

JINX

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Heralding the approach of summer, the nights on Boragora had become hot, humid, and wet. It was the rainy season, when hurricanes and sudden squalls drove the island's inhabitants indoors, away from nature's fury. From dusk until dawn the skies were filled with swollen black clouds that stretched toward the seaward horizon, obliterating the stars and moon. By early morning the rain would end and the sun would burn through the fog, drying the mud and evaporating the puddles, only to disappear by late afternoon as a new storm front rolled inland.

Tonight, however, looked as if it would be an exception. For the first time in a week, Boragora saw the sunset. The storm clouds remained absent long after the stars began to litter the sky and a cooling breeze wafted off the lagoon, fanning the early evening strollers taking advantage of the turn in weather. While the tourists remained optimistic, a long-time resident of the island warned that it was a deceptive calm, too good to last. Nature agreed. Black clouds blew in on a heavy wind and the rain started anew, driving everyone indoors.

Almost everyone.

Corky was sitting astride the *Goose's* port engine when the storm blew in. Slamming shut the maintenance hatch, he stuffed the tools into his pockets and slid off the wing onto the dock. No sooner did he duck into the plane than the heavens burst asunder and it began to pour.

It's gonna be a bad one, too, he thought

glumly, glancing out a cabin window.

The reasonable thing to do would be to leave the repairs until morning and make a dash for the Monkey Bar before the storm reached its height.

But Corky wasn't feeling reasonable. Digging through the aft locker, he found an oilskin poncho and tugged it free. Examining it for spiders that may have camped out in the little-used article, he judged it satisfactory and pulled it on over his coveralls. It was a tight fit -- the poncho was Jake's -- but it would have to do. Thus attired, he left the shelter of the *Goose* and went out into the storm.

"What's keeping him?" Sarah White wiped away condensation from a window with her hanky and peeped out through the portal she'd created. She couldn't see the dock through the grey wall of rain. The condensation quickly reclaimed her window, turning it opaque. "You don't think he's standing out in the rain, do you?"

"Not even Corky is that absent-minded," said Reverend Tenboom, leaning against the bar. "He has probably taken refuge within the *Goose*."

"Maybe." Jake sounded doubtful as he maintained his vigil by the door. "Or maybe he doesn't want to come in."

"Why not?"

"Maybe he thinks we forgot," said Gushie.

"And he's not the kind of person to bring it to anyone's attention," agreed Jake. "Sarah, did you say anything to Corky today? Hello, good-bye -- anything?"

"No. I was afraid I'd give everything away," she admitted. "I guess I must have avoided him."

"So did I," said Jake regretfully. He looked about the bar and discovered the same guilty realization on the faces around him. "It looks like we all did. We were so preoccupied with keeping everything a secret that we forgot the most important thing -- Corky."

"What are we going to do?" asked Sarah. "We can't just leave him out there."

"I wasn't planning to." Jake reached for his flight jacket. "I'll get him."

"What if he won't come?"

"He'll come if I have to carry him. Just have everything ready. I won't be long." Slipping into the jacket and pulling the collar tight, Jake ran out into the downpour.

"What are you doing out here?" Jake was forced to shout over the hollow beat of the rain on the dock.

Corky shrugged, staring intently at the section of hull he had just caulked. He didn't want Jake to see his disappointment. "I thought I'd fix that leak you were complainin' about last week."

"Did you fix it?"

"Yeah."

"Then there's no reason to stay out here anymore, is there?"

"No," Corky admitted.

"Good. Then let's get out of the rain. I've already had a bath today."

There really wasn't any way Corky could refuse without Jake asking unwanted questions. Reluctantly, he allowed himself to be lead away.

Peering between the door slats, Sarah saw two dark objects plodding toward the building through the heavy rain.

"They're coming!" she exclaimed. "Places, everyone!"

Corky scowled through the rain at the Monkey Bar. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" asked Jake, looking up. He'd been

concentrating on his footing. He had no desire to slip in the mud or stumble into a deceptively shallow puddle.

"The lights just went out."

"Huh," Jake grunted. "The generator must have blown."

They ran the rest of the way, splashing through the muck to the shelter of the porch. Stamping his boots, Jake took off his cap and shook water from his hair.

"Hey!" protested Corky, stepping back and ineffectually wiping his face with a dripping sleeve.

"Sorry," said the pilot, suppressing a grin. "Come on. Let's see what happened to the lights." Taking Corky's arm, he led the mechanic into the Monkey Bar.

It was unusually quiet inside the dark building. Normally when the generator blew a chorus of voices would loudly protest the inconvenience. Tonight was different. The only sounds were the drum of the rain and their footsteps on the hardwood floor. It was too early for everyone to have gone to their rooms for the night. Not even the weather could drive the locals away from Boragora's only dispenser of alcoholic beverages. Where was everyone?

Corky was about to ask Jake when the lights suddenly flared into brilliance. Blinking from the sudden onslaught, Corky's first thought was that someone must have fixed the generator. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he discovered that Jake had left him standing in front of the bar. A bed sheet was draped over the mirror, awkwardly held in place by the carved monkeys that gave the establishment its name. Painted on the banner in bold, sloppy red letters were the words, "Happy Birthday, Corky!"

"Surprise!" cried Sarah, leaping up from behind the counter like a jack-in-the-box.

It was the signal for everyone else to pop out of hiding, throwing the room into turmoil. The door to the back room was thrown wide, revealing Gushie, Willie Tenboom and Neena, currently the reverend's favorite beneficiary of daily blessings. Jack scuttled out from beneath the piano bench and barked, adding his voice to the growing chorus. Squawking fitfully, Francois appeared from behind one of the carved monkeys. The parrot contributed a splash of color to the dark wood as he flapped his wings. More people scrambled out from under tables and chairs while others peeked out from behind the banner, grinning at Corky's bewildered expression. Only Bon Chance Louie showed any semblance of decorum, leaving his office and descending the stairs at his leisure.

"Betcha thought we forgot," said Jake cheerfully as everyone gathered around Corky.

"Gee, Jake. I didn't even think about it," he said. "I was so busy with the Goose that it musta slipped my mind--"

"Uh-huh." Sarah stepped in front of him, her eyes twinkling. "And if you believe that, I've got a bridge in Brooklyn I'd like to sell you," she said, gently pushing him backward. As if on cue, someone swung a chair against the back of Corky's legs and he fell into it, sitting down heavily.

