

FLEECE

carolyn g. lynn

Sweat trickled in rivulets down Jake Cutter's back as he fought to maintain control of his Grumman Goose. Beyond the fogged windscreen, the horizon had long since been obliterated by a curtain of heavy rain that drummed against the plane's hull. Surrounded by the raging elements, the former Flying Tiger felt claustrophobic within the confines of the small cockpit. He'd flown through storms before but never one as violent as this. The morning forecast from Tagataya had called for fair weather and smooth sailing. Mother Nature had decided otherwise.

Jake grimaced. *It's going to be a rotten day.*

In the copilot seat, Corky nervously wiped his palms on the legs of his grease-stained coveralls and strained to see beyond the heavy stream of water tracing patterns across the cockpit's four windows. He wiped condensation from the glass with his sleeve and peered hard at the starboard engine. Roiling, grey clouds swallowed the wing of the plane and clung to the engine like spider webbing. Thunder bellowed a rumbling refrain, an ominous reminder that the *Goose* and its six occupants were at the mercy of the elements. Corky licked his lips and desperately wished for a beer.

A blue-white flash of light suddenly filled the cockpit, and a splintering crash shook the plane and its inhabitants. Metal screamed in protest and the *Goose* lurched hard to port. Jack, Cutter's one-eyed mongrel dog, yelped in indignation. Tail tucked firmly between his legs, he scurried aft and buried himself beneath the folds of his blanket, his forepaws clasped over his muz-

zle. If they were going down, he didn't have to watch.

Corky pressed his nose against the window pane. The starboard engine belched thick, acrid black smoke. "We've been hit!"

"I know! I know!" shouted Jake over the shriek of the straining port engine. The *Goose* tried to buck away from him, but he kept her under control. Barely. Come on, baby. Not now!

"What's going on?" Sarah Stickney-White braced herself against the bulkhead and squeezed into the cockpit. "Jack just came flying past like--" A tongue of orange flame leapt past the starboard engine. "Oh my!"

"Damn it! Corky!"

The mechanic was already working, anxiously dividing his attention between his task and the results. He feathered the starboard prop, a task that entailed cutting engine's power while allowing the propeller blades to rotate, and kicked in the fire extinguisher for good measure. With the combined efforts of the extinguisher, the slipstream from the whirling propeller, and the driving rain, the flames were beaten back until there was nothing to see but a cloud of greasy black smoke.

"Are we going to make it?" asked Sarah, wedging herself between the pilot and copilot seats.

I wish I knew, thought Jake. He offered her what he hoped was a reassuring smile and said,

"Sure we will. Have I ever let you down?"

Jack barked twice in clear disagreement from the tail of the plane.

"Nobody asked you!" *So much for man's best friend*, Jake thought darkly before turning back to Sarah. "You'd better go on back and sit down," he said. "It'll get worse before it gets better."

"I dunno, Jake," said Corky when Sarah had resumed her seat in the cabin. "How are we going to get through this storm without the starboard engine? Just look at it! Why, I haven't seen a storm this bad since we flew that mission over, uh...over..." His expression grew vague as he tried to remember just where that elusive storm had cropped up. He lifted his cap and scratched his head thoughtfully, severely ruffling his already unruly black hair. "It was, uh...Hanchung...No, that's not it. Uh...Tsing, uh...Tsing..."

"Taipei," supplied Jake.

Corky brightened momentarily. "Sure! That's it," he said with a snap of his fingers. "Taipei," he agreed. "You remember what happened during that storm, don'tcha? We were running blind through a cloud bank and just missed hitting a couple a' Zeeks right in the middle of--"

"You're not helping, Corky."

"Oh. Right. Sorry, Jake."

"Why don't you try again and see if you can raise Louie."

"Sure, Jake." The mechanic took the radio receiver from its hook. "Mayday! Mayday!" He kept a nervous eye on the starboard engine. "Cutter's Goose to Boragora. Come in, Boragora. Mayday!"

Come on, Louie. Answer the damned radio. Jake tried not to listen to Corky, instead focusing his attention on keeping the *Goose* out of a dive. It took all his energy just to keep her level. *Come on, old girl. Pull up!*

The *Goose* ignored him. She continued to lose altitude.

"I'm still not getting anything, Jake."

Great. Wonderful. Just what we need. "The storm's probably scrambling the frequency." He consulted his instruments and did some rapid calculations. "The way I figure it, we're probably a little south of the Kyt'su Islands. If we can drop low enough I might be able to bring her down."

"Land? In this?" He'd have jumped from his seat had there been room to do so. "That's crazy!"

"We're in no condition to fly, Corky. You of all people should know that," Jake pointed out. "If I can manage to put her down near one of those islands, we can wait out the storm."

"And take off with one engine?"

"We've done it before."

"What about the Japanese? The Kyt'su are in the Japanese Mandate, and they're not gonna like us just dropping in on them unannounced."

"Got any better ideas?"

Corky thought about that for a moment and had to admit that he didn't. That settled any further argument.

"Strap in," ordered Jake. For the benefit of his passengers, he called over his shoulder, "Hang on, folks. This is going to be rough."

Corky craned his neck over his left shoulder and looked into the hold. Sarah sat with her back pressed firmly against her seat, her eyes tightly closed and her fingers clamped onto the armrests for dear life. In the seat beside her, Professor Bernard Ingalls stared in fascination as the clouds broke in misty tendrils around his window. He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

Munroe wasn't nearly so happy. He sat across the aisle from Sarah and the professor, his craggy face set in a perpetual sneer as he glowered at the window and the weather beyond. He caught Corky peering in at them and turned to glare at the mechanic with hard black eyes.

Corky turned away quickly and shifted uneasily in his seat. "I don't like that guy."

"Huh?" Jake only barely registered the comment. He was too busy trying to hold the *Goose* level with the swirling, gray horizon. "What's that?"

"Munroe," said Corky. "I don't like him."

"No one said you had to." The mechanic crossed his arms over his chest and stared sullenly at the instrument panel. Jake caught the gesture from the corner of his eye and spared a moment to glance at his friend. "If it'll make you feel any better, I'm not overly fond of him myself. Strapped in?" Corky tugged at his safety harness, then nodded. "Okay. Here goes." Jake eased up on the throttle.

The *Goose* dropped like a stone. Thunder growled ominously as they began their descent. Four thousand feet. Three. The port engine began to whine in protest. At two thousand feet the *Goose* broke through the clouds. A great, murky void of roiling water yawned below them in every direction.

Fifteen hundred feet to go. Better make this good, Cutter.

"Jake!" Corky pointed frantically out the windscreen. "Look!"

Now what? He flicked his eyes from the instruments to the horizon and groaned. *What else could go wrong?* An island loomed through the wall of water. *That can't be right. It's too close. We should still be at least ten miles south of the Kyt'su Islands. My calculations couldn't have been*

that far off.

Nevertheless, an island sat where no island had a right to be. Whatever the explanation -- instrument failure or hallucination -- it sat directly in their path.

It was too late to abort the landing.

The Goose hit the water with a jarring smack and the shoreline rushed up to greet them. The plane groaned as it ran out of water and bumped onto the mainland. Sarah's scream was dwarfed by the rending of metal and Jack's howl of protest. Jake lurched forward, and the universe exploded in a cacophony of rending wood.

It was hot inside the Goose. Steam rose from the floorboards.

Jake fumbled free of the seat straps and pushed himself to his feet. The cockpit was a shambles. The starboard portal was dark with vegetation, and the main windscreen was shattered in two places where branches had thrust their way through. Glass littered the floor and crunched beneath his boots like cracking bones in a stagnant silence.

