whenever the plane leaves."

"Can I tell him how long he's going for?"
"How should I know? We're going until we come back -- and that depends on what we find there!"

***

Pablo was fishing from the roots of the tree. He saw the canoe glide out from among the branches and the flash of the paddles as it approached.

He stood. Waved and called. Saw Pedro's answering wave.

Then he turned to call to the others, saw Maria already running full tilt to meet the canoe. Ramon and Manuel ran behind her and others walked. Maria laughed, but tears ran down her cheeks.

Pedro might have seen the tears had he looked more closely, but he had other interests. For the first time he saw the swell of her breasts and the curve of her hips, and he felt something stir within him.

***

In the Indian camp the Mother-of-all raised her hand and closed her eyes. The talk stopped and the camp fell silent. Then she smiled, lowered her hand and opened her eyes. The camp relaxed, and people again spoke and moved about.

***
CHAPTER 23

There was a flurry of greetings as Pedro stepped onto the tree. Maria, Manuel and Ramon were in the forefront, but one woman pushed her way through the crowd and demanded his attention.

"Senor. You must come to see Alfredo!

Pedro recognized her now. She was the one who was taking care of the injured schoolteacher.

"He is in pain," Carla said, "and his leg is swelling."

Pedro had forgotten about Alfredo and now he felt guilty. He began to push his way toward the branches that had sheltered the stretcher.

"No senor, this way." Carla, called him back toward the roots of the tree.

"The men were working up there, senor. He was in their way, and they were disturbing him, so I had them bring him here this morning."

The stretcher lay near the root ball, with a crude shelter of parachute cloth stretched on poles above it. Alfredo lay under a blanket from one of the rafts. Carla ran ahead of Pedro to kneel beside him again.

Alfredo's face was pale and sweat beaded on his forehead. His lips moved slightly as Pedro approached.
"Senor." Pedro had to lean close to hear him speak.

"Yes?" Pedro was kneeling beside the stretcher now.

"Senor. Thank you. I remember you climbed down to me while I was caught."

"Don't worry about that. How are you now."

"It hurts, senor. My leg hurts very much."

Gently, Pedro lifted the blanket and looked at the crushed leg. It was swollen, and tell-tale red lines of infection crept up his thigh.

Pedro touched the angry red flesh. Alfredo winced.

Pedro lowered the blanket and his eyes clouded for a moment.

"Senor?" Worry showed on Carla's face as she looked at him. Then resignation as she read his thoughts.

"My jump-bag?" Pedro looked up, searched for Maria.

"Senor." She stood behind him, with the bag.

He took it. Set it down and opened it. Found a syringe of morphine and shot it into Alfredo's arm. Then a multiple-antibiotic shot that might stop the infection.

He watched Alfredo's face as it relaxed before he passed out.

"Senor?" Carla's voice betrayed her worry. "It is bad, no?"
"It is bad." Pedro stood as he spoke, and looked down at the man on the stretcher without really seeing him.

"He will not die?" Carla looked hopefully up at him.

Pedro felt her eyes on him. He wondered whether he should lie or not.

"I don't know." He looked at her. "It is bad, but if we could get him to a hospital..."

"They would cut off his leg, senor." Ramon stepped forward as he spoke.

Pedro turned his eyes to the foreman. Considered, then spoke.

"Yes. They might."

Manuel looked at Pedro dubiously. "And if you cut off his leg, senor?"

"I could not. He would die."

"He will die if you don't," Ramon said.

Pedro turned again toward the man on the stretcher.

"It must be done." Ramon insisted.

"But how? I have no tools!"

Ramon shook a cigarette out of its package. Put it into his mouth and lit it.

"We have machetes," he said.
"Amputate with a machete? Impossible!"

"No. There is a little green snake that lives in banana plants, senor, and it sometimes bites men who cut the plants. The snake is deadly -- there is no cure for its bite.

"When a man is bitten he cries out. He cannot help it.

"And other men hear him. Even if he fights them, they will cut off his hand or his arm if he has been bitten. They hold it down on a log and cut with the machete."

Pedro looked at the foreman. "And the man dies, and they are charged with murder."

"No senor. Most times the man does not die. They take him immediately to the hospital and he recovers.

"But they know he would die if they did not cut off the arm, and so do the doctors and the police. If he dies, nothing is said.

"But if a man was bitten and another man knew it, if the other man did not cut off the arm -- then people would say it was his fault when the man died."

"But that's an arm."

"Si senor. And this is a leg."

"It's different. The bone in a leg is very big -- very strong -- and we have only small machetes here. They could not cut it quickly."
"And there is a very big artery in the leg. It runs up the inside of the thigh and a man can bleed to death in a few minutes if it is cut."

"Better to bleed to death in a few minutes than to die slowly." Ramon kept his eyes locked on Pedro's as he puffed his cigarette.

Pedro looked again at the injured man, now sleeping quietly under the morphine. He turned again to Ramon.

"He would not bleed to death. I can stop that by burning the cut with hot steel. But he is very weak now, and he would go into shock if I cut his leg. He would probably die in two or three days."

"Better to die in two or three days than to die tomorrow. Better to die in two or three days than to live a week in pain."

"He would not feel the pain -- I can give him morphine."

"While it lasts, senor, or while he lives. But we may be here a long time. Someone else may need morphine and you will have no more."

"Still.... " Pedro let his voice trail off. He turned to the circle of faces that surrounded him and saw the decision in their eyes. Saw it, but refused to accept it.

"Tomorrow," he said. "The injection I gave him may stop the infection, and we may be able to save the leg. We will know tomorrow."

"It is a strong injection, senor?" Manuel was dubious.
"Very strong."

"And if it works, will the leg heal?"

"It will not heal straight, but it will heal."

"Will he be able to walk, senor?"

"Not well, but a little."

"Better a bad leg than no leg at all." Manuel said. "If you say so, senor, it can wait until tomorrow." He looked at the injured man, then turned to Pedro with a wry smile on his face.

"Not a good welcome back, senor."

Pedro relaxed a bit. Tried to smile.

"No, but it's what I'm here for."

"We heard about what you did in the Indian camp senor -- the Indians told us. They said it was magic."

"Just first aid with modern drugs."

"Modern drugs -- magic." Manuel shrugged. "I wonder how important the difference is. You did well, senor -- the Mother-of-all is a very powerful witch doctor."

"She is a fine lady." Pedro looked at the faces that surrounded him and realized that Hotan was not among them.

"Hotan? Where is Hotan?"
"The Indian?" A voice from the back of the crowd. "He went to speak to the others."

"The others?" Pedro looked at Ramon curiously.

"The other Indians, senor. Six of them came while you were at their camp. They are helping us build the platform.

"It is nearly finished now."

He glanced around the crowd. "I see that all our people have come to greet you, but I guess the Indians are still working."

"They came to help? How? Why?"

"They came to help us, senor, because you helped the Mother." Maria stooped to pick up Pedro's jump-bag as she spoke.

"They work very hard," Ramon said. "They have better tools than ours -- big machetes like the ones we use on plantations -- and two axes.

"They can stand on floating logs and cut them. Two of our men nearly fell off trying.

"And they use split vines to lash the platform together. The parachute cord does not work well -- it stretches too much.

"They do better lashings than any of our men can," Manuel said. "Better than I can do myself."

"Oh?" Pedro edged toward the crown of the tree now, Maria, Manuel and Ramon with him. The crowd parted to make way for them and, as Pedro came into the clear, he saw the
hammock stuffed with cans hanging on the tall branch. He pointed to it.

"What's that?"


"A plane came past while you were away, and the senorita hung it up there."

"And did they see it? Did it circle?"

"No senor." Maria looked down as she spoke. "I was too late. The plane had already passed."

"She tried, senor. She tried very hard." Ramon spoke earnestly. "She might have killed herself!"

"What happened?"

"She slipped, senor. She fell from the top of the branch into the water."

"Into the water?" Pedro glanced at Maria. Saw the cuts and scratches on her arms and legs.

"But the boat was close," Maria said. "Ramon pulled me out."

"The plane passed again," Maria continued, "but it was farther away the second time. The first time it came very close."

"But they didn't find us, senor. I wonder if the reflector could be up wrong?" Ramon looked at it dubiously as he spoke.

Pedro glanced at it, the turned back to the foreman.
"No -- there is no wrong way to put it up." he was silent a moment. "They should have seen it, but sometimes on a search pattern they use the radar on very short range when there is a lot of clutter -- it gives a sharper picture. The plane might have been too far away when you put it up.

"Did you try the rockets?"

"Rockets!" Maria had been glowing with pride, but now her shoulders sagged.

"I am sorry, senor. I should have thought. I should have known!"

"You did think, senorita!" Ramon insisted. "You did more than any of us -- you could not think of everything!" Maria blushed as he spoke.

***

The branch was clear of the water now, supported on two logs each more than a meter in diameter. Smaller logs resting on them formed cross-pieces, and the Indians were lashing poles in place to form a platform that would be at least five meters wide and perhaps ten meters long. Hotan was working with them now.

Pedro stopped and stared when he saw it. "How in god's name did you get that much done in a day," he asked.

"Twenty men working," Ramon said.

"And a slave-driver behind them." Manuel, added.
The foreman waved his hand in dismissal. "I tried to get them to keep up with the Indians, senor, but they could not."

The Indians waved as Pedro approached, but most of them turned back to their work. Hotan jumped from one of the smaller logs to the trunk and came to meet him. Pedro turned to Maria.

"Muchacha?"

"Senor."

"Please tell Hotan I am sorry I was so rude -- going away as soon as we came."

"He understands, senor. He told me before -- when you first went to see the sick man."

"Tell him anyway. And give him my thanks for the help here."

"I have done that too senor. I have thanked them for all of us. They say they are glad to do it, because you saved their Mother."