"Ve haff you now," Willie chuckled evilly, rubbing his hands together suggestively. "Der is no escape." Stepping aside with a flourish, he made way for Gushie who carried a cake glowing with candles on the tray of his wheelchair.

"Candles!" exclaimed Corky. "Where'd you find birthday candles?"

"Being magistrate has its advantages," said Louie sagely.

"Gee, I don't know what to say."

"Who says you have to say anything?" asked Sarah, affectionately tossing his hair. "Just make a wish and blow out the candles."

Before Corky could explain that he already had everything he could wish for -- their friendship -- someone started an off-key rendition of "Happy Birthday". Everyone quickly joined in. Even Jack howled a little, though no one could be certain whether he was singing or being a music critic.

Standing on the outer veranda, his back to the wall, Leonard Christensen listened to the singing that spilled from the bar. He'd waited impatiently in his hotel room while the locals filed into the room below for the celebration. Just when he thought he could wait no longer, he saw Cutter lead the guest of honor through the rain and into the building. Two hours of waiting had finally come to an end. Now was his chance. There might never be another opportunity as perfect as this.

Cloaked in shadows, the squeak of the floorboards marked by the fury of the storm, Christensen crept along the lower balcony at the rear of the building. Encountering a door, he reached forward and risked a tentative twist of the knob. It didn't yield, nor would the second door he encountered.

On an island as small as Boragora, why would anyone lock their doors? he thought irritably, discovering the third barred against him. One door remained. If it didn't open he would be forced to advance to the more visible upper balcony that surrounded the entire building. As though sensing his frustration, the last door did not resist.

At last! Christensen slipped inside and quickly closed the door behind himself.

Peering about the room, he could discern little detail in the darkness. It was a small chamber -- a large closet more than a room -- heavy with the smell of grease, sweat and beer. A hammock stretched from the south to the north wall like a monstrous, luminous spider web. Beside it, a dresser with a dull, cracked mirror stood like a tired sentry and gave back Christensen's reflec-

tion. The image was not a flattering one, showing a tall, sallow-skinned man with dark hair and sunken eyes that had seen better days. A tired man. A desperate man.

Christensen forced his gaze away from the mirror and began to examine the contents of the dresser drawers. His search revealed nothing spectacular: three clean shirts, a crumpled pair of white overalls, socks, underwear, an autographed baseball from the Duluth Dukes, a pen knife, some tools, and several old photographs. No wonder the room hadn't been locked. There was nothing in it worth stealing.

Then again, Christensen wasn't interested in taking anything; he was here to give something away....

Once the cake had been cut and the pieces distributed, everyone settled down to watch Corky open his presents. The mechanic looked like a little kid on Christmas morning, sitting amid a pile of boxes, newspaper, and an unusual assortment of wrapping "paper". There were no gift shops on Boragora. As a result, most of the presents were wrapped in old newspapers tied with string. Some people, however, were more creative. Willie's present, a bottle of Schnapps, was cleverly wrapped in a canvas bag that had been hand-dyed courtesy of Neena's knowledge of local berries. Not to be outdone, Gushie's gift of a new wrench came without wrapping -- the tool itself had been painted in the seven colors of the rainbow. Other unusual wrappings fell by the wayside as Corky opened his gifts: old tee-shirts, a pair of socks (each containing a bottle of imported beer), pages from the Book of Genesis (Willie cocked a disapproving eyebrow at Louie who merely shrugged), the broad leaves of a rubber plant, and the centerfold of a questionable magazine.

The wrappings hid even better discoveries within, and Corky accepted each with embarrassed delight and many thanks. It took more than an hour for him to wade through them all until only one box remained. Wrapped in frilly blue cloth and tied with a red ribbon, Corky had been saving this particular package for last.

"Well, don't just sit there staring at it. Open it," urged Jake.

"It's too pretty," protested Corky.

"It ought to be." Sarah leaned against Jake, his arm a comfortable weight about her waist. "I sacrificed one of my best dresses for that box."

"Don't listen to her," said Cutter, seeing Corky's look of surprise. "She was going to throw it out anyway. Too small."

"It was not!"

"A little too tight around--"

"Jake Cutter, don't you dare!"

"Mon dieu!" sighed Louie, rolling his eyes



heavenward.

"Sorry," said Jake, trying to look apologetic. "Go ahead, Corky. Open it."

"But Sarah said--"

"Corky!" everyone cried in impatient unison.

"All right. All right! I'm opening it, already!" He tugged at the ribbon and the wrapping fell away, draping his hand with blue chiffon. In the center lay a pocket-sized volume bound in cracked red leather and lettered in gold leaf.

"We found it in Tagataya last month," explained Jake, grinning as Corky gaped in surprise at the book. "It's not the one you lost but it's the same edition."

"It's perfect," said Corky, holding the book gingerly.

Willie frowned as he peered over Corky's shoulder at the title. "*Treasure Island*?"

"*Treasure Island*," confirmed Jake, amused by the reverend's puzzled expression.

"I lost mine," explained Corky. "My dad gave it to me when I was a kid and his dad gave it to him. I kinda lost it when we were in China."

"He moped for days," recalled Jake.

"I don't know what to say," Corky stammered, looking from Jake to Sarah.

"Say thank you," Sarah suggested sensibly.

"Thanks." Corky looked at the people gathered around him with new appreciation. "Thanks, *everyone*! This is the best birthday ever!"

"It was our pleasure, my son," said Willie, patting Corky on the back. "Now, how 'bout a little Schnapps, eh?"

Christensen lay on the bed in his hotel room, his hands behind his head. His damp clothing lay carelessly tossed over the back of a chair, dripping on the scarred floorboards. Outside the rain was beginning to let up, settling into a steady drizzle that would last until morning.

Staring at a crack in the ceiling that ran from the south wall to the veranda door, Christensen marveled at how easy it had been to accomplish his task. The worst part of the evening had been the long wait on the veranda for the right conditions. Once he'd gained entry to the room, the rest had been easy. Child's play. It had taken him only a few minutes to hide the stone. Ten minutes later he was back in the safety of his own room with no one the wiser.

A simple, straight forward ruse. It would work like a charm; at least, so he originally thought. Now, alone in his room with time to think about it, he wasn't so sure.

The mattress creaked in protest as he sat up.