Corky was still strapped into his seat. Glass slivers glittered in his hair, and several shallow cuts lacerated his face and neck. What little blood there was had already dried to a tacky, rust-colored crust.

"Corky?" Jake shook him gently. "Come on, buddy. Wake up."

Reluctantly, the mechanic began to stir. "Jake?" he murmured, opening his eyes. It took him a moment to orient himself. The world seemed to be doing handstands.

"Right here." Jake unbuckled the straps that kept his friend from sliding forward onto the floor. "Looks like you got pretty banged up. How do you feel?"

"Okay, I guess." Corky sat up. Suddenly he yelped and drew a piece of glass out of his leg, glaring accusingly at the shattered windscreen. "Hey," he exclaimed when he saw the foliage choking the portals. "We're on land!"

"I overran the beach."

"Gee, Jake, that's great!" Cutter raised a questioning eyebrow. The landing hadn't exactly been textbook. "I mean that we're all in one piece and everything," Corky elaborated sheepishly.

"I wouldn't celebrate too soon. I haven't taken inventory yet." Cutter extended a hand to help him out of the seat. "It's stopped raining. We might be able to get through to Louie now."

"I'll do it."

"Thanks, Corky." Cutter clapped him affectionately on the shoulder, then turned and made his

way aft to check on his passengers.

Sarah pushed herself out of her seat to meet him. She seemed a little shaky on her feet but otherwise appeared none the worse for wear. "That was some landing," she said, brushing a wisp of curly dark hair out of her eyes.

"Yeah, I'll say." Munroe leaned forward in his seat. His eyes glittered dangerously. "You got a deathwish, Cutter? 'Cause I sure as hell don't."

Figures Munroe'd be all right. It's almost a shame. If anyone needs a little shaking up, it's him. Jake turned to his last passenger. "How about you, Professor? Everything okay?"

"Hmmm? Oh yes. Quite." The old man adjusted a pair of wire-frames on his narrow nose and peered through the fogged lenses. "Fit as a fiddle. Miss White is correct. It was a marvelous landing."

"Thanks, Professor. Personally, I'm just glad we're all in one piece."

"No thanks to you."

"How'd you like to swim back to Borabora, Munroe?"

"Looks like none of us has got much of a choice," he growled, lumbering to his feet. He stood slightly taller than Jake. The boxing posters featuring Gorilla Joe Munroe hadn't exaggerated the heavyweight's thick, muscular frame and craggy, slab-like face. He really looked like the ape for which he'd been named. "As far as I'm concerned, Cutter, you can take this crate of yours and shove it up--"

"Jake?" Corky poked his head into the hold. "Still nothing on the radio. Is it okay if I go out and take a look at the engines?"

"Sure, Corky. Go ahead," he replied, without taking his eyes from the red-faced Munroe.

Jack ran from beneath his blanket and scamp-ered down the aisle after the mechanic. As he reached the entrance to the cockpit, he paused just long enough to snap at Munroe's heels. The boxer gave an angry yelp and swung his foot at the dog. Jack avoided the kick with practiced ease, shot into the cabin and leapt out of the plane's nose hatch after Corky.

"I warned you about that mutt of yours, Cutter! Next time I won't be using my foot."

"You and what army?" demanded Jake.

"Big talk, fly boy? How about backing it up?"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. Please!" Professor Ingalls rose from his seat and stepped between the two men. He was a fragile looking gentleman with dark blue eyes and an unruly mop of snowy hair that swept across a high forehead. He spoke in a soft, well modulated voice that carried surprisingly well. "There is a time and a place for everything. Personal differences aside, don't you think we



ought to determine where we are and a means by which to return safely to Boragora?"

"The professor's right," said Sarah sensibly. "Standing around and fighting like a pair of three year olds isn't getting us anywhere. If the two of you are so desperate to pummel each other, I suggest you at least wait until we find a way out of this mess."

She's got a point, thought Jake. He didn't particularly feel up to a knockdown/dragout with Munroe. His joints were stiff and his head ached where it had connected with the instrument panel. Not exactly the best condition to conduct a fist fight with a professional boxer. Besides, Sarah and the professor were right. It was time to pick up the pieces, not create more of them.

Munroe seemed reluctant to leave the matter lie, but he finally backed down. His expression clearly said there would be another time. He returned to his seat, removed a box from his overnight bag, and set about loading his Smith and Wesson.

Corky pulled a grease stained rag from his coveralls and mopped his face with it. It left a black streak across his chin that was lost in a shadow of dark stubble. In spite of the shade provided by the tree-lined beach, it was hot and sticky and very uncomfortable. He was sweating profusely. It made the shallow cuts on his face and neck itch terribly. Worse, he was thirsty. There was always a bottle of water in the *Goose*, but Corky was *really* thirsty. He wanted a beer. In fact, an entire pitcher would have been a blessing right about now.

"What the hell are you grinning at?"

Corky's daydream burst like a bubble and left him disoriented. He looked down on Munroe from his perch behind the starboard engine. "Huh?" he asked eloquently.

"You deaf or what? I said--"

"--Nothing important." Jake brushed past Munroe and peered up through the foliage. The *Goose's* forward momentum had been stopped by a stand of trees that marked the beginning of the island's jungle. "How's it look?"

"Not good." Corky stuffed the rag into a pocket and slid off the wing to the ground. He caught his balance awkwardly, barely managing to land on his feet. "We've lost the starboard engine."

"Can you get it going again?"

"Not without parts. She's in pretty bad shape."

"How about port?"

"I dunno, Jake." Corky scratched his chin thoughtfully. "She chopped up a lot of leaves and sucked them in. She'll go but I don't think she'll

handle the strain for very long."

"What's that mean in English?" demanded Munroe.

"It means," said Jake, addressing the passengers as a group, "that we're stuck here until help arrives."

"How the hell do you expect help to find us in the middle of bleeding nowhere, fly boy?"

"Why not ask them," said Ingalls quietly.

"Ask who?" Jake turned and groaned. "Oh no."

Twenty natives surrounded the *Goose* and its passengers. They stood as motionless as statues with grim expressions peering through heavy coats of facial paint. Dark skinned and muscular, each native was scantily attired in a leather loincloth and bore feather adorned spears, the stone points of which had been honed to an ugly, serrated edge.

"Where the hell did they come from?" demanded Munroe.

"The jungle, I would suppose." Ingalls adjusted the wire-frames on his nose and peered over the rim at the natives. "Interesting how they managed to surround us without making a sound. Almost as if they simply materialized from thin air."

"I wish you hadn't said that," lamented Corky. He scooped up Jack and pressed close to Sarah. Together they formed a tight group behind Jake.

"They're just a bunch of dumb natives. The islands out here are full of 'em," said Munroe belligerently. "And no half naked savage is gonna keep me from getting off this rock." He reached for the revolver at his hip. Seven spears leapt forward and poised inches from his throat, arresting his hand as it hovered over the butt of his weapon.

"It would seem they have the advantage," observed the professor.

Definitely not a good day. Jake swallowed the bile that had crept into his throat and cautiously stepped forward to address one of the natives. He chose the one with the most ornate spear and loincloth and hoped that he'd found the leader. "Uh, hello," he said as cheerfully as he could. It wasn't easy. "Friend." He opened his hands slowly and held them palm upward to show them empty of weapons. "Friend," he repeated hopefully.