Now she turned to the Indians and spoke a few words in their language. They smiled and nodded. Hotan spoke.

"He says the work goes well, senor, and that the platform will be finished tomorrow. He asks your permission for some of them to spend the night here, senor."

"Of course they can -- but why? I thought they did not like to live with white men."
"They do not, senor, but they help with the platform to pay a debt -- and the debt is not paid until it is finished. It is very important to them to pay their debts."

"But why spend the night? What difference does that make?"

"They can't work at night, senor, but if they stay here they do not leave the job. If they go back to their own camp, they are not paying the debt as fast as they can." Pedro shook his head gently in wonder, then froze in surprise at Hotan's look of resentment. He turned to Maria and began to form a question, then stopped as she spoke before he did.

"Please, senor -- you must not do that?"

"Do what?"

"Do not shake your head like that, senor! It means 'no' to him! He thinks you are refusing him permission to stay."

Without waiting for Pedro to answer she turned to Hotan and spoke rapidly. The Indian's face softened as he spoke to her, and he smiled as she turned to Pedro to translate.

"I told him," she said, "that you shook you head because you do not believe they can finish tomorrow. I told him you had never seen a debt paid so fast."

"Thank you." Pedro grinned, then sobered. "But this debt -- it's ridiculous! They don't owe us anything!"

"You helped the Mother-of-all, senor, and they wish to thank you. It is very important to them to pay their debts as soon as they can."
"So what should I do now? What should I say?"

Instead of answering, Maria spoke to Hotan. He listened, nodded his head, turned and walked back to where he had been working.

"What did you say?" Pedro's surprise sounded in his voice.

"I told him you were impressed and pleased with the work," she said, and that you thank them for their help." Maria's tone was apologetic.

"I am sorry, senor -- but you asked me what you should say. Hotan was wondering what we were talking about, so I spoke to him as though I was translating what you had said."

Pedro grinned. "Just in case I didn't say it, eh?"

Maria flushed. "No senor. I did it because I was afraid he would know that I was telling you what to say, and he would not respect you if he thought that."

Pedro looked at her with appreciation. "Good thinking," he said. "And now --what should I do? Can I help them on the platform?"

"No, senor -- you must not work on the platform." Maria thought a moment, then continued. "I think it would be best, senor, for you to sit with Ramon and Manuel and drink some matte. It will please the Indians to see you rest -- and the matte is very good!"

"Matte?" Is that the drink I had at the Indian camp? It was good!"
"It is very good, senor, when you have fire.

The Indians could have made it before, but they had no fire until you gave Hotan the lighter." Maria explained.

"Oh," Pedro was thoughtful. "I should have thought of the lighters earlier."

Maria was edging him back toward the fire now, and he accepted her lead. Ramon and Manuel still walked with them.

"Have we food enough for the Indians?," Pedro asked.

"We have," Maria said. They brought some with them, and we have plenty of fish and coconuts, as well as the food bars."

"The women were fishermen today," Manuel said. "They caught twelve fish!"

"Oh?" Pedro turned to the fisherman with a smile. "And you, my friend. Did you do the cooking?"

"No senor." Manuel was embarrassed. "I worked on the platform part of the day and I fished part of the day."

"He caught four fish." Maria said.

"And now, senor," she continued, "you must be tired. You have not had a chance to sit down since you arrived -- and we have matte to drink!"

Pedro looked at Manuel and Ramon, then turned back to Maria.

"That will be good, muchacha. Thank you." He turned toward the fire.
The three men sat near the base of the tall branch while Maria went to the fire where Juana heated water. Pedro gazed around at the tree that had been his home for -- was it only three days?

Maria approached now, the hem of her skirt gathered in her hands to protect them from the two cans of hot matte she carried. Watching, Pedro noticed her legs for the first time. They were smooth and muscular -- the legs of an young woman who had walked or run most of the miles she had travelled in her lifetime.

Maria knelt to set the cans down, one each in front of Pedro and Manuel.

"Be careful," she said. "The can is very hot."

"Thank you, mu ---" Pedro paused, then corrected himself. "Senorita." He barely heard her words -- he was fascinated by the thrust of her breasts and the way her nipples stretched the cloth of her dress. It was obvious that she wore no brassiere but her breasts did not sag. They must be firm, he thought.

He looked at her face and realized that she had seen his look. He felt himself blush.

Maria saw the blush and stood hurriedly. She turned back to the fire, her own face shining.

"Something happened!" Juana's voice was low, almost a whisper as Maria returned to the fire. Maria's was a whisper as she answered.
"He looked at me! He called me senorita! He knows I am grown up!" Blushing, she reached to pick up the third can of matte Juana had prepared, but stopped as Juana laid a hand on hers.

"Wait a minute, senorita -- not yet."

Juana stood and walked to the men. Knelt by Ramon and spoke to him.

"Senor, I need your help."

"What?" He turned to her.

"I need your help, Ramon. Please -- may I show you?"

She stood and waited until Ramon stood, then led him away toward the fire. Maria could not hear what she said to him.

But Ramon could. He turned back and called to Manuel.

"My friend -- I will need your help for this."

"Oh?" Manuel looked up. Pedro looked up too and began to stand as Manuel rose.

"No senor -- you are tired and the two of us will be enough," Ramon said.

They were approaching the fire as Manuel asked Ramon what help was needed, and they were passing it as Ramon answered. Maria heard the answer.

"I need help with my sex life, my friend. Juana says I will sleep alone for a month if I don't get you away from the senor!"
Now Juana handed Maria the can of matte she had prepared for Ramon.

"No sense this matte going to waste, senorita, and the senor should not have to sit alone!"

"But I can't! What will I say?"

Juana turned her and pushed her toward Pedro.

"It doesn't matter what you say, senorita, as long as it is you who say it."

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Hesitantly, Maria approached Pedro. She felt herself flush as she saw how he watched her.

But she smiled as she approached and she felt warm as she saw the way his eyes caressed her body. She knelt beside him.

"You are alone, senor. May I sit with you?"

"Of course, senorita."

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Pedro did not look at her but he could feel her presence. Idly, he plucked a flake of bark off the tree with his fingers, broke chips off it and flicked them aside. Watched them fall into the sea as he listened to her.

"I spoke with Manuel last night, senor. He told me about your parents."
"Yes?"

"It must be very sad to grow up without a mother."

Pedro's voice was soft, and Maria had to lean forward to hear him. "I watched her die, senorita. I have dreamed of it ever since."

"Senor?" Maria was shocked.

"My father's house fell down in an earthquake. My father and my sister were killed, my mother and I were trapped. I was still alive when the Canadians found me but she was not."

"And when you grew up, senor, you joined the Canadians."

"I did."

"You could not help your mother, senor, but you have helped many people."

"I guess so." Pedro picked up his can. Swirled the remaining matte about in it and peered into it.

"Do you drink matte in San Felipe?" he asked.

"Sometimes, senor. But it is very expensive, and coffee is very cheap. We drink more coffee."

"But you say you like matte better?"

"I do, senor. Some do not. They say coffee is the white man's drink and that matte is for Indians."
Pedro smiled. "I am half Indian -- does that mean I can drink both?"

"I am half Indian too, senor, and so are most of the people in San Felipe. But when they speak of Indians and white men, most people in San Felipe don't think about the color of the skin. They speak of how people live. In San Felipe, senor, you would be considered a white man.

"And you?"

"I am considered white, senor. I lived in the village and my father owned a store."

"And that makes you white. Was your father an Indian?"

"No senor. My mother was an Ayuba."

"Manuel tells me you were to have been married soon."

"Next month, senor. But Giorgo is dead now. I am sure of it."

"I am sorry."

"I am not, senor. Not very. Giorgo's father was an important man in the village, and the marriage was my father's idea -- not mine."

"You did not like Giorgo?"

"I did not care much, senor. In the village, one young man looks very much like another. My father thought he was a good man, and he was kind to me. As kind as most men." She looked out over the sea a moment, then continued.
"If we had been married I would have been happy, I think." She turned to him. "You are not married, senor?"

Pedro picked another flake of bark off the tree and began to pull it apart.

"No. I am a member of the Rescue Corps, and corpsmen are not allowed to marry."

"Never, senor?"

"Not while they are corpsmen. Officers can marry."

"But you are not an officer, senor?"

"No. I can't be an officer because I'm not Canadian." He threw the last chip of bark into the water. "I guess I'm not even a corpsman now."

"Manuel told me, senor, that you were to be discharged soon. He said you are allowed to serve only three years."

"Yes."

"He said you were not happy, that you would rather stay with the corps."

"Yes." Pedro paused. "I wanted to stay."

"Even though you could not marry, senor?"

"I never thought of it that way. I never wanted to marry."

Maria's eyebrows rose. "But a man must marry, senor! He must have a home!"
Pedro pulled another flake of bark from the tree and inspected it while he answered her.

"Must he? I guess so. I don't really know -- I never had one. Many of my friends did not."

"I don't understand, senor."

"I grew up in an orphanage and I went from there into the Rescue Corps. I guess the orphanage and the Rescue Corps were my homes for most of my life."

"Manuel says you still dream about your mother."

"I do, senorita. I wanted to help her but there was nothing I could do."

"You joined the corps, senor, and you have helped many people since."

"I did, and I have."

"But you did not save your mother. Manuel says he thinks you are still looking for her."

Pedro sat for a moment lost in thought. "He might be right."

"Are you happy, senor?"

"I guess so. I don't really know."

"And you do not want to get married?"
"I never thought about it, I guess." He turned to face her. "I've never had much chance to think about it. There were no girls in the orphanage."

"But you went to school, senor. There must have been girls there?"

"There were, but they did not speak to boys from the orphanage."

"But you met girls in Canada, senor?"

He looked away from her. "I am half Indio, senorita. In Canada you do not stop being an Indian just because you live as a white man."