Too many things could go wrong. The room's owner might stumble across the thing before Christensen could return to reclaim it. True, the chance of that happening in the next eight hours was slim, but he'd seen enough in the past week to know that nothing was impossible. Nothing. Worse, *they* might find it -- and *him*. They were the reason for his hiding the damned rock in the first place.

It wasn't enough that they'd hounded him through all of England; now they'd followed him half-way across the world to Borabora. He'd been careful to cover his tracks along the way, leaving false trails to eradicate any trace of his passage. Traveling on the China Clipper under an alias, he'd chosen his destination at random. Studying each and every passenger as they boarded, he'd made certain that *they* weren't on the flight with him. Christensen finally allowed himself to relax, thinking he'd eluded the last of his pursuers, until they calmly -- and inexplicably -- walked down the Clipper's ramp five minutes after he debarked on Borabora.

Christensen ran palsied fingers through his thinning dark hair, avoiding his reflection in the dresser mirror. *It must call to them*, he thought grimly. Or they're attracted to it. How else could they have followed him to a destination even he didn't know about until he'd arrived?

I should have sold it when I had the chance, he despaired. *Ever since I picked the bloody thing up it's been nothing but trouble. The stories're true. It's cursed or--*

There was a knock at the door -- a soft tap that startled the room's solitary occupant.

Who the hell could that be? He'd been careful to ignore the Clipper passengers, and he deliberately avoided contacts on the island.

There was only one logical answer, of course. *Them*.

Christensen licked his lips nervously and stared at the door. *It's not as though you weren't expecting them*, he thought. *That was the reason behind tonight's little escapade, after all.*

The visitor knocked again, a little more loudly this time. Wiping his sweaty palms on the sheets, Christensen stood.

What are you worried about? he thought with false bravado, staring at the door. *It's not like you have what they're looking for.*

Taking a deep breath, he answered the door.

The party began to wind down. One by one the participants departed, leaving behind their well wishes and empty beer bottles. Not willing to let the festivities die completely, Sarah and Jake danced to Benny Goodman's "Down Home Rag" while Gushie maneuvered his wheelchair around them in an

effort to clean up. Lying with his paws wrapped possessively around a depleted bowl of beer, Jack snored fitfully in time to the music. Louie adjourned to his office in the company of a buxom blonde eager to see his Gauguin. Finding this an equitable solution now that the festivities (and the Schnapps) were coming to an end, Willie took custody of Neena and disappeared into the night to conduct evening "blessings". (After all, he thought piously, a soul is a terrible thing to waste.)

The record ended, leaving Sarah and Jake flushed with exertion. Fanning herself with some sheet music, Sarah accepted a glass of water from Gushie as he rolled by while Jake went to the victrola to change the record. Opening the cabinet, he thumbed through the cardboard sleeves of the 78s stacked within.

"How about Slam Willis?" he asked, removing a blue record jacket.

"Let's not and say we did," said Sarah, sipping her water.

"What've you got against Slam Willis?"

"Only that this'll be the seventh time this week--"

"Willis always sounds good!" said Jake defensively.

"If you're deaf."

Gushie sniggered.

That did it. Defiantly pulling the record from the pile, Jake set the heavy plastic disc on the turntable and cranked it up. He'd show them!

Corky glanced over the top edge of his book. Catching Sarah's eye, he made a small, covert gesture with his left hand that she didn't quite catch. Before she could deduce its meaning, Jake had set the needle.

"Now you'll hear some *real* music," Jake said confidently. He offered his hand to Sarah for the next dance and waited expectantly for the downbeat.

Al Jolson began to croon after dear old "Swanee".

"Hey!" exclaimed Jake. He hurried back to the victrola and peered inside. With little circular motions of his head, he followed the turntable around and around in an effort to read the record label. It didn't occur to him to stop the record. "All right," he demanded, turning to eye Sarah and Gushie suspiciously. "Who switched the labels on my Slam Willis record?"

"Don't look at me," said Sarah, trying her best to appear indignant and innocent at the same time.

Corky remained absorbed in the adventures of Long John Silver.

Jake's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Corky..."

"Yeah, Jake?" he asked innocently, looking up.

Cutter folded his arms over his chest. "Where is it?"

"Where's what, Jake?"

"My record. Where's--"

A scream -- high and long and loud -- neatly severed Jake's sentence. Even Al Jolson was cowed by the awful, wailing sound as the needle skipped to the end of the record. The scream ended sharply, with a distant, wet slap. The needle rasped on the finished record, filling the sudden silence.

For a crucial moment everyone stared at one another, frozen in place until, suddenly, everything seemed to happen at once. Louie burst out of his office, hastily buttoning his blazer. Jake drew his Weatherby and Corky jumped to his feet. Doors could be heard opening throughout the hotel as curious guests tried to ascertain what was happening. In a corner of the bar, Jack rolled over and placed his paws over his ears.

"Where?" demanded Louie, jogging down the steps.

"Outside," shouted Jake as he barreled through the batwings. Corky and Louie followed close behind.

It didn't take long to find the scream's origin. Around the southern corner of the building, not six feet away from the bar doors, a man lay sprawled in the mud, his neck twisted to an impossible angle. As Louie stooped down to verify the man's death, Jake looked up at the balcony, rain pelting his upturned face. A section of the railing hung in tatters, as if a great weight had been thrown against it.

"Who was he?" asked Jake.

"Leonard Christensen." Louie stood, his cursory examination of the body complete. "He arrived on the Clipper while you were in Tagataya."

"I don't remember seeing him around."

"He kept mostly to himself." Louie looked at the broken railing. "He must have slipped and fallen."

"Or he was pushed."

The magistrate scowled. "You suspect murder, mon ami?"

"Maybe, considering the state of that railing," replied Jake. "It's shattered. He couldn't have just fallen; he was thrown through it. If he slipped, it was at a dead run."

Corky stared at the balcony. "It doesn't look high enough to kill someone," he mused.

"Perhaps not," said Louie. "Yet I have known men to fall lesser distances and suffer a worse fate." Before Jake could question this latest reference to the magistrate's colorful past, Louie

indicated the body with a nod. "Let us get him out of the rain."

Late that night, Jake sat alone in the darkened bar, nursing a beer and watching the rain stream past the open door. Christensen's death continued to bother him, keeping him awake long after everyone else had retired.