The leader thumped the butt of his spear on the ground twice and barked a guttural word. The remaining warriors quickly formed a horseshoe around the prisoners, separating them from the *Goose*. Another grunt, this directed at Jake, and the leader pointed toward the jungle. A few prods from the spears made his meaning very clear.

"What're we gonna do, Jake?" asked Corky.

"Do?" Jake glanced at the grim faces of their captors. The spears were very persuasive. "What

he wants us to do," he said with resignation.

By the time they reached their destination the sun had begun to set. There was no one to greet the party of natives as they arrived. The village stood in silence, cloaked in the lengthening shadows of evening. Small huts formed a spiral radiating outward from a single, gray stone building that was the heart of the village. Firelight danced in paneless windows, but there was no indication of movement within.

"How curious," observed Ingalls as they were prodded through the village. He paused to study one of the smaller structures. "There appears to be a curious blending of Germanic, African and Mayan cultures here. How fascinating! If anyone had told me about this at the university, I'd have said they were out of their minds." An impatient native urged him forward with a prod of his spear.

"Why's that?" asked Corky as Ingalls stumbled into step beside him.

"Why? Because it couldn't possibly exist, that's why."

"Wonderful," sighed Sarah.

Their destination was the central building. Unlike the wood, thatch and mud brick structures that composed the outer circle of dwellings, it was constructed of ornately carved gray stone, black slate and marble.

Marble? Jake frowned. *Now where could they possibly have gotten marble?*

The patrol leader left his prisoners in the custody of his men and entered the structure through its single archway.

"Roman," marveled Ingalls as they waited beside the aperture. Closer examination revealed minute caricatures carved within the stone of the archway. "With Egyptian hieroglyphics! What a time to be without a notebook!"

Jake wasn't the least bit interested in the architecture. He was more concerned about what appeared to be their limited future. There wasn't long to wait. Their native guide reappeared several moments later, and the little company was herded into the building.

"Amazing!" breathed Ingalls. "Absolutely amazing!"

"Holy shit," murmured Munroe.

"Jake, this is incredible!" whispered Sarah. "I've never seen anything like it. It's beautiful!"

Cutter could only nod his agreement. The building's interior was magnificent. Silken drapes and richly colored tapestries adorned the walls, and statuary stood on intricately carved pedestals. The floor was a maze of fur and silken pillows on either side of a plush red carpet leading to a

central dais. On either side of the dais fire danced in silver braziers, brilliantly illuminating a dark wood, gold inlaid throne.

"Amazing," repeated Ingalls. "There must be at least nine ancient cultures represented in this room alone, seven of which are extinct."

"There's a goddamned fortune here, too," said Munroe. His mind raced with estimations. *Why, those braziers alone are worth thousands!*

Upon the throne sat a man, his skin the color of darkest mahogany. He was clothed in a cape of multicolored feathers and a loincloth of white linen threaded with silver. Upon his head was a crown of feathers and gold. A white lion with a golden collar rested docilely on a pillow at his feet and watched their approach with interest.

"That must be the big chief," Jake told Sarah. "The head man."

"Great. We get to see native royalty before he eats us."

"Eat you?" The figure on the dais seemed genuinely bewildered by Sarah's suggestion. "Good heavens! Why on earth would I wish to eat you?"

It took a moment for Jake to realize what he had heard. "You speak English!"

"Of course," he replied conversationally. "Also French, Spanish, German, Japanese, and two hundred thirty-seven other languages and dialects."

"I didn't know there were that many," marveled Corky.

"There are if you consider ancient languages," murmured Ingalls to no one in particular.

The chief rose from his throne and stepped down from the dais. He easily towered over Jake without the added height of the feathered head-dress. Muscles rippled beneath the dark skin as he approached. Dark, intelligent eyes flickered across the faces of the little company and finally came to rest on Jake. "No language would be sufficient to express my regret at your treatment by my huntsmen," he said in a deep, rumbling voice. "I am Kuro Kiantus Nuana. Chief. I command all that is upon Colchis. You are welcome."

"Some welcome," snarled Munroe. "Being dragged halfway across the island by a couple of jerks in bunny skins."

"Munroe!" exclaimed Jake. Their position was still tenuous in spite of the chief's apparent good humor.

Kuro acknowledged the complaint with a shrug. "My men are suspicious of outsiders. Visitors here are rare. There was no time to consult me."

"We understand," said Jake hastily.

"That is very gracious of you," the chief replied pleasantly. "Please accept my hospitality. You are my guests." He clapped his hands and

instantly three natives appeared in the doorway. There was a brief exchange in a guttural language that Professor Ingalls tried desperately to identify before the chief returned his attention to his 'guests'. "I have instructed that you be shown to private quarters. Facilities will be provided to tidy yourselves. You shall dine with me."

"Uh, I don't mean to sound rude, but what if we want to leave?" asked Sarah.

"You are free to go, of course. With or without escort, though I suggest you wait until morning. The jungle is not a place to wander at night." He offered Sarah a genuinely warm smile. "You are not captives. Believe me, I wish you no harm."

"We may as well be," Corky whispered to Jake. "We can't leave the island without the Goose."

Kuro turned to the mechanic as if the comment had been addressed to him. "It is being seen to." Jake began to respond to this, but the chief silenced him with a casual wave of his hand. "Ask whatever you wish at dinner. Until then, Captain Cutter." Kuro turned his back to them and returned to his throne. They were dismissed.

As the three natives led the little party to their quarters, Jake couldn't help but wonder: what did Kuro mean when he said that their 'problem' was being solved. More importantly, how had Kuro known his name?

Three buildings had been designated as housing for the castaways. Munroe and Ingalls were paired in one hut while Jake, Jack and Corky shared a second. Sarah was guided to accommodations of her own. She protested at first, but Jake assured her that they were only a few yards away and could reach her in a matter of seconds.

Though what we'd do about it with a village full of spear-toting natives I couldn't say, thought Cutter.

Surprisingly enough, the chief hadn't insisted on their turning their weapons over to him for the duration of their stay. That both relieved and frightened Jake. He could trust himself not to use his gun, but Munroe was another matter altogether. The man was unpredictable -- and dangerous.

Approximately two hours after their arrival, a native came to guide them back to the chief's quarters. Uneasy but loathe to refuse the invitation, the small party entered the stone building. The interior was much as it had been when they'd first seen it, but the huge, ornate throne had been removed along with the lion that had rested at its foot. In its place, a feast had been laid out upon a table long enough to accommodate fifty men.

Kuro Kiantus Nuana sat upon a pile of silken pillows at the head of the table. He had removed the elaborate feather and gold headdress and set it to one side. "My friends," he intoned as they were brought before him, "be welcome." He indicated the pillows that had been set around the table. "Cap-

tain Cutter, would you do me the honor of sitting to my right?"

"A traditional position of honor," observed Ingalls as Jake moved to comply. "Curious."

Sarah positioned herself on the chief's left directly across from Jake with Munroe and Ingalls beside her. Corky and Jack were quick to seat themselves at Jake's side.

With a cursory wave of his hand Kuro indicated the many varieties of food spread before them. Many of the dishes were unusual and, to Jake, unfamiliar, but they all smelled temptingly delicious. "Eat what you wish and as much as you desire. I have caused this to be prepared especially for you." Munroe distrustfully examined a steaming bowl of thick, cream colored soup sitting before him. "I assure you that you will suffer no harm but, to ease you, I shall taste all of the food myself."

"That isn't necessary," insisted Jake, glaring pointedly at Munroe. "We accept your hospitality at face value." He lifted his glass, full of a dark red wine, held his breath, and took a sip. It was delicious. It would be a shame if it were poisoned.