"Are there no Indians in Canada, senor?"

"There are -- but not in Newfoundland, where I was stationed."

"That is sad," she said. She looked into his eyes. "I am half Indio, senor. And in San Felipe an Indio who lives as a white is considered a white. Most of the Indians think they are better than whites."

"But you have helped the Mother-of-all. In San Felipe you could take your choice -- live in the village and be white, or live in the swamp and be Indian if you wanted to."

***
"My god, that must be the last of its breed!" Clive Jonas peered at the ancient Catalina flying boat that tugged gently at anchor in the harbor at Panagra.

"It's got to be at least fifty years old!"

Jim Cosby leaned forward to look over Jonas' shoulder.

"You mean we're going to fly in that thing? Are you out of your mind?"

Raoul Hernandez turned sideways in the driver's seat so he could see both Jonas and Cosby. Black-haired and slender, he had a quick vitality and an infectious enthusiasm. Pilot and owner of the Catalina, about 40 years old, he was dressed in a white shirt and once-blue jeans.

"She is old, senors," he said. "But she is good. I know her well -- I built most of her myself."

"Where did you get it for God's sake?" Clive kept his eyes on the plane as he asked the question.

"She was a smugglers' plane," Raoul said. Many years ago they abandoned it up the coast after an engine burned out and they had to make a forced landing. They taxied to a little fishing village and ran her ashore, then they stole a boat to carry their load to Mexico.
"But they were caught in Mexico and they never came back for their plane."

"And that's it? How long did it sit there before you found it?"

"Two years, senor. The man they stole the boat from took her, but she was no use to him because she had only one engine and he was not a pilot. He could not sell her easily because she was so old and the parts are hard to get, so I bought her very cheap."

"And you rebuilt her yourself?"

"I did, senor. I hired a boat to tow her to Panama and ground her on a little beach just south of the city, and I did most of the work there."

"Where did you find the parts?"

"When the Americans pulled out of Panama they left many parts behind in warehouses. I knew about them because my father had worked on their navy base. That's why I was willing to pay more for the plane than the junk dealers would."

"How long did it take you?"

"Two years, senor."

"And she's good? She's passed all the inspections?"

"I have been flying her for ten years, senor. She is slow, but she is safe."

"Safe enough for you, maybe," Cosby said.
"She is safe, senor, and she is the only long-range seaplane you will find around here."

Jonas opened the car door and stepped out.

"C'mon Jim," he said. "We'll take a look at it anyway. You don't have to fly in it if you don't want to, but I'll trust any Catalina that's still got wings. Those things just don't give up." He turned to Raoul, now getting out of the front seat.

"Okay, Raoul, show us your plane!" Turning, he headed for the battered dinghy that floated by the dock.

***

Pedro had been looking into Maria's eyes steadily for the past five minutes without moving. Her hand rested on the tree between them, his lay on top of it. He was not aware that one of his fingers gently stroked the back of her hand, but she was.

Juana ruled the fire now and the area around it, including the spot where Pedro and Maria sat. She had headed off several attempts to interrupt them -- women with questions for Maria and men with questions for Pedro -- but as preparations for dinner progressed the two were definitely in the way. Finally Juana turned to Manuel for help.

She found him sitting on one of the roots of the tree, talking to Pablo who drifted in the boat beside him. They both grinned as she made her request.

"You want to interrupt them, senora?" Manuel raised his eyebrows.
Juana laughed. "No," she said. "I don't want to interrupt anything, I just want to get them into the hammock where they belong.

"Now they are too close to the fire and we must prepare dinner. They are in the way."

Manuel smiled again. "Not the hammock, senora." He glanced to the end of the tree, where a dozen men still worked on the platform. "That is too public for the first time. We must get them alone somewhere." Idly, he kicked the side of the boat.

Pablo grinned.

"Not very good," Manuel said. "You should never use a boat at sea without water and food, Pablo. It would do no harm to carry a parachute too, just in case."

Pablo grinned again. "In San Felipe, I carried cushions."

"But we are not in San Felipe." Manuel pushed the boat away with his foot. "Get the boat ready and tie it by the platform. Then tell Ramon he needs you for something."

"Seguro!" Pablo started the motor and idled the boat toward the other end of the tree.

"Well, senor?"

Manuel turned. The question showing on his face. "Well what, senora?"

"About the senor and Maria. Can we move them?"

Manuel grinned. "You live inland, senora?"
"Yes. So what?"

"When a fisherman wants to make friends with a woman, senora, he may take her fishing."

Delight shone in Juana's face. "Of course."

Manuel looked out over the sea.

"Where did Pablo say he saw the mango tree?"

"Over there." Juana pointed. "Why?"

"Because you want some of them for dinner, senora."

"But Pablo looked at all of them. They are no good."

"Perhaps, senora, and perhaps he missed some. He also caught the three biggest and best-tasting fish we had yesterday at that tree. They must have been feeding on the mangoes."

"Pablo caught no fish yesterday, senor."

"Manuel grinned again. "Yes he did, senora. You did not remember, but you do now." He stood. "I'd better go and remind Pablo."

Five minutes later, Juana stood beside Maria and Pedro as she called to Pablo on the nearly-finished platform.

"Pablo -- those mangoes. Can you get some for dinner?"

"I'm sorry," he answered. "I cannot go now. Ramon needs me here."
"But I need you to run the boat."

"I am not the only one, senora. Manuel can run the boat. The senor can."

"Manuel?"

He answered from the platform. "I have work to do here, senora. We must finish this tonight, and none of these landsmen can tie a proper knot. Ask the senor."

Now Juana looked down at Pedro. "Senor? There is a mango tree floating out there -- beyond that tree." She pointed. "Could you take the boat please, and get us some for dinner?"

"If you're going out there," Manuel said, "take a fishing line. Pablo caught some good fish out there yesterday. They were feeding on the mangoes."

"Senor?"

Pedro looked up, then reluctantly released Maria's hand and prepared to stand. Juana shifted her gaze to Maria.

"Senorita? Will you go with him? You caught some good fish yesterday, but none today." She turned back toward the platform so they could not see her grin.

***

"There's the mango tree, senor!" From the bow of the boat, Maria pointed. In the stern, Pedro swung the tiller and closed the throttle. The boat turned toward the tree and slowed as Pedro surveyed the tree critically.
"Doesn't look like there's much on it."

"Perhaps on the other side."

"Could be. There must be some we can't see." Pedro opened the throttle again and the boat moved forward, swung around the crown of the tree and slowed again.

"Here we are." Idling the motor Pedro turned the boat toward the tree, eased it in among the branches, then shut the motor down. Maria stood to test a mango hanging above her, and found it spoiled.

Pedro stood and pulled one off the tree, then turned it slowly in his hands. It was spoiled and he could see the finger-marks where Pablo had tested it the day before. He turned to Maria.

"This one's gone. Looks like someone already tested it."

Maria looked at him, a puzzled look on her face. Then she smiled, sat down, and looked at Pedro.

"Pablo did it, senor. I remember now. Juana asked him if they were good and he said he tried every one on the tree."

Pedro looked at her. "I guess she forgot." He sat down, set the mango beside him in the boat and reached for the fishing line Manuel had given him.

"Well," he said. "There's still fish." With his knife he cut a chunk out of the mango and used it to bait the fish-hook.

"I remember something else, senor."
"Oh?" Pedro had been about to drop the baited hook into the sea. He paused and looked at Maria.

"Pablo didn't catch any fish yesterday, senor." Maria almost laughed at the look on Pedro's face when he understood.

Then he laughed. He dropped the baited hook over the side of the boat and looped the line around the center seat as he spoke.

"We'll fish anyway, while we're here," he said. He moved forward to the center seat beside Maria.

"We can talk while we see if there are any fish in the sea."

A half-hour later a hundred-kilogram sea bass took the hook and swam slowly away with it. Pedro and Maria noticed when the boat caught on a branch but by then it was too late. The boat tipped slightly, then the line broke and the fish swam away.

***

Moonlight through the branches above them wakened Maria. She opened her eyes in dreamy wonder, and found herself lying in the bottom of the boat with Pedro at her side. His face was pale in the moonlight but he looked relaxed and calm. His breathing was easy and regular and she felt proud and happy as she gazed at him. No tossing or turning in his sleep tonight! No bad dreams!

She hesitated to wake him but finally shook his shoulder gently.

"Senor!"

"Huh?" Pedro opened his eyes.
"Senor. It is night. We must go back to the tree. To the others!"

Pedro raised his head and looked about. Sat up and looked again, then stretched and yawned. He remembered where he was when he looked at Maria, and he bent down to kiss her before he spoke.

"Now what was it you wanted?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down again. Kissed him before she answered.

"I want you, querido, but it is late. Juana will be worried!"

Pedro grinned. "Is she still waiting for her mango? And for the fish?"

Maria laughed. "No, senor, but she will be worried if we do not return."

"I guess so."

Pedro climbed slowly up on the seat and primed the motor. Started it, untied the boat and backed slowly out from among the branches.

The moon spread a ladder of light on the water ahead of them as Pedro idled the boat around the end of the tree. He pointed to the pattern of ripples in the moonlight.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Maria looked at it and smiled.

"It is, querido. The fish feed well tonight."

"Fish?"
"Fish, querido. The ripples are from fish feeding."

Pedro shut the motor down. Maria looked at him and wondered at his grin.

"Querido?"

"Get the fish lines out, querida!"

They had six large fish by the time they reached the tree, one of them so big that Maria could not lift it into the boat. Between them, they carried the fish to the fire and left them there.

Then they tip-toed past the people sleeping on the platform to their matrimonio.

***

Juana was up before sunrise next morning. She looked at Pedro's matrimonio and smiled as she saw that it was occupied by two people.

She walked down to light the fire and almost burst out laughing at the sight of the fish that lay beside it.