Something was wrong; something that went beyond the Englishman's "accident", though what it was and who it would affect Jake couldn't say. As a pilot, he'd long ago learned to pay attention to his hunches. They had saved his life on more than one occasion during his tenure with the Flying Tigers. He trusted them then, and he trusted them now.

Rain pelted against the windows with a harsh, ticking sound. The wind souged mournfully through the room. Though the breeze was warm, Jake shivered.

Unbidden, a phrase stole into his mind. 'By the pricking of my thumb, something wicked this way comes.'

Two days later he would remember the quote as not only prophetic, but flawed. The evil was already on Borabora.

During breakfast, the bar buzzed with rumors generated by the evening's fatality. Those less familiar with the island and its inhabitants swore that a riotous, decadent party had been held until the wee small hours of the morning. The scream, they said, was some poor unfortunate who had tried to leave the revels too soon and had met a dastardly fate at the hands of his intoxicated fellows. Another theory was that the scream and subsequent "death" had actually been staged to frighten the guests. Still others contended that it hadn't been a scream at all, but some wild animal in the jungle protesting the disagreeable weather. Everyone had an opinion about what really transpired, though very few thought to ask the magistrate for the truth. After all, gossip was much more exciting.

"It was a horrible, nasty trick, that's what it was," insisted Mildred Boswick. "They ought to be ashamed of themselves."

Emma, her elder sister and traveling companion, merely nodded. She knew better than to argue. Milly wasn't happy unless she had something to complain about. More and more often Emma found herself wondering why she'd agreed to accompany Milly on her trip to the tropics. Perhaps it was the lure of "adventure", the kind Emma enjoyed reading about in romance novels and pulp magazines. Maybe it was the desire to do something new, something daring. For two spinsterish sisters living in the unprepossessing -- and unexciting -- suburb of Selden, New York, the volatile South Pacific was a refreshing step into the unknown and potentially exciting.

"I think you're making too much of it," said

Emma, buttering her toast with quick, exact motions of the knife. "You wanted adventure, remember?"

"Not at one o'clock in the morning," sniffed Mildred, primly adjusting the napkin on her lap. In spite of the humidity, she'd insisted on wearing a dark, long-sleeved, high collared dress. With her shock of grey hair and piercing blue eyes, she looked every bit the Victorian spinster.

In contrast, Emma wore a fashionable, light cotton dress with a pattern of tiny blue flowers that matched the color of her eyes. "Don't be such a prude," she admonished her sibling. "After all, it isn't as if you were asleep."

"That's not the point." Leaning forward, Mildred cast a furtive eye about the room and whispered, "I'll bet they were *deliberately* trying to frighten us. Goodness knows what might have happened if we'd left our room."

"Yes, dear," murmured Emma, taking a dainty bite of her toast.

"We might have been murdered in our beds for all the magistrate cared," she continued, looking about suspiciously. "Why, I've heard that he was a prisoner on Devil's Island! Imagine!"

"Thank you, but I'd rather not. I'm trying to eat my breakfast."

If Milly noticed that her sister seemed less than attentive, she gave no indication. She continued to burble on while her sister ate, criticizing everyone and everything around them. Nothing pleased her. The coffee was too cold, the eggs were underdone, the bread was stale, the lighting was poor, the room smelled of beer and mildew, and the carved monkeys around the bar were obviously mimicking lewd and luscious poses.

One subject of Mildred's rancor was a young couple sitting quietly in a corner of the room. They seemed more interested in studying the room's occupants than the breakfast growing cold on the table before them.

"Just look at them," said Mildred haughtily. "Sitting way over there, staring at everyone like the King and Queen. Snobs, that's what they are. Too good to associate with down to earth people like us, the pair of them."

Emma peeked at the couple in question, curious in spite of herself. Though a handsome pair, she thought them a bit mismatched. The woman wore a diaphanous dress of dark blue and a string of sapphires about her pale throat. Her companion was more severely attired in a dark grey business suit. Unsmiling beneath a fringe of unfashionably long blond hair, he suddenly turned and deliberately met Emma's gaze with cold, grey-blue eyes. Steel eyes. In that brief instant, Emma felt as though she were an open book; that all of her innermost secrets were laid bare to that penetrating stare. Fumbling with another piece of toast, she forced herself to look away.

Mildred remained oblivious to the exchange. "The nerve of them," she said. "Someone ought to

teach them manners."

"Quiet, dear. You're drawing attention to yourself."

"I don't care. I'll say what I please when I please."

"Milly, shush!" Emma glared at her sister. "That's quite enough."

Passing by their table, Sarah tried her best not to laugh as she overheard their conversation. A tiny snigger escaped, drawing Mildred's accusing stare. Sarah hurried on.

"Morning, Reverend," she said, seeing Willie Tenboom leaning against the bar.

"Good morning." Willie sipped from his cup and grimaced.

"The cook burn the coffee again?" Sarah asked sympathetically.

"Nein." Tenboom set aside the cup. "Gushie was kind enough to add a little -- how do you say -- 'pick me up'." He frowned at the dark liquid. "I need something a bit stronger than coffee this morning."

"Christensen," Sarah guessed.

"Ja." Willie sighed, shaking his head. "A tragedy, to be cut down in one's youth. God's will is a mystery to us all."

Sarah was about to comment that God might not have had anything to do with the Englishman's accident when Jake, Corky and Jack entered the bar.

"Morning, everyone," said Jake, joining Sarah and Willie. A cloth was loosely swathed around his left hand.

"You've hurt yourself!" exclaimed Sarah, reaching for the injured appendage.

"It's nothing," said Jake. He tried to tuck the hand into a pocket.

"Let me see," she demanded in her most non-nonsense voice.

With a sigh of resignation, he allowed her to unwind his makeshift bandage. Beneath it, the flesh of his hand was badly bruised and beginning to swell. It hurt like hell but, at the same time, it was nice having Sarah fawn over him.

"What did you do to it?" she asked, examining the discoloration.

"It was an accident," said Jake.

"I dropped the nose hatch on it," explained Corky unhappily.

"How'd that happen?" asked Willie.

"Corky left the hatch open and like an idiot I grabbed the edge of the opening while he was climb-

ing up to the starboard engine. The plane shifted and the hatch fell forward." Jake gently pulled his hand away from Sarah. "It wasn't anyone's fault."