"Good for you, Captain Cutter," laughed Kuro. He gave Jake a hearty slap on the back that almost knocked him across the table. "Well, then. Shall we dine?"

The remainder of the meal was conducted in silence broken occasionally by happy sounds of pleasure as the contents of every tray were consumed. Only after everyone was contentedly full and the dishes removed by inclothed servants did conversation being in earnest. The chief seemed in a particularly jovial mood throughout the evening, the deep bass of his voice filling the cavernous room with tales of his people and the simple, rudimentary lives they led.

It was during a pause in one of these stories that Jake decided it was time for a few answers to the questions that had been nagging at him. Now appeared as good a time as any. "You said earlier you'd be willing to answer our questions at dinner."

"Yes I did, didn't I?" Kuro smiled benignly. "Continue."

Right. Well, here goes. "Earlier you addressed me by name, yet I don't remember introducing myself."

"Is that all that's been bothering you?" asked Kuro, surprised. "It's no great mystery, Captain Cutter. My huntsman told me."

"You mean the guy that dragged us here?" demanded Munroe. "I thought he couldn't understand us."

"He understood you perfectly."

"He can speak English?" asked Sarah.

"Of course. However, he would have brought you to me regardless."

"He could at least have explained things to us," she said indignantly. "He didn't have to be so rude!"

"I am afraid that is just another example of our suspicion of strangers," explained Kuro. "We are a very private people."

"Excuse me," ventured Ingalls, "but I have a question." Kuro turned to regard the professor and waited with quiet attention. "You called this island Colchis. I seem to recall having heard the name before, but the reference escapes me."

"It is a very old land," replied the chief evasively.

"It's not on any map I've ever seen," said Corky. "At least, I don't think it is." He blushed as Kuro turned questioning eyes on him. "I don't remember so good."

"Your memory is not at fault. You will not find Colchis on any of your maps." Kuro plucked a grape and studied it. "We value our privacy," he said, popping the grape into his mouth and chewing thoughtfully. "In fact, you are the first visitors we have had in many years."

"You made a comment earlier about our plane being taken care of," interjected Jake. "What did you mean?"

"Just that, Captain Cutter. We are a primitive people but not without our skills. You shall be able to depart the island on the morrow." Kuro flashed perfect white teeth in a smile. "In fact, I insist on it."

A fleeting chill raced along Jake's spine with minute feet. Before he could place his finger on what had caused it, the chief was rising from his place.

"And now," he said, towering over his guests, "I must bid you good evening. It grows late. The day has been long and I'm sure you are tired." A single clap of his hands summoned the huntsman and two of his men.

Don't they ever sleep? wondered Jake.

"Jauntu will see you safely to your quarters."

I'll just bet he will, thought Munroe. He gave the treasures within the room one last, longing look before allowing himself to be led away.

It was a glorious evening; crisp and clear with the sort of star-littered sky that took your breath away. The full moon was a pearl among diamonds, its silvery mantle bathing the little village in gray, shifting shadows. The village itself was quiet, every window a dark, vacant eye. The only sounds were those that came from the heart of the jungle that surrounded them, a primitive commingling of bird and carnivore. Heavy, pungent

fragrances wafted on a sighing wind. A beautiful night. Peaceful.

Then why do I feel so uneasy? Jake frowned at the constellations. *Why do I feel as though I've stepped into the eye of a storm? Certainly we're in a lot of trouble with the Goose grounded, the radio damaged and no salvageable parts with which to repair them. Not to mention finding ourselves prisoners in a village peopled with dark, grim men.*

Prisoners? No, that wasn't quite right. Kuro had been nothing but friendly, even if his men had been less than communicative. He'd left no guards on the huts of his guests; in fact, there was no one moving about the village at all. Not men, not women. Come to think of it, he couldn't recall seeing any women or children at all. Odd. Why hadn't he noticed that before?

That brought up another question that had been bothering him, effectively holding sleep at bay. Why was Kuro so anxious to have them leave the island? Was he hiding something and, if so, did it pose a danger to them?

He glanced over his shoulder and through the doorway into the hut. Corky snored softly as he lay stretched across a straw pallet, his arms folded loosely over his chest. He'd fallen asleep almost as soon as he'd lain down, the happy victim of the native beer Jake allowed him to sample. Beside him, Jack lay with his head pillowed on Corky's left leg. He'd watched Jake rise after a restless attempt to sleep but made no effort to follow him into the night. Instead, he gave a little snort and, closing his good eye, went back to sleep.

If Jack's not worried, why am I?

"Are the accommodations not to your liking?"

Jake turned and found Kuro standing before him, a shadowy figure. "Just having a little trouble getting to sleep," he explained. "I guess I'm still a little keyed up, what with the plane crash and all."

"Of course. I understand." The chief glanced briefly through the hut door at the sleeping mechanic. "It is hard to be responsible for so many." A particularly loud snore punctuated his observation and he smiled. "You should take your friend's advice. Try to sleep."

"I will. Thanks."

Kuro drew his cloak about himself. "Good night, Jake Cutter." He strode away. Shadows swallowed his dark form but his voice lingered. "Tomorrow is a day of truths."

"I don't like any of it," complained Munroe as he laced his boots. "If it were up to me we'd just take what we want. They're only a buncha dumb natives, for crying out loud. They probably don't even know what they got."

"And how do you propose to transport these

treasures once you've obtained them?" asked Ingalls, exasperated. All he'd heard upon waking was Munroe's disgruntled gripings. "Swim with them tied to your back?"

"That bird of Cutter's, how else?"

"In case you've forgotten, that bird, as you call it, is damaged. Perhaps irreparably. If we're to believe the chief, he's capable of remedying the problem. Personally, I'd rather not jeopardize our possible return home just so you can steal a few gold trinkets."

"Trinkets? Whaddaya mean, *trinkets*?" Munroe exclaimed. "Those 'trinkets' are sold gold!" Ingalls appeared unsympathetic. "You just don't get it, do you? I'm talking thousands, maybe millions, here. Money, my friend, and lots of it. Enough to buy that whole damed museum of yours and twenty more like it."

"Sometimes I think you're more primitive than these natives." Ingalls adjusted his wire-frames on his nose and peered through them disdainfully. "Even if I were to harbor some thought of removing a few artifacts -- which I certainly do not -- it would be for their historic and cultural value and not for their monetary worth. I'd much rather return with a scientific expedition to study these people and would do anything in my means to stop any mayhem you might try."

Will ya get a loada this? "You're somethin' else, old man, ya know that?" Munroe pushed himself to his feet and glowered down at the professor. "What makes you think you'd be able to stop me?"

"I didn't say I would succeed," replied Ingalls with quiet conviction. "I said I would try."

I'll say one thing for him -- the old boy's got guts.

Ingalls watched him stalk out of the hut and shook his head sorrowfully. What an extraordinary single-minded man. *Perhaps it would be best to notify Captain Cutter. After all, if Munroe does something foolish then I won't be to blame -- the responsibility will be Cutter's. In fact, I think that's exactly what I'll do.* Satisfied, Ingalls rose from his pallet and followed Munroe outside.

There was no one about as he stepped into the tropic morning. It was already unbearably hot. To his surprise, the village appeared to be deserted. The huts showed no sign of activity within, and nowhere could he hear voices. *I wonder where they could all be. Hunting for breakfast, perhaps?*

"Hey, Teach."

Ingalls turned. "I'll thank you not to call me that," he bristled.