She lit the fire, opened six cans of water and set them to heat. Then she picked up a seventh can of water and opened it as she walked toward the roots of the tree. She stepped past the sleeping Carla, set the can beside the stretcher, and looked at the injured man.

He was flushed now with fever, and there were beads of sweat on his brow. Juana lifted the blanket and gazed for a moment at
the angry red swelling of his leg. Gently she lowered the blanket and again looked at his face.

Was he sleeping or unconscious? Juana was not sure. The leg looked as bad as it had yesterday and she wondered if the medicine was working.

She did not know, and she knew of nothing she could do about it anyway. She returned to the fire, felt the water cans and decided the one nearest the fire would be hot enough in a few minutes. She opened the package of matte and set it to the side where it would be handy.

Then she found the knife and began to clean and cut up the big fish.

She had the head off and the fish skinned and gutted when she heard movement on the platform. Manuel urinated off the side, then bent to shake another sleeping form. Juana could hear his words.

"Get up, Pablo. Time to catch breakfast."

Juana's own can of matte was cooling beside her as she worked. As Manuel turned toward the fire, she lifted another can of water from it and measured in a half-handful of matte.

She watched as Manuel stopped to look at the boat, floating quietly at its mooring. She saw his grin as he approached, and she smiled to herself as she picked up his matte and rose to meet him.

"Our love-birds have returned, I see." Manuel was obviously pleased.
"Senor? Juana pretended not to understand.

He waved at the boat. "Our love-birds. The senor and the senorita. The boat is back, so they must be back."

"Love-birds, senor? They went to find mango -- and to catch fish."

Manuel chuckled. "Something got caught all right, but I don't think it was fish!"

"No?" Juana feigned puzzlement.

"Then what are those, senor?" She turned and pointed to the fish that lay by the fire, then laughed aloud at Manuel's surprise.

***

In Panagra Clive Jonas and Raoul Hernandez stood on the dock as the dinghy paddled toward them.

Clive looked at the dusky man, clad in ragged jeans and clean white shirt who paddled it, then turned to Raoul. "We have a lot of Indian pilots in Canada," he said, "but I've never met one down here."

"Mayta, senor? He is not a pilot."

"Engineer then?"

"No senor." Raoul smiled. "I am the pilot, the engineer and the radio-man. He is just crew."

"What's he do then?"
"He lives aboard, senor, and he makes sure none of the equipment or the tools grow legs and walk away in the night."

"But you can hire a watchman anywhere. Why carry one with you?"

"He has other talents that are very good on a flying boat. He was born in a swamp, senor, and he knows, ropes, boats -- everything a man needs to know about the water." Raoul grinned.

"And he has other talents too. You understand, senor, that I am not a smuggler. I never break the laws of Costa Grande -- never.

"But even for legal loads, people do not hire flying boats to land at regular airfields. We land at small ports -- in swamps, on rivers -- all sorts of places. They are not always safe, but Mayta can see logs and snags that no one else can. He can tell how deep water is just by looking at it.

And sometimes it is almost impossible to get to shore to moor the plane, but Mayta can always do it. A log or a hummock of swamp that would not support a frog is like a paved road to him. They say his people can walk on water!"

Behind them, Jim Cosby fussed with a map on a clip board. Finally he handed it forward to Clive.

"That's the way I figure it," he said. "I can't be sure because I don't know how much to allow for the winds and how much for the currents, but the trees should be somewhere in that area I've circled."

Clive took the map and showed it to Raoul. The pilot smiled.
"Three hours out to the edge of the circle, senor, and four hours back. We have twelve hours' fuel, with reserves -- so we will have five hours to look for your logs. If we don't find them in that time, senor, there are not enough to be worth finding!"

The dinghy bumped gently against the dock and Mayta held it steady while they stepped into it.

***
CHAPTER 25

Pablo came to the fire soon after Manuel and he too admired the fish. They took their matte and moved out of the way while Juana cleaned one of the small ones and cut and cooked fish for their breakfast.

"And Alfredo," Manuel asked. How is he this morning?"

"Not good, senor."

"Not good. Not bad?"

"No worse than yesterday, but I don't think he is better." Juana dropped the fish she had cut for Pablo onto a flat piece of wood tilted to face the fire.

Manuel swirled the matte in his can and looked at it.

"The senor does not want to cut the leg." Pablo said.

"Nobody wants to cut a leg, but sometimes it is necessary."

Ramon has seen arms cut off. Several times." Juana dipped her finger into a can to test the temperature of the water as she spoke.

"Has he seen a leg cut off?"

"No." Juana measured matte into the can of hot water. Picked it up and swirled it, then set it aside. She put another piece of fish on to cook, picked up the can of brewing matte, stood and
walked past the two men. Manuel turned to Pablo again as she left.

"A leg is much bigger than an arm," Manuel said. The senor says it is much more serious to cut it."

"But if it must be cut?"

"That is the problem. We think it must be cut. But the senor knows more about it than any of us -- he has learned from doctors."

"He says he is not sure."

"Then I am not sure."

"But what if he is just afraid to cut? What if he knows the leg should be cut, but he is afraid to do it."

"Then what?" Manuel rested his elbows on his knees and looked out over the sea.

"When a man who knows more about something than I do is afraid of it," he said, "then I am afraid of it."

"Afraid of what, fisherman?" Ramon approached, carrying the matte Juana had brought to him. Juana slipped past him, knelt again at the fire and used a forked stick to lift Manuel's fish from the board where it was cooked onto a flattened water can that she set in front of him. Manuel thanked her, then turned to Ramon.

"Good morning," he said. "We were talking about Alfredo -- about whether his leg must be cut off or not."
Ramon swirled his can of matte thoughtfully before he answered. "I think it should be," he said. "We don't have time to think of such things in the plantations -- when the green snake bites, a man will die in a half hour if his hand is not cut off. We do it."

"But never a leg?"

"Never that I know of. Always, the snake bites the hand or the wrist. If it strikes at the boots or the trousers it does no harm, because the fangs are not long enough to reach through to the skin."

"So you do not know." Manuel broke a piece off the fish-steak in front of him. Put it in his mouth and chewed.

"No. But I see a man dying. I know he will not live if his leg is not cut off." Ramon took a sip of his matte.

"But you do not know -- none of us knows -- how strong is the medicine the senor gave him. He says it may be able to stop the infection."

"He says it may, but he does not know. I think he is afraid to cut the leg."

"I know he is afraid." Manuel took another bite of fish. "And that's what we were talking about when you came.

"The senor knows more than I do about these things; and when a man who knows more than I do is afraid, then I am afraid."

"Perhaps." Ramon stood, glanced across to Juana at the fire, then spoke again to Manuel and Pablo. "I think I have time to take a look at him before my fish is cooked."
He sipped his matte and looked down at Manuel.

"You may be right, fisherman. Pablo knows more than I do about sharks -- and I was not afraid of them when he was."

He touched Juana's shoulder as he passed her.

"I'll be back in a moment, querida."

***

On the platform Hayma stirred and slowly opened his eyes. He sat up and stretched, then looked around as he remembered where he was. Four other Ayuba lay nearby, and a half-dozen whites had also slept on the platform.

The Indian shook his head at the thought. He had slept among white people! Perhaps they were not so dangerous after all.

He stood and stepped up to the tree trunk. Looked at the matrimonio in time to see Maria poke her head up through the slit at the top. Nodded to her, and saw her nod back. The matrimonio jiggled a bit as she dressed.

Hayma closed his eyes and thought of the Mother. He felt the warmth of her presence and her pleasure at the sight of the full matrimonio.

Then he opened his eyes and watched Maria climb out of the hammock and walk toward the shield of cloth the women used as a bathroom. Hayma walked out to the end of a branch and pissed into the sea.
Maria was walking toward the fire when he finished. He followed her.

Juana saw Maria as she approached, and she sprinkled a handful of matte into a can of hot water for her. She stood with it to greet the younger woman, and smiled as she spoke.

"Good morning." Juana handed the can of matte to Maria. "This time I was up before you -- but don't apologize. You could have slept all day today!"

"I could have?" Maria accepted the can and swirled the matte gently. "Thank you, maybe I will. But I am hungry now. I need a big piece of fish!"

She knelt and leaned forward to cut a fillet off the fish Juana had started but Juana caught her arm and pulled her gently back.

"This is your morning, senorita. You don't have to cook your own breakfast."

Maria looked at her curiously, then smiled. "Thank you, senora." She looked at the fish.

"It looks just as big in daylight as it did at night. I nearly lost that one."

Juana looked at her. "You caught it?"

"We both did -- we had two lines out as we came back, and it took both of us to pull it into the boat."
"But I nearly lost it getting it onto the tree. The senor was on the tree and I tried to lift it up to him. I nearly dropped it back into the sea!"

"It is a beautiful fish." Juana laughed. "You should have seen the look on Manuel's face!"

She looked to the end of the tree where Ramon knelt beside the stretcher. On the fire, his fish was nearly ready. She cut another piece and set it to cook.

Then she took Ramon's fish off the fire and set it in front of Maria.

"Eat this one, senorita. Ramon will not be back for a few minutes.

"And then get back to your hammock. Take a coconut with you and some cans, so you will have milk for the senor when he wakes up."

"But I should stay here and help you with the fire!"

Juana smiled. "You have your own fire to tend this morning, senorita. Eat that fish and go back to tend it!"

Hayma was approaching now. Juana put another fish steak on the fire and prepared another tin of matte for him. When she turned back to Maria, the younger woman was blushing.

"It was you who asked for the mango! Thank you, elder sister!"

"As I said -- he just needed some training. Was it worth the effort?"
Maria grinned. "It was. I think I'll keep him!"

Juana's face sobered.

"Never say that, senorita. Do it if you can, but never say it!"

"Why not?" Maria was curious.