"It's a wonder you didn't break anything."

"Don't I know it."

"Just the same, you ought to let Louie take a look at it," insisted Sarah.

"It's not worth it." Jake began to rebind his hand. "By the way, what's for breakfast?"

A porter bearing a tray of hot coffee edged around the group at the bar. Coming abreast of Corky, he set his foot down rather heavily, unaware that Jack's tail was beneath it. With a yelp, the little mongrel whirled and savagely bit the porter's ankle. Crying out, he stumbled. China shattered as the tray fell with a crash, spilling hot coffee all over Mildred and Emma Boswick. Both ladies screamed and leaped to their feet. Emma's chair fell with a harsh clatter as she danced backward, pulling her dress, wet with steaming coffee, off of her legs. Mildred's back was drenched with it. Howling in pain and outrage, she swung at the hapless porter with her purse and hit him over the head. When he ducked a second swing, the purse hit a man at a neighboring table and knocked him backward out of his chair.

When Louie entered the Monkey Bar five minutes later, it was to find a full scale brawl on his hands. Tables were overturned, chairs and bodies littered the floor, and bottles and coffee mugs flew through the air, shattering against the walls and anything else that happened to be in their way.

"I think we've set a record," said Gushie, joining Louie at the door. "This is the first time we've had a fight during breakfast."

"Who started it?" demanded Louie, scowling at the melee.

Gushie grinned. "Jack."

"Jack?"

"Uh-huh."

The magistrate pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Who, then, do I charge for the damages?"

The woman was blonde. Delicate. Gentle, yet firm. Her smile was sunlight; her eyes the eternal sky. The man was tow-headed. His eyes were cold; his expression impassive. She was soft blue to his neutral grey. He was Winter to her Spring.

Sapphire and Steel. Elements of order, and control.

Together they watched the fight's progress, their table an island in a sea of chaos. None of the hurled projectiles came near their sanctuary, nor did anyone notice that the couple remained unscathed and apart from the pandemonium. It was

as if they sat within an obscuring, protective bubble; the eye of the storm.

Scowling, Steel watched Corky and Sarah as they defended their position behind the bar, wielding cheap bottles of whiskey as clubs.

(Is it here?) His lips did not move, nor did he look at the woman by his side, yet she clearly heard his voice within her mind.

(Not in this room, no.) Sapphire replied in kind. Her gaze followed Jake as he sailed across the room and through a window.

(Where?)

(I'm not certain.)

Steel turned to her, his eyes hard and unsympathetic. (Be certain.)

(It's not that simple.) Her voice caressed his mind like a gentle breeze. (It doesn't want to be found. Not yet. Not before it can do its damage.)

(To Time?)

(Yes.) Sapphire's eyes glowed with the brilliance of her namesake as she saw an alternate future unfold. (It will cause the war in the South Pacific to start prematurely.)

(How?)

(The curse.)

(Then the Japanese will win the war?)

(And the Germans. Yes.)

(Then we're wasting time.) The pun was not intentional. Steel was not a man who made puns, or jokes. In fact, he rarely even smiled. (Force it to show itself.)

(Not yet. We can't afford another Christensen.) A frown marred her delicate features. (He thought we intended to hurt him.)

(His paranoia did that, not us.)

(The diamond enhanced his fear.) Her voice carried a tinge of remorse.

(It couldn't be helped.)

(Perhaps not, but I'll not give it a second chance.) She looked at him pointedly, daring him to argue.

Steel refused to rise to the bait. (How long must we wait?)

(Not long.) She extended one fine-boned hand before her, testing the atmosphere. A light blue aura flickered along her fingers. (This is It's doing.)

(The fight?)

(Yes.)

Sapphire heard a low growl. Drawing back her hand, she turned and looked for its source. Looking down, she discovered Jack sitting on the edge of their psychic barrier, looking in. Of the room's occupants, he was the only one still aware of their presence.

(We have company.)

Steel spared Jack a cursory glance. (A dog.)

(More than just a dog, I think.) Reaching down, Sapphire held out her hand for Jack to sniff. Hesitantly, the little mongrel investigated the woman's smell. Satisfied that there was no danger here, he looked at her with his one good eye and solemnly barked his approval.

"Thank you." Sapphire spoke aloud for his benefit. A gentle smile touched her lips. "It seems we have an ally, Steel."

Jack barked twice and wagged his tail in agreement.

In the days that followed, Boragora's luck changed from bad to worse.

The lagoon that served as the island's port yielded the natives' empty nets where once the fish had been abundant. Sharks began to appear in the lagoon, darting among the small fishing vessels. Three boats sank while docked beside *Cutters Goose*. When they were recovered from the lagoon's sandy bottom, no mark or blemish could be found to explain their sudden unseaworthiness. Aboard the plane itself, Jake found himself exceedingly and inexplicably accident prone. He dropped tools on his foot and tripped over objects he was sure he'd picked up and put away only moments before. Cargo refused to remain strapped down, instruments gave false readings in spite of Corky's best efforts to ascertain the cause, and anything that could go wrong with the engines, did.

Nor were the accidents and minor catastrophes confined to the lagoon and *Cutters Goose*. A gremlin had been loosed in the bar, wrecking havoc wherever it went. Tempers flared easily, turning brawls into an every day occurrence. Glasses fell off their shelves with the slightest tread on the floorboards. Items disappeared at random from locked rooms and drawers, only to reappear in the most extraordinary -- and inconvenient -- places. Twice the wheels on Gushie's chair locked in place, throwing the startled cripple onto the floor. In spite of exaggerated care, a bottle of expensive, thirty-year-old scotch slipped through Louie's fingers as though coated with grease and shattered. When he tried to pick up the glass shards littering the floor, he severely cut his hand and had to have seven stitches. Even Jack was bedeviled. No matter where he went, someone always managed to step on his tail.

A week after Christensen's death, the siege continued unabated. The incidents graduated from the merely annoying to the dangerous. Reverend

Tenboom tripped down the steps of his church and fell on his arm, breaking it in two places. The brakes on Gushie's wheelchair failed, nearly sending him down a flight of steps before he managed to stop himself. Out on the lagoon, a native got tangled in his fishing nets and almost drowned; would have drowned, had Jake and Corky not been there to save him. Mother Nature herself decided to add to Boragora's grief, raining day and night with little reprieve. Just when it seemed the sun would shine and dry the waterlogged inhabitants, the sky would cloud up and the rains would begin anew.