"Yeah, yeah," said the boxer with a dismissive wave of his hand. He stood with his back to the professor, his attention on the jungle that began a little more than twenty feet away. "Come here and look at this, will ya?"

Honestly, some people. Now what is he going to-- "Oh my!" Ingalls exclaimed as he reached Munroe's side.

Rising from a canopy of green jungle was a hill of dark gray rock whose summit shone with a jewel of radiant light. Individual rays of amber-tinted fire leapt like streamers into a cloudless blue sky.

"What is that? The sunrise?"

"If it is, it's unlike any sunrise I ever saw." The golden corona was so bright that it hurt the professor's eyes to look upon it for extended periods. "Why, it's fantastic!"

"It's gold," insisted Munroe. "I'd stake my life on it."

"Impossible," snapped Ingalls. He shielded his eyes with the flat of his hand. "The entire hilltop would have to be made of gold to reflect like that."

"Yeah," Munroe grinned. "Just what I was thinking." He eagerly started forward. "Come on."

"Do you think it wise?" After all, it was a jungle out there, and they would be alone, without guides and, except for Munroe's pistol, unarmed.

"Not only do I think it wise, I think it profitable, and that's good enough for me. Now, you coming or not?"

What could create such a radiance? The professor was too curious to refuse the opportunity to find out. He followed Munroe into the jungle.

"Are we gonna leave today, Jake?"

"If Kuro's right, we should be able to."

"Good."

Cutter paused in the midst of pulling on his flight jacket. He turned to where Corky sat cross-legged in a corner of the hut, Jack sitting on his lap. A sudden, inexplicable trill of apprehension passed through him. *Ill wind coming*, he thought vaguely. The moment passed.

"I'm anxious to get home too, Corky," he said. "But I think we can trust the chief." He shrugged into his jacket as he crossed the hut's dirt floor. He offered Corky a hand, and pulled him to his feet with a tug that dumped Jack unceremoniously onto the floor. The little mongrel growled in protest.

"Sorry, Jack."

Corky shifted uneasily from foot to foot, his fingers twisting his cap into an almost unrecognizable lump of white cloth.

"Are you all right?" asked Jake, laying a hand on the mechanic's shoulder. "You're not worried about the natives, are you?"

"No," he admitted, clapping his cap onto his head and stuffing his hands into the pockets of his overalls. "It's just that this place gives Jack the creeps."

Jack barked twice.

"There, you see?"

Better than you know, thought Jake. He knew that Corky was scared and, frankly, he didn't blame him.

"Morning!" Sarah appeared in the hut doorway. "Everyone decent?"

Jack growled moodily.

"My, aren't we a glum looking group this morning." She waltzed into the hut and took Jake by the arm. "Well, I've got just the thing to cheer you up."

"Really?" he asked, grinning.

"Jake!" she exclaimed, scandalized.

"Sorry," he said. "What's up?"

"Come on. I'll show you." Jake allowed himself to be led outside. Corky followed close behind. Sarah directed them toward the jungle and pointed. "There," she said, triumphant.

It was the single most beautiful sight Jake had ever seen. It was also the most frightening. A shimmering, golden nimbus surrounded the crest of a hill rising from the depths of the jungle. Had the hill been there yesterday? He couldn't remember.

Jack paused at his feet and growled.

"Isn't that the most beautiful sunrise you ever saw?" asked Sarah.

"That isn't a sunrise," murmured Jake.

Jack barked twice in agreement.

"Well, of course it is," insisted Sarah. "What else could it be?"

"I'm not sure, but it isn't a sunrise. That hill's in the west. The sun would have to be behind it to cause an effect like that." If it could create an effect like that, he thought.

"Then what is it?" asked Corky. "A distress signal or something?"

Jake mutely shook his head. Whatever was causing the shimmering radiance, it wasn't anything he'd ever seen before.

"Well, why don't we ask the professor and Munroe when they get back?"

Back? Jake's apprehension was back with bells on. Warning bells. "Where'd they go?"

"I assume they went to see what that glow is,"

she replied. "I saw them heading off into the jungle toward it."

Whatever sixth sense Jake possessed was suddenly working overtime in an attempt to warn him. Whatever Munroe was up to, it couldn't be good. He unlimbered his pistol. "You three stay here. I'll be back as soon as I can." *I hope.*

Jake actually managed to take three steps toward the jungle before Corky and Sarah materialized at his side. Jack had already run ahead into the jungle.

"Oh no you don't," said Sarah, stepping in front of him. "Where you go, I go."

"That goes for me, too," insisted Corky, folding his arms defiantly over his chest.

"There's no use arguing," said Sarah before Jake could utter a protest. "Let's go."

She turned and followed Jack into the jungle. Jake and Corky had to hurry to keep up.

"It ought to be up here somewhere," panted Munroe.

Ingalls scabbled up the slope behind him, clinging to the sparse vegetation that jutted from the rocks and shale. *I'm getting too old for this sort of thing.* He paused to catch his breath, then pushed himself over the last crag.

They'd reached the top of the hill. It was a flat, barren slab of rock and earth, empty of all vegetation save a single, ancient tree. The gnarled wood of its branches stretched skyward like broken fingers, the trunk poised on the brink of a black, gaping wound in the earth. A single, leafless branch extended over the pit. Upon it hung the golden hide of a ram.

"That's it? That's all there is?" demanded Munroe, clearly disappointed. "A fur rug?"

Oh no. It can't be. It simply can't! Ingalls began to tremble, not daring to believe his eyes. *It's a legend. A fairy tale. It can't possibly be real.*

And yet there it was, not twenty feet away. "The Fleece," he breathed, awed. "The Golden Fleece!"

"Gold, huh?" Munroe started toward the tree. "That's all I gotta know. Since there ain't anyone here to stop me from--"

"No, wait!" cried Ingalls. He leapt forward and caught Munroe's arm, dragging him backward. "The legend warns of a guardian. A giant serpent or a dragon."

"Let 'em come," snarled Munroe, tugging free of Ingalls and starting forward again. He unholstered his revolver. "I'd like to see anything try and stop me."

"Don't shoot the body!" he shouted before Jake could get off a shot. "It won't work."

"Is it much further?" asked Sarah.

"We're almost there," Jake assured her. He assisted her onto the next ledge. "You could always wait here, you know."

"Not a chance."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you." He glanced down at the ledge directly below them. "Need any help?"

"No." Corky dumped the last rock out of his right shoe, wiggled his toes, and jammed his foot back in. "I'm right behind ya."

"Then let's--"

The morning calm was suddenly shattered by the most discordant and unearthly ululation Jake had ever heard -- or ever cared to hear again. It was a high pitched, wailing shriek that hurt his ears and jarred the very roots of his soul. The scream was followed by the report of a gun near at hand.

If Jake was apprehensive before, he was frightened now.

Munroe backed away from the monster clambering out of the pit, the Fleece draped awkwardly over his left arm and shoulder. He pumped two shots into the draconic body and watched in mounting horror as the bullets crumpled against shining green scales and fell harmlessly to the ground. Four of the nine heads lashed outward, one flashing scimitar-sharp teeth close to his face. Venom spattered the ground and smoked as it ate through the rock.

"Shoot the heads!" shouted Ingalls. "The body's armored. Shoot the heads!"

Now he tells me! Munroe shot the closest head as it lunged forward. He missed and almost lost his arm for the effort. It took two more shots before he was able to hit it. The injured head howled with pain, green ichor oozing from the wound as it thrashed against the ground in agony. Its eight brothers keened in sympathetic outrage. Munroe managed to shoot two more heads, missing once. He was left with one bullet left in the chamber and five heads to deal with.