Hayma sat by the fire and Juana handed him a can of matte. Since he spoke no Spanish, she continued her advice to Maria in words she would never have used in the hearing of a man who could understand them.

"It scares them, senorita. A woman wants to be kept, but a man wants to be free. Remember that, and remember that the way to keep a man is to make him feel free."

"All men, Juana?"

"All the ones that are worth keeping, senorita. The ones you don't want are impossible to get rid of!"

Maria sat and watched as Juana knelt before the fire again. She cradled the can of matte in her hands and considered Juana's words.

"You may be right, senora. I am thinking of some people in San Felipe -- a man named Jose and his wife Carena. But senor Pedro would never be like Jose!"

"I don't know this Jose, but I think your senor will make a good husband if you keep him happy. Let him run free and let him take his choice of women, but make sure you are the best he can find."
Maria set her can of matte on the tree and wrapped her arms around her knees. She rolled back a bit, then forward again. Grinned.

"That will take practice, senora. I must practice often. Every chance I get!"

Ramon came back now, from his visit to the stretcher. His face was sober as he walked, but he smiled when he saw Maria.

"Good morning, senorita. You are up early. Do you think the senor will be able to get up today?"

Maria blushed. Juana shot Ramon a look that should have killed him, but she smiled as she turned back to the fire.

"You're fish is almost ready, Ramon."

"Good." Ramon squatted beside the fire and watched as Maria finished her breakfast. Then she stood, found a coconut and a couple of cans of water and returned to the hammock.

Ramon grinned. "I think I envy the senor!"

Juana glanced after Maria as she walked down the tree. She envied the sensuous swing of her hips and the swell of her tight buttocks.

"I think every man on the raft does." Juana used the cleft stick to pick up Ramon's fish on it and set it on a flattened water can for him.

"I don't. Not really." Ramon touched the fish with his finger and decided it was still too hot to eat.
"She looks good, but she hasn't got the practice yet. Besides -- I know the type. She wants a husband to give her children and to come home every night. She would never put up with me."

Juana looked at him, then turned back to the fire. "Every woman wants that, Ramon. But some of us take what we can get."

Ramon smiled. "And you got me. Any regrets so far?"

Juana laughed. "No. Not really." She looked at him and smiled. "I guess life would get a bit boring with the senor."

Ramon became serious.

"Alfredo is in bad shape. I think we should wake the senor and ask him to take the leg off."

"Ask him to take it off, or ask him if it should come off? If he is to do it, then he must decide."

"But it has to come off."

Ramon picked a piece off his fish and blew on it. Put it in his mouth and chewed as Juana continued.

"Will you do it?"

"I can't. The senor knows how and he has the medicines."

"And he doesn't want to do it. How would you do it, anyway? He is right about the size of the leg bone. I remember when we used to kill pigs on the farm. It took an axe to chop the bones, but you can't use an axe on a man's leg."
"A machete..."

"If you had one." Juana glanced at the short machete at Ramon's belt. "But yours is not a real machete -- it is just a little one. For travelling with, not for working. The senor's is the same.

"If you had a big machete -- the kind they use for working -- that would be different."

"But the leg must come off. Some of the Indians have big machetes."

"Perhaps." Juana looked toward the stretcher, then turned to where Maria was climbing into the hammock.

"But I know this. Alfredo is in no pain now, and he may die whether the leg comes off now or not. He means nothing to me anyway." She nodded toward the hammock.

"We all owe those two a lot, and this is the most important morning of their lives. Give them a few more hours, at least."

Ramon looked at the hammock and saw the movement as Maria settled herself. He picked up another piece of fish.

"Hell" he said. "Nobody even noticed Alfredo until he got hurt!"

***

The Catalina skimmed across Panagra harbor. In the co-pilot's seat, Clive felt a gentle rocking as the plane moved forward and heard the slap of the waves as it picked up speed. Then it steadied and the sound of the waves diminished as it climbed up on its step, and stopped as it lifted off the water. Looking back
he smiled at the sight of Jim Cosby, nervous in the navigator's seat, and of Mayta half asleep in the hammock that swung near the middle of the fuselage.

***
CHAPTER 26

Pablo had caught a large fish and was helping Juana clean it when Carla came running to the fire.

"Juana!"

"Si?"

"Alfredo is awake. He is in much pain."

"Let me see." Juana put her knife down. Stood and walked quickly to the stretcher.

Alfredo's face was covered with sweat. His eyes were closed tight and his jaw clenched, his lips pulled back to bare his teeth. Juana turned to Carla.

"How long has he been like this?"

"Not long, senora. I was close by -- it could not have been more than five minutes."

Pablo approached now, with Ramon. The foreman looked at the injured man, then knelt beside him. Spoke to Carla.

"Lift the blanket," he said. "Let's see that leg."

Gently, Carla lifted the blanket to bare Alfredo's leg. The crushed knee was blue now, with a tinge of green, and angry red lines ran half-way up the swollen thigh. Ramon sucked in his breath when he saw it.
"It must come off," he said.

Juana looked at the leg, then at Alfredo's face and nodded in agreement. "Something must be done."

"I will wake the senor." Ramon rose to his feet.

Juana looked at him. Considered and decided.

"No. I will wake him." She turned to Carla. "I don't know what he will need, but best heat some water. Boil it. A dozen cans."

"We should have a fire here," Ramon turned to Pablo. "The senor may need it. Bring coals from the other fire, so it will be ready soon."

Carla was already heading toward the fire. Pablo followed her and Juana walked slowly toward the matrimonio. The men working on the platform watched her as she passed.

The husk of a coconut lay on the tree below the double hammock. From within came a murmur of voices.

Juana stopped by the foot of the hammock and scratched the cloth with her fingernails.

"Senor?"

The hammock swung slightly, then Pedro's head appeared through the slit at the top.

"Good morning, senor." Juana hesitated, glanced at the sun and corrected herself. "Good afternoon."

Pedro looked at the sun, surprise on his face.
"My God, is it that late? Why didn't someone call me?"

"There was no need, senor. But there is need now. Alfredo is awake and in much pain. His leg looks very bad."

"I'll be there in a minute." Pedro's head ducked back inside the hammock. The head of the matrimonio sagged as Maria squeezed forward to leave Pedro more room to dress. She handed him his pants -- still rolled to keep things from falling out of the pockets -- and his tee shirt, and he put them on.

Then Pedro pulled down the side of the hammock and swung his legs out. Juana caught a glimpse of Maria pulling her dress on as Pedro stepped down to the tree.

"How long has he been awake?" Pedro walked toward the roots as he spoke.

"Not long, senor. Five minutes perhaps."

The men working on the platform waved and smiled as Pedro passed, but he barely noticed them. Hayma left the group and followed.

Pedro stopped by the supplies to pick up his jump-bag, then dug through the pile to find the first aid kit from one of the rafts. He took both with him as he turned toward the stretcher.

Juana had a can of matte ready by the time he reached the fire. She handed it to him as she spoke.

"There is another fire now, senor -- Ramon built it beside Alfredo. Carla is boiling water there, and I have some here."
Pedro paused.

"Thank you, senora, but you don't have to boil the water -- it's already sterile. It is good to have it heated though -- as hot as you would want to wash your hands in."

Juana touched a can. "It is hot enough now, senor."

"Good. I'll call you when I need it." Pedro turned again toward the stretcher. The knot of people crowded round it stood aside as he approached.

He knelt by the injured man and looked at his face. Spoke to him as he opened his jump bag.

"How does it feel, my friend."

Alfredo opened his eyes when Pedro spoke. He answered in a faint voice.

"It is bad, senor."

"But is it hot or cold? Does it ache?"

"It is hot, senor. And the pain -- I cannot describe it."

Pedro tore the paper wrapping from a packaged hypodermic.

"All right, my friend. I will give you a shot now, to take the pain away." He lifted the man's arm, slid the needle in and pushed the plunger.

Alfredo's eyes closed and his face relaxed as Pedro unwrapped another needle and gave the man a shot of general purpose antibiotic, then lifted the blanket and looked at the leg.
"It should come off, senor." Ramon knelt beside the fire about two meters away.

"I think it is worse now than it was yesterday, senor." Maria arrived and knelt beside Pedro.

"It is." Pedro lowered the blanket.

"Will you take it off?" Ramon's face was grave as he spoke.

"It is a very serious matter," Pedro said.

"But it must be done, senor. Without the leg, he has a chance."

"Yes." Pedro looked at Alfredo, then turned to the foreman.

"And it must be fast and clean -- it will be easier on him that way. Can you do it with one stroke of a machete? I could not."

Ramon's face paled as Pedro spoke, but his voice was steady as he answered.

"Not with my machete, senor, but I could with a big one. The Indians have big ones."

Pedro looked round the crowd that was gathering and saw Hayma watching. He turned to Maria.

"Tell him the problem. Ask if he will lend us the biggest machete they have."

Maria nodded, rose to her feet and spoke to the Indian. He closed his eyes for a second and thought of the Mother.
Then he opened his eyes, nodded, turned and trotted toward the platform.

"He will do it," Maria said as she knelt again beside Pedro.

Hayma returned in less than a minute with a big machete -- its blade more than a meter long -- and offered it to Pedro. Pedro tore a piece off his shirt, wet it with some of the water Carla had heated and scrubbed the blade of the machete. Then he used another can of hot water to wash his hands before he felt the edge of the machete and turned to Ramon.

"That will do, senor." The foreman eyed the machete. It is a good one."

"But not sharp enough." Pedro handed it to him.

"Of course, senor." Ramon accepted it and turned to the men behind him.

"Pedro! The fisherman's file is on the platform. Will you bring it, please?"

"Of course, senor." One man stepped out of the crowd. Trotted toward the crown of the tree.

Pedro opened the first-aid kit, sorted through it and slammed it closed in disgust. Then he turned to the young fisherman.