Jake was the first to realize that the events seemed to follow a pattern, though he refused to let himself believe it had any real significance. It had to be coincidence that the accidents happened only when Corky was in the vicinity. Soon other people began to notice the coincidence, not the least of whom was Corky himself.

Though not an exceptionally bright man, he wasn't stupid. It was frighteningly easy to put two and two together. The day Willie tripped and broke his arm he'd been passing by, playing catch with Jack. He'd been working on the *Goose* the day Tomas almost drowned, tangled in a fishing net he'd used without mishap for over twenty years. Every time Gushie had a problem with his wheelchair Corky was somewhere nearby.

The implications were clear, even if they weren't logical. For Corky, the most disconcerting realization was that the accidents never happened to him personally; only those around him.

Jake restlessly tapped his empty beer bottle against the bar's polished countertop. "You know what's funny about this whole thing?"

"Was there something funny about it?" Sarah asked sarcastically. "I hadn't noticed."

"I mean unusual 'funny'."

"The whole thing's unusual," said Gushie from across the room.

"Right, and it all started when Christensen died."

"So?"

"So maybe that has something to do with what's been happening," concluded Jake.

"The *Revenge of the Englishman*," Sarah intoned. She shook her head, leaning back on the bench until her elbows rested on the piano's closed keyboard. "It sounds like a penny-dreadful."

"I only wish it were."

The hinges of the batwings creaked in protest. Everyone turned as Corky ambled into the bar.

Here comes trouble, Jake thought absently, setting aside the bottle. He was instantly appalled that he could think such a thing. *It's not*

Corky's fault, he told himself savagely. Unfortunately, in light of the circumstantial evidence, it was becoming harder and harder to believe that.

"You busy, Jake?" asked Corky, uncomfortably aware that the *Monkey Bar* was empty when it should have been full of customers.

He knows, thought Cutter, recognizing doubt in the mechanic's dark eyes. *Why did I assume he wouldn't notice what's been obvious to everyone else?*

"Just hanging around," he replied aloud in what he hoped was a cheerful voice.

"Can I talk to ya?" Corky glanced at Sarah, and concluded apologetically, "Alone?"

"It's okay." Unoffended, Sarah picked up her wine glass and joined Gushie on the other side of the room, leaving the two friends alone at the bar.

"What's up?" Jake asked.

"It's about all the bad stuff that's been happenin'," Corky began hesitantly. Forcing himself to meet Jake's gaze, he spoke his fear aloud. "It's my fault, isn't it?"

"Of course not! Don't be ridiculous."

"Then what's happening, Jake?" he asked anxiously. "Why do things go wrong when I'm around?"

"It's coincidence, that's all," Jake assured him.

"Is it? I'm not sure anymore." Corky wrung his cap in his hands, kneading the stained cloth into a shapeless mass. "The *Goose* won't fly when I'm aboard her, things fall and break by themselves when I'm around...and people get hurt, Jake." He looked mournfully at Cutter. "I've jinxed everyone."

"You've done no such thing. I told you, it's just a little bad luck."

"Then why--?"

"I don't know, Corky," Jake interrupted gently, "but it's not your fault." The mechanic looked doubtful. "Really."

"Ya think so?"

"Sure I do."

"Gee, that's a relief. I really thought it was me." He smiled, embarrassed. "Silly, huh?"

"Yeah, it is," agreed Jake. Happy to see the cloud of depression lift from his friend's expression, he momentarily forgot his own suspicions. "How 'bout a beer?"

"Sure!"

Sarah looked up from helping Gushie clear the tables and saw Jake reach over and under the counter, producing two bottles of beer. "Man-talk o-

ver?" she asked, her voice echoing slightly as it carried across the empty room.

"All done," said Cutter, handing Corky a beer. "Come on over."

Wiping her soiled hands on Gushie's towel, Sarah began to weave her way around the tables and chairs toward the bar.

Jake never knew what caused him to look up at the moment; perhaps it was the unfamiliar creak he heard seconds before or the sudden, inexplicable feeling of dread that gripped him. Whatever the reason, he was in time to see one of the heavy ceiling fans pull free of its mooring.

"Sarah!" Jake jumped forward, his bottle shattering on the floor.

Startled, Sarah looked up just as Jake crashed into her. They bounced off a table and onto the floor as fifty pounds of wood and metal tore free of the ceiling. The fan crashed onto the spot where Sarah had been standing moments before, gouging a crater in the hardwood floor.

As the dust settled, Sarah sat up and stared in horror at the damage, looking with shocked disbelief from the ceiling to the shattered remains on the floor. "Oh my God!"

Jake slid an arm around her waist and drew her close, feeling her tremble against him. "You okay?"

Sarah managed a nod. She couldn't seem to find her voice.

"Are you both okay?" asked Gushie, quickly circumnavigating the debris.

"Fine." Jake frowned at the jagged hole in the ceiling. Sarah wasn't the only one trembling. "They don't make those things like they used to," he said sarcastically.

There it was again. That damned bad luck, and Corky standing not three feet away from--

Jake frowned as he looked toward the bar. There was no one there. "Where's Corky?"

Gushie looked over his shoulder. "I don't know," he admitted. "He was there a minute ago."

It was a response that Jake would hear repeatedly during the next two hours.

It didn't take Corky long to empty the dresser into his battered old duffle bag. His possessions were few. Holding the canvas bag open in his left hand, he wadded his various shirts and underthings into crumpled balls and haphazardly tossed them inside. These were followed by his diplomas, carefully wrapped in his spare coveralls to cushion the glass from shattering. Covering these with the rest of his clothing, Corky contemplated the last of his possessions to be packed. All that remained were a few old photographs, an autographed base-

ball, his black Greek fisherman's cap, socks without their mates, and Jack's spare eyepatch. Without looking at the images, he carefully tucked the fading black and white photos into the duffle bag. Someday he'd be able to look at the pictures of Jake and Jack and Sarah again, but not now; not for a long time.

The baseball was one of his most treasured possessions. Signed by the Duluth Dukes, it had been given to him by Jake as a special token of their friendship. Corky used to carry it around for good luck, reassured by its hard, round shape in the depths of his coveralls' pocket. When the signatures began to fade away after so much handling, he was forced to put it aside. Every now and then he liked to look at it and remember how happy and honored he'd been the day Jake had given it to him.