Now what? he wondered, dodging a snapping jaw and ducking beneath a second. *Maybe I can get it to chew on the professor while I--* Jeez! He leapt back seconds before a third head could close on his shoulder. He pumped his last shot into it and it crumpled. *Four down, five to go and no bullets. Great. Wonderful. Now what?*

Jake chose that moment to appear, gun in hand and an expression of disbelief on his face. Munroe grinned. *Well, what d'ya know? The cavalry does come over the hill in the nick of time.*

You don't have to tell me twice, thought Jake. The Weatherby kicked in his hand, and another head dropped to the ground. Three of the four remaining heads instantly swung to orient on him. *Uh-oh.*

"Jake, what's going--" Sarah stumbled over the edge and looked up at the rearing Hydra. "Oh my God!"

"Sarah, get back!" A head darted toward her and Jake hurried to interpose himself. He had barely enough time to shoot it before it bit his head off. That was too close!

"Come on, Teach." Munroe backed away from the Hydra. "Let fly boy handle it."

"But it will kill them!"

"Better them than us," he snapped. "Come on!"

Ingalls stood torn between two desires. He wanted to help Jake but he also didn't want to lose sight of the Fleece. Why, it was the greatest find in history. To let it go now without a chance to examine it -- why, that would be like reburying the Tomb of Tutankhaman. It would be tragic if the Hydra killed Cutter and his friends but certainly history would understand such a sacrifice in exchange for the fabled wonders of the Fleece.

With a silent apology and a mental note to give Cutter credit for the chance to bring the Fleece to civilization at the unfortunate cost of his life, Ingalls hurried down the slope after Munroe.

"They're running away!" cried Sarah.

I'm just a little busy right now to -- umph! -- complain, thought Jake, dodging one of the three remaining heads. Thank goodness it hadn't resorted to using its tail or its claws. The heads were deadly enough. He didn't want to think what those teeth could do if it managed to catch him or, for that matter, what the poison would do should he miraculously survive the bite.

Corky almost fell backward down the slope when he saw the Hydra. He'd never seen anything like it and he hoped to God he wouldn't see another ever again. Why, that thing was taller than the *Goose* and almost as wide!

"Jake!" cried Sarah. "Look out!"

"I see it! I see it!" Cutter danced aside and the jaws that would have snapped off his entire upper torso missed with inches to spare. Jack was a brown and white blur as he shot past and tried to take a bite out of a huge, scaly green toe. "Jack, get out of there before it steps on you!"

The little mongrel barked his denial.

"Jack!"

Ignoring his master, Jack narrowly avoided being snapped up by a head and ran toward the

monster's rear where he began to worry the tail with vicious nips.

Two heads remained, lashing like whipcords. They reared on either side of Jake and bellowed a keening ululation in unison.

They're gonna attack simultaneously! thought Jake as they arched for the strike.

Smack! A fist-sized rock struck the left head. It lashed backward with an outraged howl and swung to orient on its new tormentor. It shot forward, found Corky just out of reach and got beaned on the snoot with another rock for its trouble. A second attempt to chomp the mechanic had the same painful result as the next rock bounced off of its nose.

This wasn't any fun! The head began to turn back toward Jake -- at least he was within reach!

"Hey!" Corky scooped up another rock and bounced it off the head. "Over here! What's the matter? Aren't I good enough for you?" He danced tantalizingly within reach.

Atta boy, Corky! With the heads divided between targets, Jake had the spare minutes he needed to reload the Weatherby. Four shots later, the last head crashed to the ground and the bulk of the draconic body tumbled after.

Sarah threw her arms around Jake's neck and clung to him. "Oh, Jake! I was so scared!"

Corky dropped the rock in his hand and joined them. "You okay, Jake?" he asked.

"Fine. Thanks, Corky."

"Sure, Jake." He beamed.

Jack barked expectantly.

"You too, Jack."

"What do we do now?" asked Sarah, edging away from the Hydra.

Jake's expression hardened. "We find Munroe and Ingalls."

"I remember it now," said the professor as they pushed their way through the undergrowth. "Where I'd heard the name Colchis before, I mean." He clambered awkwardly over a vine. "According to Greek mythology, Colchis is the island where Jason found the Golden Fleece. No records exist to pinpoint its exact location, though most historians believe it actually did exist at one time, much as they believe in Atlantis, though it, too, disappeared."

Munroe plowed through a tangle of grass and dead vines and almost stumbled into the clearing beyond. He gratefully unlimbered the Fleece and dropped to the ground beside it. The damned thing was heavier than it looked. He could believe it was made of pure gold.

"This is a treasure beyond imagining," Ingalls was saying as he trudged into the clearing. He paused to stoop and run reverent, admiring fingers through the soft, gilded wool. "Its powers are extraordinary."

"Yeah? Well, it still looks like a fancy rug to me."

Cretin, Ingalls thought. *What do you know?* "What I'm trying to tell you is that its worth goes beyond simple monetary value."

I could get real tired of this. "That's what you said about the chief's trinkets, remember?"

"This is different," said Ingalls with intensity. "This is the Golden Fleece, man! Legend tells of how it can cure all ills and even raise the dead!"

Huh? "Say what?"

Ah-ha! I knew that would get his attention. "According to some versions, the Fleece is reputed to restore life. Think of it!"

Not a bad little gizmo to have, come to think of it, agreed Munroe. "If it's true. If it works." He fingered the butt of his reloaded Smith and Wesson. "You willing to test this legend?"

Ingalls paled. Surely he couldn't be serious? "It is unproven, of course."

"Of course," grinned Munroe.

"A legend. A--"

"Shhh!" Munroe shot to his feet.

"What--"

"I said shut up!" He slid his gun from its holster. "Someone's coming."

"I don't hear anything."

You wouldn't. Munroe listened intently. Two, no, three people and using the same path he and Ingalls had cut through the jungle.

Cutter? It's possible he could have gotten away from that thing on the hill. Munroe glanced at the Fleece lying at his feet and grinned. *Sure. Why not?*

Two minutes later Jake cautiously stepped into the clearing and into the muzzle of Munroe's handgun.

"You're beginning to impress me, Cutter," he said, liberating the Weatherby from Jake's hand. "Catch!" he called and blindly threw it over his shoulder. It hit the mossy ground and Ingalls had to scramble for it. "Come on and join the party," he invited, peering into the jungle. "All of you." Reluctantly, Sarah and Corky walked into the clearing. "The mutt, too." Jack growled but came out of the foliage. "Well now, that's more like it."

Sarah pressed close to Jake and Corky stood

awkwardly beside them. "You folks make a nice family portrait," said Munroe. "And I hate portraits. Spread out a little. You. Fatso. Over there."

Corky looked questioningly at Jake. "Do what he says," Jake said tightly. Obediently, Corky moved to his left.

"That's good enough. Hold it right there." Munroe backed away, never once taking his gaze from them. "Cover 'em, Teach."

Ingalls awkwardly leveled the gun at Jake and Sarah. "Please understand," he stammered. "This is for the best, believe me."

"Oh shut up, will ya?" Munroe offered the group his most winning smile. It wasn't very pretty. "Seems you folks got here just in time." He toed the Fleece. "Pretty, ain't it? Teach, here, says this is a pretty special fur rug. We was just discussing a demonstration, weren't we, Teach?"

Ingalls licked his lips nervously and nodded. Cutter was looking at him with a cold, hard expression. Certainly he must understand how important the Fleece is? *Perhaps if I tell him...*

Munroe turned his gun on Corky.