"Pablo?"

"Senor?"

"Have you ever seen a tourniquet?"
"To stop bleeding? Si senor."

"We will need one. Can you find enough parachute cord to make it, and a stick?"

"Seguro." Pablo turned, ran toward the supplies.

Now Pedro lifted the blanket off the injured man. The infection was obviously very bad -- one of the worst he had ever had to deal with -- but it didn't bother him as much as others had. He felt concern for the injured man, but no nausea or sickness when he looked at the rotting leg.

"Best get him off the stretcher, senor." Ramon, sat off to the side, carefully stroking the edge of the machete with the file.

"No," Pedro said. "I don't want to move him before you cut."

"Then I will cut the stretcher."

"I know." Stepping over Alfredo, Pedro lifted the good leg and moved it to the side as far as it would go. He looked up as Pablo returned with the cord and the stick.

"Something else we need, Pablo. A short log, thicker than his thigh, that we can put between his legs to protect the good one."

"I won't miss, senor." Ramon tested the edge of the machete with his thumb as he spoke.

"I'm sure you won't, my friend. But we will all feel better if we know his other leg is protected. I think you will feel better -- and cut better -- too."
Ramon stroked the edge of the machete again before he spoke. "You are right, senor." He offered the machete to Pedro.

"I think this is sharp enough now."

Pedro tested it and nodded. "It is, my friend."

He laid it carefully beside the stretcher. Drew his own machete and laid the end of the blade in the fire. Ramon lit a cigarette.

When Pablo returned Pedro placed the chunk of wood between Alfredo's legs. He made sure the injured leg was flat on the tree trunk, then glanced at his machete in the fire and saw that the blade glowed red. He looked at Ramon.

"Are you ready?"

Ramon stabbed his cigarette out on the tree and rose to his feet. "I am," he said.

"Okay. Pedro unwrapped an antiseptic swab and wiped the blade of the big machete. He used a second swab to wipe the blade again, then handed the huge knife back to Ramon.

"Don't touch the blade until after you use it."

He knelt by the stretcher and unwrapped yet another swab. Gently wiped around the leg just above the knee, then picked up the tourniquet Pablo had made. He centered the knot over Alfredo's femoral artery and wrapped the cord about the leg perhaps ten centimeters above the knee. He tightened it, tied it, then leaned back and turned to Ramon.

"Between the rope and the knee, as fast and as clean as you can." He stood and stepped aside.
"Seguro, senor." Ramon stepped into position and raised the machete. He paused, changed from a one-handed to a two handed grip and glanced at Pedro.

Pedro nodded. Ramon braced himself and struck.

The blade swept through the leg and through the stretcher to bury itself centimeters-deep in the tree trunk. Blood spurted and the severed leg rolled free. People stepped hurriedly aside as it approached them and watched in horrified fascination as it splashed into the sea.

Ramon wrenched the blade free of the wood, handed it to Pablo and pointed to the floating leg.

"Get that!" He spoke to no-one in particular as he turned to kneel beside Pedro.

Blood spurted despite the tourniquet. Pedro reached for his own machete, its blade now glowing red in the fire.

***

Carla didn't see the amputation. As Ramon raised the machete she heard a faint sound to the south and turned to look for it. As Alfredo's severed leg rolled into the sea she stared mesmerized at the tiny dot that might be an airplane.

As Pedro picked up his own machete she stepped toward him.

"Senor?"

"Shhh." Maria and Juana both, pulled her back when she would have touched Pedro's shoulder. "Can't you see he's busy."
"But senora -- there is an airplane!" Carla pointed toward the approaching Catalina.

Maria and Juana both looked at the plane, then at Pedro and Ramon. Pedro held the red-hot blade against the stump of Alfredo's leg now. It sizzled like a steak on a frying pan, and the smell of burning meat filled the air.

Juana turned to Maria. "We can't interrupt. They cannot leave him now!"

"But the plane!" Maria looked at the tiny shape in the sky. Listened to the sound of the engines, faint over the sea. "Where is Manuel?"

"Out with the boat. Fishing."

Maria looked at the Catalina again. "That plane sounds different. It's not one of the ones that was looking for us -- it's just passing by and it will not come back!"

She turned to Pedro and saw the look of concentration on his face.

"We must do something!" Juana spoke anxiously.

"We will." Maria looked again at the plane. "Come with me!"

She ran to the pile of equipment and searched frantically. Found the box of rockets.

"I should have thought of these before," she said, "instead of using those cans! The senor says they will signal a plane from kilometers away!"
She dragged the box out onto the tree trunk. Opened it and lifted one rocket out -- a cylinder nearly a meter long and about ten centimeters in diameter. Juana looked at it curiously.

"How do we set it off?"

"Here are instructions -- yes, there's Spanish too. Look."

Maria handed the rocket to Juana and turned to study the instructions on the box.

"Type VII -- whatever that means. Is that what it says on the rocket?"

"I cannot read, senorita."

"Show me one then." Maria looked at the rocket. "Yes there it is." She turned again to the instructions. "Is there a paper tag on one end of it?"

Juana touched it with her hand. "This, senorita?"

Maria glanced at the rocket. "Yes, that's it. These are very simple then, we will have no trouble. Give it to me!"

Maria took the rocket, pulled the fuse-tab out of the end and heard something start to sizzle.

She cocked her arm back and threw the rocket as far as she could out to sea.

It splashed into the water and floated for a minute, pointed end upward. Then it fired and soared several hundred meters into
the sky to burst with a thunderous crash and a flaring fireball that settled slowly toward the surface.

Maria looked toward the plane, saw that it had turned and was heading away from them now.

"Another, quickly. This may be our last chance." Maria grabbed a second rocket and a third. Pulled the tabs and threw them into the sea.

Pedro was lifting the hot machete away from the seared stump as the first rocket exploded.

He turned, saw the fireball hanging in the sky and the streamer of colored smoke. Ramon turned too and started to rise.

"No!" Pedro's voice stopped him. "Whatever it is, it will have to wait." He turned back to Alfredo.

***

In the Indian camp the Mother-of-all started at the sound. She scrambled to the door of her hut just in time to see the fireball just before it sank below the trees. She closed her eyes and thought desperately of all her people.

Hayma was startled by the rocket too, and by the Mother's thought that hit him with almost physical force. He had to calm himself for a moment before he looked carefully at Maria as she threw the second and third rockets into the sea. Then he closed his eyes and thought of the Mother.

***
Ten kilometers away the Catalina cruised a couple of hundred meters over a mass of floating trees. In the observation blister, Clive Jonas and Jim Cosby studied the floating wood with binoculars.

"I don't recognize half of them, but they're good trees all right," Cosby said. "If we get all of them we'll wipe out the hardwood market for a year."

"And we have them. All cut and waiting for us in international waters! First come, first served!" Clive was jubilant.

From behind them came a startled cry. They turned to see Mayta sit bolt upright in his hammock, a look of terror on his face. He spoke a few words in a strange, guttural language.

He looked desperately around the interior of the plane. Swung out of his hammock and ran forward to the cockpit where he grabbed Raoul's shoulder.

"What is the banging senor? What is the fire?"

Startled, Raoul looked at the Indian.

"The banging, senor. Is it dangerous? The light -- like the sun falling!"

Raoul listened to the plane but heard only the reassuring drone of the twin engines. He looked at his instruments and saw them all reading normal. He looked back into the fuselage and saw Cosby and Clive crowding forward to watch him.

He turned to Mayta. "You were sleeping?"
"Si senor." The Indian put his hand to his forehead. "My head aches."

Raoul grinned. "I'm not surprised. That must have been some dream you had!"

Then he spoke to Clive. "Well, senor? We have fuel for about two more hours, then we must head back."

Clive looked at Cosby. "Jim? What do you think?"

"There's obviously enough here to justify an operation. I bet it would take a couple of weeks to count them -- and the time would be better spent logging than counting."

"My thoughts exactly. Right now I guess the best thing to do is to call home and get things started." He glanced at his watch. "Besides, Mary's plane should be getting in soon."

He turned to Raoul.

"Okay, we've seen enough for this trip. Let's go back to Panagra. And I guess you'd better consider yourself chartered for at least a month!"

Smiling, Raoul turned his eyes to the compass and banked the plane to turn back to land. A month's charter -- and that was just a start!

***

In the Indian camp Hotan opened his eyes and blinked a couple of times to recover from the shock of the Mother's desperate fear. He looked at her and wondered at the puzzlement on her face.
"Mother?" He leaned forward.

She looked at him. Spoke.

"I am all right, Hotan -- and it seems the banging is not dangerous. The girl was making the noise, with something that shot up into the air.

"But there is something strange. I just heard one of my sons -- someone I have not heard for a long time. He is not with us, but he is not very far away. I must think of this."

The Mother-of-All leaned back against her back-rest and closed her eyes. She opened her mind, and began to count her people.

***
CHAPTER 27

Pedro slid the wooden block under the seared stump of Alfredo's leg to keep it raised. He opened a packet of antibiotic powder and dusted it over the burn, then bandaged it.

He spread the blanket over the injured man. Alfredo would be in shock now, and he must be kept warm even in the heat of the tropical day. Pedro looked carefully at his face.

"And now, senor?" Ramon's knees were drawn up in front of him as he sat, Pedro saw that his pants were soaked with blood and that his own were soaked too. He looked at the dribble of blood that lay below the stump. A liter, perhaps two lost. In a hospital they would replace it -- but Alfredo would not die from lack of blood.

A hand set one can of matte in front of him and another before Ramon. Pedro turned to look at Maria as she knelt beside him.

"While you were busy," she said, "there was a plane."

Pedro's eyes opened wide.

"I did not want to interrupt, senor, so I fired rockets. Three of them."

Pedro nodded.