Hefting the ball experimentally, Corky thought it felt slightly heavier than he remembered. It fit neatly in his palm -- small enough to grip comfortably but large enough so that his fingers couldn't circle it completely. Examining it more closely, he discovered that one of the seams had split. He couldn't recall how or when the damage had occurred, but he wasn't going to make matters worse by letting it rattle around in his duffle bag. He put it in his pocket.

Blinking back hot, stinging tears, Corky yanked the drawstring closed and slung the bag over his shoulder. Without a backward glance, he left the little room that had been his home for more than a year and slipped away.

It took forty minutes for Jake to calm Sarah and explain what had happened to an irate Louie. When Jake was finally able to break free, he immediately went looking for Corky. With the latest circumstantial evidence, he knew the mechanic would be brooding somewhere and blaming himself for the mishap.

The wharf was empty of all save Old Pierre who was fishing off the edge of the pier. A few minutes of searching was all Jake needed to realize that Corky wasn't on the *Goose* or anywhere near the docks.

Pierre watched Jake with interest. "Lose something, mon ami?"

"Sort of," he replied. "You haven't seen Corky around, have you?"

"Oui. I saw him this morning talking to the captain of the charter that came in yesterday." The elderly Frenchman grinned suggestively. "Can't blame him, either. Prettiest damned sea captain I ever saw. If I were younger, I'd've spoken to her myself, even if that tub of hers is the ugliest thing I've ever--"

"How about an hour ago?" interrupted Jake. Pierre would talk for hours if given half the chance. Right now he didn't have the time to listen.



Pierre shrugged. "Not since lunch."

Jake sighed. "Thanks."

If Corky wasn't in or near the *Goose* then there was only one more place he would have gone.

Why didn't I check there in the first place? wondered Jake as he returned to the hotel.

Hesitating outside the little room, Jake knocked. The door creaked open at the pressure, revealing a sliver of dark interior through the opening. A trill of apprehension caused Jake to push the door open the rest of the way.

The room was dark. A pale rectangle of light fell across the floor, marred by Jake's shadow. The hammock spanned the room, abandoned. Stepping inside, Jake found the dresser drawers open and empty of their contents. All of Corky's personal effects were gone. Only Jack's spare eyepatch remained, carefully folded and lying on top of the dresser.

Jake's worst fears had been confirmed. Believing himself a threat to the lives of his friends, Corky had taken matters into his own hands. If Corky found a way off the island, Jake knew with painful certainty that he would never again see his best friend.

Sapphire stood on the beach and watched the sun peek through snow-white clouds for the first time in days. The sun always looked so beautiful from a distance. Viewed up close, yellow stars were really rather unattractive; erratic, violently flaming balls in the cold void of space. She smiled to herself, realizing that Steel would think her a fool if he caught her daydreaming.

Any why not? she thought, enjoying the breeze that ruffled her hair and tugged at her dress. *I am the idealist of the team, as well as the diplomat.*

Maybe that was why she was so fond of Earth. Though the inhabitants were still primitive and childish, Mankind's future definitely held promise. Humans were such a challenge. Sapphire actually found herself looking forward to assignments on this unique little world. She suspected Steel felt the same in his own, dispassionate way. Perhaps if he wasn't so stuffy and--

A cold chill caressed her psyche and she gasped. Turning, she stared in surprise at the settlement. Forcing aside her astonishment, her eyes glowed fierce blue as she reached outward with her consciousness. Probing. Touching. Seeking. The atmosphere was clear, as though a heavy veil had lifted. Or had slipped away.

(Steel!)

Laying on the bed in their hotel room, Steel's eyes snapped open. (What is it?)

(The diamond. It's gone!)

Steel sat up and scowled. (What do you mean, gone?)

(The atmosphere's changed. Can't you feel it?)

(No.) Steel turned and waited expectantly as Sapphire's transparent form stepped through the outer wall and solidified.

"It left an aura to fool us," explained Sapphire.

"And it worked," he said irritably. "It has a head start." Steel rose to his feet. "Maybe it's lowered its guard."

"The aura blankets most of the island. I can't penetrate it."

"Have you tried?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, unoffended. Tact was not Steel's forte.

"Then we're back to where we started."

"Not really. We're actually a little closer."

Steel scowled. "Do you know where it was going?"

"Only that it will have to leave the island before it can cause enough trouble to prematurely start the war."

"How?"

"It will manage to find its way to Japan. Unfortunately, I don't know where on the island it plans to leave from."

"Then how can you--"

"I know who has it."

Steel's eyes narrowed. "Someone's missing?" Sapphire nodded. "Who?"

"The one called Corky. The mechanic."

At last, they had something! "There will be a search party," he said. "If we can't find it, perhaps they can."

Jake studied the map of Boragora spread before him, irritably aware of Sarah looking over his shoulder.

"Must you breathe down my neck?" he demanded.

"I'm not breathing down your neck," she retorted. "I'm breathing on your shoulder."

"Sarah--"

"--and don't bother telling me to leave. You'll only be wasting your time. I'm going with you." Sarah planted her hands firmly on her hips, eyes flashing. Her expression dared him to argue.

Jake knew better. He had enough to worry about without starting a verbal war with Sarah. Besides which, she had a point. He was going to need all the help he could get. Search parties led by Louie, Ahmed, Willie Tenboom, and Tomas were already scouring the roads and beaches. Though he wasn't physically able to participate in the search, Gushie did his share by monitoring the shortwave. He would know the instant one of the groups found the fugitive mechanic -- if they found him. Boragora wasn't the largest island in the French Marivellas, but it wasn't exactly small, either. Finding Corky when he didn't want to be found would be like looking for that needle in the proverbial haystack.

Personally, Jake thought they were wasting time. Corky had left because he thought himself personally responsible for Boragora's plague of bad luck. He was probably heading for one of the fishing villages on the other side of the island. Once there, he could hire transport off the island, no questions asked. He wouldn't want to be found before he reached his destination. If Jake knew Corky -- and he did -- the mechanic would avoid the easiest routes. That left only one alternative: the jungle. A dangerous journey by day, Jake wouldn't let himself think of what could happen to Corky when night set in.

Cutter forced his attention back to the map. There were more than fifteen villages that would be ideal for Corky's purposes. Which one would he go to?