Ingalls shifted uneasily, sparing a moment to glance at Munroe. His hands began to tremble. "What are you doing?"

"Got a better way to test your theory?"

Corky paled visibly. "Jake?" he asked uncertainly.

Sarah's fingers tightened on his arm and a cold chill squeezed his heart. "It's okay," said Jake with more confidence than he felt. "He wouldn't. Not in cold blood." Munroe shrugged. "You wouldn't!"

"Of course not," he replied sarcastically. He fired.

Jake's expression of shock was surpassed only by Corky's own. The mechanic flew backward as the bullet punched him in the chest and ripped through his heart. There was no time to cry out. Just hot, searing pain. He hit the ground with a gasp and rolled onto his back. The sky sparkled with flecks of red and wheeled at sickening speed. Something warm and damp crawled over his chest but he couldn't see it, couldn't touch it. He tried to breathe but a weight was sitting on his chest.

"Noooo!" Sarah's anguished shriek was distant and fading rapidly.

Poor Sarah. She never could sing very well, Corky thought vaguely as his vision swam in darkness.

It only took a matter of seconds. A heart-beat. Perhaps two. For Jake Cutter an eternity passed in the brief time it took his friend to die. He stared in stunned disbelief as Corky's life drained away.

Sarah's scream snapped his trance. He leapt for the professor with a cry of outrage and grief.

Munroe swung around and fired a shot that gouged the earth at Jake's feet. "Move and the babe's next!"

It took all of his will to keep him from rushing forward anyway. He clenched his fists. "Why?" he demanded. "Why Corky? He didn't do anything to you. I'm the one you want to settle with!"

"Cause I need you to fly that rig of yours outta here, that's why," Munroe said. "Besides, that dopey smile of his offended me. But don't you worry, Cutter. Your little pal's gonna have company real soon." He took the gun away from Ingalls and stuffed it into his belt, then toed the Fleece. "Go ahead, Teach. Let's see if this thing works like you say it will."

Ingalls couldn't take his eyes off of the dead man. His stomach was doing a good imitation of a backflip.

He killed him. I can't believe it. He really did it! The professor swallowed the bile that stuck in his throat. *Dear God, I've aided a murderer.*

Not if he's ressurected.

It's only a legend!

Is it?

Ingalls stood indecisively over the Fleece. What if it wasn't only a legend? What if it were true? Could he really afford to ignore the possibility, no matter how slight?

No.

"Come on, Teach. We ain't got all day."

Professor Ingalls bent and lifted the Fleece by the ram's horns. How heavy it was! He half dragged, half carried the artifact toward the body.

What the hell's he doing? Jake watched Ingalls tug the golden hide over Corky.

Munroe also watched though he never quite took his attention fully off of Jake and Sarah. "Now what?"

"I don't know," admitted Ingalls. He stood back from the Fleece and wrung his hands. "It should work automatically."

"Yeah? Well, it don't look to me like it's doing anything."

"Perhaps there's a command word." He rubbed his chin. "Or a ritual."

"Maybe it just don't work," sneered Munroe. "No loss. I've still got me a sold gold fur rug and that ain't small change."

"But the legends must be based on some fact."

They've been right so far," insisted Ingalls. "Perhaps if we--"

This guy yaps more than anyone I've ever met! Forget it. It don't work.

"But--"

"Just shut up, will ya?" demanded Munroe. "You're starting to get on my--"

The moment the boxer turned his attention on the professor, Jack catapulted forward and clamped down on the first available leg. Munroe screamed and sent Jack flying across the clearing with a violent kick.

Jake rushed forward to fill the breach. He threw his entire weight behind a shoulder block that sent both of them sprawling. Munroe's gun flew out of his hand into the jungle. He rolled away from Cutter and groped for the gun at his belt. Jake realized what he was after and clawed for the weapon, the two of them rolling over and over across the clearing.

Ingalls' primary concern was the Fleece. He began to pull it off of the dead man.

"Oh no, you don't!" Sarah ran up behind him and smacked him over the head with the first available rock. Ingalls collapsed with a groan and lay still.

She hefted the rock and started toward Jake and Munroe, skipping aside as they rolled past. *If they would only hold still long enough I could--* A shot rang out.

"Jake!" Sarah dropped her rock and ran toward him.

Cutter wearily rose to his feet and pried the gun from Munroe's lifeless fingers, tossing it aside. He allowed Sarah to hug him as he turned, his gaze settling on the body of his friend.

Corky.

Gently removing Sarah's arms from about his neck, Jake sank to his knees beside the mechanic.

He felt as though a part of his soul had been unmercifully ripped away. With the possible exception of Sarah, there wasn't a single living person Jake loved more. Corky was more than just a friend. He was family.

They'd shared a lot together, good and bad. Jake had spent many a long and painful night administering to the mechanic as he lay sick after one of his frequent, drunken binges. He'd worked hard to turn Corky around before he killed himself with booze.

For all the good it did, Jake thought as he gently closed the mechanic's sightless eyes with a trembling hand.

In spite of a tendency to misplace Jake's possessions because of a memory that was at best, poor, and at worst, non-existent, Corky tried his

best to live up to Cutter's expectations. He would gladly have moved heaven and earth to protect both Jake and Jack; had, on several occasions.

Damn you, Munroe!

Sarah tightly clasped Jake's hand in hers. She was trembling with quiet sobs. Jack crawled onto Corky's chest, pausing to lick the dead man's face.

"I should have known he'd do it," whispered Cutter. "Damn it! Why couldn't I see?" *I'm sorry, Corky. I'm so sorry.*

Jack threw back his head and howled.

"How can the gods ignore such grief?"

Sarah gasped and Jake looked up.

Kuro stood near at hand, an imposing figure in a heavy, white fur cloak that draped his shoulders and swept the ground. A plain golden circlet adorned his ebony brow. He seemed taller somehow, nobler. He wore authority as comfortably as the cloak. The white lion sat untethered at his side and watched the little group with glowing, pupilless amber eyes, Jack-O-Lantern eyes. They'd arrived as silent as the snow. In a whisper.

This is no ordinary man, thought Jake. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Kuro Nuana Kiantus," he replied solemnly, though his eyes smiled. "I am reigning King of Colchis, He Who Protects, Messenger and Keeper of the Gift of the Gods." From the folds of his cape he drew a winged scepter, a golden wand embraced by two, emerald serpents. "Behold my charge!"

A shock rushed through Jake's arm where it touched the Fleece and he jumped back, nearly bowling Sarah over. Jack yelped and vaulted to the ground, running circles after his throbbing tail.

"Look," cried Sarah. "Oh, look!"

Jake looked. The Fleece was glowing, pulsing with the same radiance that had crested the hilltop. The ram's horns burned white hot as its fleece shimmered with motes of amber and gold so gloriously brilliant that Jake and Sarah were forced to shield their eyes with their hands. The radiance bled through their fingers and dazzled their self-inflicted darkness.

The effect lasted bare seconds before it winked out.

Jake hesitantly uncovered his eyes. Spots swam before him but the Fleece lay unchanged. Gold it remained, but the aura that had sheathed it had vanished. He looked questioningly at Kuro and the chief grinned in reply.

What's he up to?

"Jake? Jake, it's hot under here. Can I get up?"

"Not now, Corky. I'm--"

I'm... Huh?

Jake turned around so fast he almost tripped over himself. *Corky!*

The mechanic was trying to struggle out from beneath the weight of the Fleece.

But it can't be! It's a trick. It's got to be.