"But the plane turned away -- it did not come to us! They must not have seen the rockets!"

"Was it one of our planes? What color was it."
"It was silver, senor, and it sounded different from the others. It was different -- I have seen one like this before at San Felipe. It has propellers and it can land on water."

"Then it wasn't looking for us." Pedro looked at the empty sky. "It's gone now. I wonder what it was doing out here?"

He looked back at Maria, saw the distress on her face.

"I wasted the rockets," she said.

Pedro reached for her hand.

"You did what you had to do, querida. If they had been looking for us they would have seen the rockets. If they weren't looking for us they might not even have been looking outside the plane! You could not know."

"I am sorry, senor."

"Don't be. The rockets didn't work, but you tried." He glanced at the injured man laying beside him.

"With or without the leg, he may die. But we tried."

They could hear an outboard motor now, beyond the tree across from them. Pedro watched as the boat appeared, Manuel at the tiller, three men with him. Pedro stood and looked again at his patient. Then spoke to Carla as she sat beside him again.

"Keep him warm and comfortable, senora. Give him lots of water when he wakes up, or matte if he wants it."
"Si senor." Carla glanced at him, then turned her eyes back to Alfredo.

The crowd dispersed. Pedro turned and walked toward the fire. Maria, Juana and Ramon with him. They met Manuel as he climbed up from the landing.

"Senor," he said. "The plane...."

"Yes?"

"They did not see the rockets?"

"I guess not. I was busy." Pedro turned his head to look back toward the stretcher. "We cut off Alfredo's leg."

"Senor? is he all right?"

"We don't know yet, but I think so. Maria and Juana set off the rockets."

Manuel was embarrassed.

"I was less than a kilometer away senor. I tried to get back but I was foolish. I flooded the motor, and it would not start quickly.

"Do you think anyone in the plane saw the rockets, senor?"

"No. It might not have landed but it would not have flown away. They would have come to look for us."

"I think so, senor. Well, we are comfortable as long as the water lasts."
Manuel looked down now, at the bloodstains on Pedro's and Ramon's pants.

"But you had better get those pants washed, senor, and you too, my friend. If you fall in the water like that, the sharks won't wait before they attack!"

Juana looked at Ramon, then Pedro. Take the pants off, senors," she said. I will wash them.

"Not in the sea," Manuel said. Scoop some water into that canvas bucket from the raft, and wash them in that.

Maria looked at Pedro. "I will wash yours, senor," she said.

"No you won't!" Juana said. "Take him back to the hammock, senorita. Then bring his pants to me and go back to the hammock yourself!"

"And you, Ramon." She turned to the foreman. "You will stay with me while I wash yours. I won't have you walking around with no pants!"

***

The Mother beckoned. Hotan stepped forward and knelt to listen to her whisper.

"Who was it, Hotan -- the young man who went off in the airplane?"

Hotan looked at her, puzzled.
"The brother of Hayma. He went away with a man who had a big airplane that could land on water. It landed in the river one day, and someone went away on it."

"I remember, Mother."

"What was his name, Hotan? His name?"

Hotan hung his head. Covered his face with his hand. Then straightened up.

"It was Mayta, Mother."

"Yes -- I remember now." The Mother's eyes closed again, Hotan stepped back and watched.

The Mother leaned back with her eyes closed and whispered to herself.

"Mayta. Mayta."

***

Five-year-old Carl Jonas slept in one bedroom of a suite at the Hotel Panagra that evening while Clive and Mary relaxed with drinks in the sitting room. A pad of yellow foolscap paper, half covered with scrawled notes, lay on the sofa beside Mary. Clive sprawled in an easy chair, his eyes closed as he listened to her.

Okay -- sawmills, markets and import duties," she said. "We check them tomorrow. But I think we should look at the Asian market too. They're just as close as anyone else by ship, and they're hungry for wood."
"Why not ask Jenkins if he could put a plywood mill in a ship? That would really sew it up."

Clive grinned. "He hasn't even worked out the sawmill yet. You're going to drive him up the wall."

"That's what he's paid for. I'll phone him tomorrow. If this stuff is as good as you say it is, we should clean up."

"I'm not that sure yet -- I don't know enough about the trees down here. But there's got to be enough to justify a pretty big operation. The stuff's free -- no stumpage or anything."

"Except for the cost of operating at sea. What about weather?"

"I checked. The season's right -- we should be able to count on six months' operation with no major problems."

"And where will that stuff be at the end of six months?"

"Jim figures it will pass about a thousand miles south of Hawaii and be somewhere near the Marshall Islands by then."

Mary tapped her pencil against her front teeth as she looked at the pad beside her.

"It's almost too good to be true, but I don't see the hitch in it."

"I don't think there is one." Clive chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking about that Indian I was telling you about. The one who flies crew for Raoul."
"You liked him?"

"Sure -- he seems like a good guy. But he was sleeping while Jim and I were looking over the logs, and he had a nightmare of some sort. All of a sudden he jumped up and started asking what all the banging was. We thought the plane was coming apart or something."

"But nothing happened?"

"No. Raoul quieted him down and he went back to sleep.

"But when we got half way back he got up again and wanted Raoul to turn around. He said his mother was out there, and he wanted us to fly back and get her."

"That sounds great. Is he off his stick or something? If he is, I'm not sure I want him with us tomorrow."

"I don't even know why we're going tomorrow. We know the stuff's out there, and I think we'd best start working on the business end of it."

"You know it's out there and I believe you -- but I still want to see it. I can't feel greedy enough to do a good job if I haven't seen what we're working on.

"And you'd better start thinking about getting someone out there full-time, soon. Don't forget it's first-come, first served. Once we get our crew out there it's ours -- but if anyone else gets there first it's theirs. We'd better make sure no-one else stakes a claim before we spend too much money!"
Clive grinned. "All that because you want a ride in a funky old plane. What if I got our company plane down here -- would you still want to fly half-way across the Pacific?"

Mary picked up a pillow and threw it at him. Clive ducked and it knocked over the lamp beside him. He laughed.

"You're slow, girl!"

"I've been working too hard for a slob who doesn't appreciate me," Mary said. "Call the babysitters, and you can show me the town."

"Okay." Clive reached for the phone. But I'll have to call Raoul first and tell him to get rid of the girl he was going to set me up with."

The next pillow knocked the phone from his hand and it broke as it hit the floor. He had to use one in the bedroom to call the babysitter.

***

Maria woke early the next morning and savored the feel of Pedro curled around her. His arm lay over her and his hand cupped her breast. His breath felt warm on her back and his beard scratched a bit.

Gently, she pushed his hand from her breast. Lifted his arm and laid it on his side, then turned on her back to look at him. She craned her neck to kiss his forehead then, still slowly, she sat up and pushed her head through the slit at the top of the matrimonio. Looked about in the half-light just before sunrise.
A few coals still glowed in the fire. Carla had sat up most of the night with Alfredo but she dozed now, sitting beside him with her knees drawn up and her head resting on them, a panel of parachute cloth wrapped around her like a shawl.

Maria ducked her head inside the matrimonio again to look for her dress. Pedro had rolled it up and was using it as a pillow.

His shirt was down near his feet. She rolled it up, carefully lifted his head and put it in place of her dress. He stirred, but did not wake.

Maria slipped the dress over her head and pulled it down to her waist, then pulled the side of the hammock down.

There was no one around. She swung her legs out, stood and shook the dress down so it covered her. Then she glanced back at the matrimonio -- now closed again -- and saw no movement. Pedro still slept.

Maria straightened her dress and ran her hands through her hair as she walked to the fire.

A couple of dry sticks caught quickly and the fire burned brightly as she opened three cans of water and set them by it to heat.

While she waited the world turned red and she felt the warmth as the sun crept over the horizon. She sat by the fire with her knees drawn up, her arms wrapped around her shins, to watch it.

She had been frightened when she awoke on the boat that first morning, and when she landed on the tree. She had been alone
in the world then -- a young girl, cast away in a strange place
with a group of strangers.

Now she was a woman among friends who respected her, living
in a place and a way that might seem strange to others but that
felt natural to her. She was a woman now, and she had a man to
help her and protect her. A man who needed her comfort and
care.

One of the cans of water began to boil. She measured a half-
handful of matte into it, swirled it a moment, then set it to cool.

She kept one eye on the matrimonio, watching for movement.
When Pedro awoke, she would make matte and bring it to him
as he climbed out of the hammock.

He was hers while they stayed on the tree -- Juana had told her
that and she knew it in her own heart. But Juana had also
warned her that things might change when they returned to
land. He might feel differently when he was among his own
people.

Maria drew her legs up and wrapped her arms round her shins.
Rested her chin on her knees and gazed at the matrimonio.

***

Hotan was drinking matte and talking with Maria when Pedro
woke. Maria still watched the hammock, and she had begun
brewing matte when she saw it move. She brought it to him as
he returned from the branch the men used as a bathroom.

"Hotan is waiting for you, querido. He has a message from the
Mother."
"Oh? Is she all right?"

"I think so, but I think she was scared by the rockets yesterday. He asks a lot of questions about them and he wants to know if we have more of them."

"Well, let's see what it's about, anyway." He walked with her to the fire and sat facing the Indian. He offered Hotan a cigarette as Maria knelt by him to translate.

"He says the Mother is well, querido, and she sends her greetings. She asks if you have more thunder and lightening -- that's what he calls the rockets."

Tell him we have, and that they do no harm. Tell him we fired them to signal the plane that flew past yesterday."

"He knows that, querido -- but I don't quite understand. He says he didn't see the plane, but he knows it flew past.

"He says it will come back today and that you should have more rockets ready to fire when the sun is high -- that's noon -- but you should not fire them until he tells you to. He says he will stay with you today, and you should stay on the tree."

"What makes him think the plane's coming back?"

"The Mother told him, querido."

"And how would she know?"