"No trick," answered Kuro.

But Munroe shot him! He is -- was -- dead! Jake grasped the Fleece and threw it off with a strength born of desperate hope. No blood. No wound. Nothing!

Corky pushed himself up onto his elbows and blinked at him, bewildered. "Something wrong, Jake?"

This was impossible! Afraid that he might vanish, Jake placed both hands on Corky's shoulders. This was no phantom. Corky was alive! It wasn't a trick!

"I told you," said the chief conversationally.

Unlike Jake, Sarah didn't question the miracle. Instead, she planted a kiss on the mechanic's cheek and hung onto him for fear he would leave them again.

Jack bounced onto Corky's chest and knocked him onto his back again.

"Hey! Take it easy, Jack! Take it -- mmmmmph -- easy!" Corky picked up the little mongrel and held him away at arm's length. "I don't get it. What's going on?" he demanded. "You're all acting like I've just got back from a long trip."

"Don't you remember?" asked Sarah, incredulous.

"Remember? All I remember is the wildest thunder storm I've ever been forced to fly through and crashing on-- Hey!" His eyes fell on the chief. "Who's he?"

"A friend, little one," replied Kuro, lazily stroking the lion's mane. Its purring filled the silence that hung between them.

Jake stood to confront the chief. "I don't understand."

"What is there to understand?"

"Why? Why us?"

"To know that, you must first understand that the Fleece gives of itself only when there is genuine need." He indicated Munroe and Ingalls with a nod. "Jason was much as these men. They had no need for the restoration of life. Theirs was a desire for assurance, and that the Fleece will not give."

Was he implying that the Fleece was sentient? "You were the one who made it work."

"I?" laughed Kuro. "Great Zeus! Certainly not. I am only the Keeper. The Fleece alone decides who it will aid. It knows the hearts of all who possess it."

"You're saying it judged us."

"And found you worthy. Yes." He Who Protects bent and took up the weighty ram's skin with ease. It shimmered like spun gold in his hands. "You are the first to benefit from its gifts in over 2,000 years. As you have honored the bond that ties you to those you hold dearest, so has the Fleece honored you." His dark eyes met Corky's. "There is a penalty," he said gently, "but the price is not yours. Take your gift and be welcome." He turned back to Jake. "Leave. The way is open to you."

So saying, he laid the artifact across his shoulder where it flared like molten gold, blinding them. When the motes of light receded, the black man, the lion, and his charge had vanished. So, too, had the bodies of Munroe and Professor Ingalls.

That did it. Enough was enough. Jake wasn't in any mood to see what else might pop up, and he certainly wasn't willing to take the chance that the chief might change his mind and revoke his gift. "Come on. Let's get out of here." With Sarah's help, he hauled Corky to his feet. "Jack, do you think you can find the Goose?"

The little mongrel wagged his tail and barked twice.

"Okay. Let's go."

"But, Jake," protested Corky. "The Goose is grounded, and we don't have the parts to fix her with. We're stranded!"

Not if Kuro kept his word, thought Jake. "Let's see," he said and turned to follow Jack into the jungle.

Has everyone gone nuts around here? thought Corky. Why would the Goose be any different now than it was a few hours ago? He shrugged. Oh well, I guess Jake knows what he's going. He usually does.

Corky followed Jake, uncomfortably aware of Sarah hovering at his elbow like a shadow.

Like Jake, she wasn't about to risk losing him a second time.

The original trek from the beach to Kuro's village had taken three hours. Jake stepped over a gnarled tree trunk and pushed through the foliage of the low-hanging bows. *If my calculations are correct, we should reach the Goose by early afternoon.*

Jack began to yelp and bark frantically.

Now what's his problem? Jake stepped up the pace, glancing briefly over his shoulder to be sure he hadn't lost Sarah and Corky. *Still there.*

Good. Let's see if we can keep it that way. I don't need any more days like this one.

He followed Jack's barking until, suddenly, the vegetation ended abruptly at the beach.

This can't be right, thought Jake. Jack must have led us to the wrong beach. We've only been traveling -- he consulted his watch -- for fifteen minutes. The entire configuration of the island couldn't have just changed.

Sarah and Corky crowded behind him.

"Are we there?" asked Sarah eagerly.

"I'm not sure," Jake answered honestly. *I'm not sure of anything anymore.*

It was Corky who saw it first. He stumbled onto the beach and pointed. "Jake, look!"

He was almost afraid to but curiosity won out. He looked.

"But," stammered Sarah, "that can't be possible."

Name me one thing on this island that is, thought Jake.

The Goose bobbed gently on the incoming tide not forty yards from where she'd crashed. The sand was unmarred, presenting a mystery as to how the plane had been deposited in the surf without trace of dragging or leverage. Closer examination revealed the cabin windows, originally shattered in the crash, intact and sparkling in the sunlight. In fact, there were no signs of the crash at all. No scratches or dents or gouges. Even the starboard engine shone like new, the trail of carbon left by the flames mysteriously absent.

But will she fly?

"Jake?" Sarah looked at him questioningly. "How? I mean, this isn't possible. It just isn't!"

He glanced to where Corky, very much alive and well, was poking at the starboard engine in obvious wonder. "That wasn't possible either," he said, "but I'm not going to question it." He took her by the hand. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

The inside was no less puzzling than the exterior had been. The gas gauge read full, and static was coming from the radio where it had been left on between bands.

Kuro doesn't miss a trick, thought Jake as he settled into the cabin.

"Jake!" Sarah's head popped into view from the cargo bay. "Munroe and the professor. Their gear is gone!"

As if they never existed, thought Cutter uncomfortably.

Corky squeezed by Sarah and assumed the copilot seat. "Everything looks okay," he exclaimed.

"I can't believe it. It's like nothing ever happened."

He doesn't remember. Thank God for small favors. Jake looked at his friend. *Correction. Thank God for miracles. Big ones.*

Jake didn't know what he'd have done without Corky. Personally, he was glad he wouldn't have to find out any time soon.

"Jake?" Corky frowned, genuinely concerned. This wasn't the first time he'd caught Cutter staring at him since leaving the glade. "Is something wrong?"

Not any more, buddy. "Everything's fine," he said, clapping Corky affectionately on the shoulder. "Let's go home."

"Now you're talking!"

The engines started without their usual protests, and in a matter of minutes the Goose was airborne and headed for home.

I wonder if Kuro's watching, thought Jake as the island passed beneath them. *He's probably as happy to see us leave as we are to be going.*

"Say good-bye to Colchis, folks," he announced.

Sarah leaned over Corky's shoulder in order to see through the starboard window. "I hope we never see that place again," she said.

The Goose shuddered in reply as, suddenly, the island winked out. In the blink of an eye Colchis had gone; vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared, leaving blue ocean for miles in every direction.

"Wow!" was all Corky could manage as he craned his neck for a better view.

Jack voiced his agreement from the cargo bay.

Neat trick, thought Sarah. *Thank God we're not sticking around for the encore.*

Jake remained silent, the knuckles of his right hand bone white as he gripped the throttle. He felt his heart hammering within his chest, beating a steady tattoo that attested to what his eyes had seen.

The moment before Colchis vanished, he had glimpsed the new guardian of the Fleece upon its hilltop. It had raised its two new heads at the sound of the passing plane and voiced a silent scream of damnation.

Human heads, ghastly pale and situated on grotesquely long necks. Munroe and Ingalls had become the Hydra.

They got what they wanted after all, thought Jake grimly as he guided the Goose toward home.

They had the Fleece. It was theirs forever.