"She knows many things, querido."

Pedro looked at Maria with interest. He was sure she knew more than she told him. He remembered his own experience
with the Mother-of-all and decided it was better not to think about it.

"I wasn't going anywhere anyway -- but tell him we have only two rockets left. We have to save them for signals, and we can't fire them for any other reason."

"He says he knows that, querido. But he says the ones I fired yesterday were wasted because no-one was looking. He said he will tell you when someone is looking."

"But he didn't even see the plane. How does he know no-one was looking?"

"I'm not sure, querido. He says the Mother tells him these things, and that she will tell him when to tell you to fire the rockets today."

"Tell him he's welcome to stay with us, but that I must decide when to fire the rockets. Say it some way that won't offend him, and offer him breakfast. I'm not going to waste rockets to amuse him but he's helped us a lot and I want to stay friendly."

Hotan closed his eyes as Maria spoke. When he opened them he was obviously disappointed, but not unfriendly. He had eaten breakfast before he came to the tree, but he accepted Maria's offer.

***

Young Carl Jonas loved the Catalina, even though he was not allowed to play in it as he wanted to. His main disappointment was that he was not allowed to ride in the forward gun turret -- which had no guns and no seat now -- for the take-off. He was allowed forward while the plane was in the air though and
Mayta -- a real live wild Indian -- even opened the hatch so he could stick his head out and gasp for breath in the 100-knot wind for a few moments.

Mayta was wonderful too. Carl had met Indians on trips with his parents around B.C. but they all spoke English, so they were not wild Indians. Mayta spoke some strange language that even his parents could not understand and they could speak to him only with the pilot as an interpreter. They said the strange language was Spanish, and that Mayta spoke another language that not even the pilot could understand. He was funny when he closed his eyes and nodded his head, as though he were talking to someone.

The pilot had allowed Carl to fly the plane for a while too, and the pilot obviously thought that should be a real treat. But this pilot's idea of flying the plane was that Carl sit still in the co-pilot's seat and touch the wheel without moving anything. Carl could not remember the days when his parents had owned no plane of their own, and he had been touching the wheel without moving it before he could walk. His idea of a thrill now was to be allowed to turn the plane or to make it climb or dive but his father said this plane was too big for a little boy to handle.

Now the plane was circling around a log boom -- like the log booms at home but much bigger -- and the Indian had pulled him back to the observation blister and was pointing at something outside. It must be very interesting because the Indian was excited, but Carl could see nothing.

His mother was looking out the other side of the plane with binoculars -- perhaps she could see what it was if she turned around. Carl reached up and tugged her arm.
On the tree they watched as the plane passed nearly twenty kilometers away. It was just a barely-visible speck in the sky, but the sound of the engines was clear in the silence of the open sea.

Pedro held the last two rockets ready in his hand. Hotan stood at his elbow, Maria at his other side. Hotan spoke and Maria turned to Pedro.

"Now, querido. He says now is the time to fire the rocket."

"Too soon, they won't see it from there unless they're looking right at us."

"He says it must be now."

"Tell him I know about these things. If we fire the rocket now they won't see it, and we can't afford to waste any."

Hotan grabbed a rocket out of Pedro's hand. Looked at it in frustration and thrust it back at him.

He looked desperately about the tree. Ran to the red matrimonio. Tore it loose from the branches and ran to the tall branch where the radar reflector hung. He scrambled up, locked his legs around it and waved the hammock back and forth.

Aboard the Catalina, Mary Jonas peered out where young Carl pointed. Saw nothing. Mayta said something and Raoul turned round to call back to her.

"He says there's a red flag, senora, on one of the trees over there."

"If there is, I don't see it."
"He has good eyes and he's usually right. Try the binoculars."

Mayta could not see the hammock from that range and neither could Mary Jonas, even with binoculars. But she did see a raft of trees much bigger than the one they had been looking at. She called Clive and handed him the binoculars.

"You've been looking at the small stuff Dumbo. Take a look out there!"

Clive looked. Called to Raoul and told him to turn north.

At the top of the branch, Hotan stopped waving the flag and shouted to Maria.

"He says the plane is going to turn toward us now, querido. He says to fire the rocket."

"Tell him it's too soon. They still might not see it. Tell him they can't see him waving that hammock either."

"He says he knows that, querido, but they are coming closer. They will see it when they come close enough."

Pedro shaded his eyes and peered at the plane. Beside him, Manuel shaded his own eyes.

"I think it's turning, my friend. Can you see?"

"It is turning, senor, but I cannot see whether it is coming toward us or going away."

***
In the plane Raoul shaded his eyes and peered ahead where Mayta pointed. He turned to Clive.

"He says the flag is still there, but I don't see it."

"Maybe his eyes are acting up. Remember his dream yesterday, and the story about his mother?"

"Perhaps, senor. We'll see, anyway, if you want to look at the trees. He says it is on one of them."

Mayta still could not see the flag and he had pointed the wrong direction when he tried to direct Raoul to it. As Pedro and the others watched the plane they realized that it would miss them by about five kilometers. Hotan saw it too, and he stopped waving the hammock, clung to the top of the tree and called to Maria again. She turned to Pedro.

"He says if you will not fire the rocket when he tells you too, will you please tell him when you are going to fire it? He says it will be better if he knows."

Pedro glanced at Manuel, saw agreement in the fisherman's eyes.

"Tell him I'm letting one go now" Pedro cocked his arm. At the top of the tree, Hotan closed his eyes and thought of the Mother.

In the plane Raoul felt his seat move under Mayta's grip. He glanced up as the Indian leaned over his shoulder, eyes sweeping the horizon. Then Mayta's hand shot out, pointing to the right.
Raoul turned his head just in time to see the rocket burst. Then he banked the plane toward the fireball that settled slowly into the sea.

***

In the Indian camp, the Mother-of-all relaxed. Opened her eyes and smiled. Now Hayma dared to lean forward and wipe the sweat from her face.

***
CHAPTER 28

The horn sounded once and the diesel engines throbbed as Manuel eased the throttles forward. Water churned under the stern of the tug and the log moved slowly into the cradle.

Then Ramon dropped his hand and Pablo started the winch, closing the noose of steel cable. As the cable came taut the log lifted slowly out of the sea and onto the raft. As it stopped Hayma ran up the shearlegs and opened the running block at the top to let the cable fall free.

Clive and Pedro watched from aboard the ship as the log was winched slowly into line with the other crosspieces of the huge raft, and lashed in place.

Clive looked at the setting sun and turned to Pedro.

"That will be it for tonight," he said."They can do the last three tomorrow morning, and then you'll have the biggest damn houseboat in the world!"

He turned his back to the rail and looked at Mary, sitting in a deck chair with yet another pad of yellow foolscap paper. She looked up at him as she spoke.

"The cheapest camp, you mean. It's all going to go through the sawmill when they're through with it, and the net cost will be less than nothing!" She grinned at Pedro. "You have to keep reminding him of things like that, or he'll nickel and dime you to death."
Pedro grinned self consciously. After three weeks, he was still not used to his employers' breezy informality. He watched as Clive settled into the deck chair beside Mary, opened another beer and turned to face him.

"You're all settled with the corps now, are you?"

"Yes. I'm out, and I have three years to take up the free tuition if I want it."

Clive snorted. "Don't worry about that," he said. "With your cut from this show, you'll be able to buy your own university by then!"

"Don't listen to him, Pedro." Mary looked up from her note-pad. "You're going to do all right, but ten per-cent of the profits split between all of you isn't going to be that much." She grinned.

"You should have asked for twenty five per-cent!"

Now Pedro grinned. "You should have told me that before I signed," he said.

Clive laughed. "That's what they all say," he said. "Mary's all sweetness and light after the deal is done, but if you'd tried for twenty five per-cent she would have talked you down to five!" He took another sip of beer.

"Anyway," he said, "it's done now and you'll be on your own starting tomorrow. Raoul will be here for us about noon, and you should have about two weeks to get the camp finished before the sawmill gets here."

"We'll be ready," Pedro said.
"Okay." Clive finished his beer in one long draught and set the can on the table beside him. Stood and looked down at Mary.

"Early day tomorrow -- you can finish that in the plane, can't you?"

Mary looked up with a mischievous grin on her face. "I had other plans for the plane," she said, "but I can still finish this later." She stood, took Clive's hand in hers and led him toward their stateroom.

Left alone on the sun-deck of the small passenger-freighter that had been his home for two weeks, Pedro looked out over the raft. Most of the whites who had been on the tree with him would live on the ship until their floating village was complete, but the Indians had already moved to the raft.

Their swamp had been wiped out by the flood, and the government of San Cristobal had offered them a thousand hectares of land as a reservation. The Mother had flown to the mainland and looked at it, but she didn't want it.

Better the trees they knew, she told Pedro, than the white man's gift. With the money they could make logging, plus their share of the profits, they could choose and buy their own land.

Since she had returned her people had set up more than a dozen huts on the raft -- the nucleus of a small village. Now their fires glowed gently in the gathering dusk.

There would be huts for all before the ship returned to land, then they would start work on another raft on which to assemble the sawmill. The floating village would take about two years to drift across to Asia, Clive predicted, and by then they would have sawn up and shipped most of the trees. The
rafts would be towed to harbor somewhere, the village and the sawmill moved to land, and the rafts themselves would be turned into at least another shipload of lumber.

Pedro took a deep breath of the sea air, and turned to go down to his stateroom.

***

She was black haired and beautiful as she lay on the big white bed. She smiled, and Pedro moved toward her.

She said something but her words were lost in the scream of a klaxon horn from somewhere outside. Pedro started and his face paled.

Maria sat up in surprise.

"What's wrong, querido? It's only Manuel, in the tugboat."

"Of course," Pedro said. He smiled, shook his head to dislodge a memory, and joined her on the big white bed.

end