"Excuse me."

Both Jake and Sarah jumped, turning toward the voice in unison. Even Jack bounced to his feet, barking enthusiastically to greet the arrivals. A woman stood within the doorway, watching them. Her companion was a solemn-faced man in a smart grey business suit. Jake had seen them around on rare occasions but had never spoken to them. They kept to themselves, apparently preferring the privacy of their hotel room to the dismal weather that had recently plagued the island.

"Captain Cutter." The woman stepped forward, her heels clicking gently on the floor. If she noticed the hole in the room's ceiling, or the dent on the floor beneath, she gave no indication. "I believe we can be of service to one another. You're looking for your friend. We can help."

Jake looked skeptical. The last thing he needed was a couple of high-class socialites getting in his way. "I don't think--"

"It is important that we assist you," she interrupted in a soft, well-modulated voice. There was the slightest hint of an accent there that Jake couldn't quite place. "Your friend has an object that doesn't belong to him."

"What sort of object?"

"You could say it's a bad luck charm. It's what's responsible for the trouble here."

Sarah resented their intrusion. She resented the way Jake was appraising the lovely blonde even

more. "Let me guess," she said tersely. "Someone gave him a voodoo doll."

"Worse," replied Sapphire, unruffled by Sarah's sarcasm.

Whatever these people were up to, they were obviously serious about it. "Just what is this thing he's supposed to have?" asked Jake.

"A very large blue diamond."

"A diamond?" Jake and Sarah echoed in unison.

Jack barked twice in reply.

"Where the hell did Corky get a diamond?" demanded Jake, incredulous.

"It was stolen." Steel strode forward to join the conversation. "The thief hid it to divert suspicion from himself."

Something suddenly clicked into place. "Christensen," guessed Jake.

"Christensen," agreed Sapphire.

"He stole it three months ago in London," said Steel.

Sarah frowned. She knew of only one diamond stolen in England three months ago. It had been front page news for over a week and had half the legal agencies in the world looking for the culprit. Could it have made its way to Boragora? Why, it was patently absurd. Surely they didn't mean that diamond.

Yet hadn't the background article mentioned something about a curse?

"You said it was blue," said Sarah, trying to maintain a nonchalant tone. "How blue? I mean, is it--"

"The Hope diamond?" said Sapphire. "Yes. It is."

"But I thought the Hope diamond curse was just a story to discourage thieves."

"Christensen didn't believe in curses," said Steel tersely.

And we all know what happened to him, thought Jake. "Are you with the police?"

"In a sense," replied Sapphire. "Our job is to return the diamond to its rightful owners."

Jake wasn't so sure. They were the most unconventional policemen he'd ever seen. Of course, Sarah didn't look very much like a spy, either. "Is that true, Jack? Are they policemen?"

Jack barked twice, his tail thumping the floor for added emphasis. As far as the little mongrel was concerned, they had his full approval.

"All right," sighed Jake. He was still doubtful but willing for the moment to take Jack's word

-- or bark -- for it. "You said you can help find Corky. How?"

"I'm sensitive to the diamond," explained Sapphire. It wasn't the whole truth, but she saw no need to go into detail. The less they knew, the better. "It has an aura. I can't locate the diamond itself, but I know when it's nearby."

"Just how big is this aura?" asked Sarah skeptically.

"Approximately five miles in diameter."

"It would narrow the search down," mused Jake, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"It still doesn't find Corky for us," Sarah pointed out. "We'd have to cover a lot of ground just to find that five mile radius."

Sapphire smiled pleasantly. "Suppose we combine my sensitivity with Jack's sense of smell?"

Jack! Of course! Jake slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. Why hadn't he thought of it before? They had the means to track Corky all along! Jack may have been more intelligent than some humans Jake knew but he was still a dog, with a dog's sense of smell.

Come to think of it, why didn't Jack think of it first? Jake looked at the dog accusingly. Jack ignored him, apparently hanging on the woman's every word.

That reminded Jake of another, more sensitive problem. Did he trust the two strangers enough to take the risk of letting them come along? Perhaps the woman was right; maybe they could help, but he doubted it. He suspected there was an ulterior motive to their helpfulness; they certainly weren't offering to help find Corky out of the goodness of their hearts. Besides, they certainly didn't look like policemen...

Sapphire suppressed the urge to smile. (He doesn't believe us.)

(He doesn't have to.) Steel's expression remained impassive. The humans remained unaware that anything out of the ordinary was taking place around them.

(He thinks we're jewel thieves.)

(Let him. So long as he leads us to the diamond.) "We're wasting time," Steel said aloud. "If we don't hurry, your friend will have more to contend with than bad luck."

"What's that supposed to mean?" demanded Sarah, irritated by the man's condescending tone of voice.

"If the diamond leaves the island it will no longer need him."

"It? What do you mean, it? You're talking like it's alive."

"Sentient," Sapphire corrected. "We're wast-

ing time, Captain." She looked at Jake with the most beautiful blue eyes he'd ever seen. "Shall we go?"

Jake nodded absently, trapped in the fathomless depths of those eyes. "Uh, yeah." He mentally shook himself, dragging his attention away from her gaze in time to catch Sarah's disapproving glare. "We have to find some machetes," he said lamely. "Meet us outside in ten minutes."

"As you wish." Steel strode away. Offering Jake and Sarah a smile, Sapphire turned and followed him outside.

"Are you crazy?" Sarah demanded when they were beyond hearing. "For all we know they're the thieves!"

"I know."

"You know?! Then why--"

Jake wearily held up a hand to stop her flow of words. "Wouldn't you prefer to have them where you could keep an eye on them?"

Sarah frowned. "You think they'd follow us?"

"It's a good bet," he said. "And I'm not in the mood for any more surprises."

"What do we do if they try and steal the diamond once we've found Corky?"

"Stop them." Jake folded the map. "We'll radio Louie about our 'guests' before we leave. If they try to steal the diamond -- if there's a diamond -- then I'd like to have some backup."

In need of a rest, Corky paused in his trek across the island. Trudging through the jungle was no easy matter. It was humid and damp and the dufflebag slung over his shoulder seemed to gain weight with every step. The path had to be cleared with constant strokes of the machete and he had to take frequent breaks to rest his aching arm. It would have been considerably easier to take one of the roads, but to have done so would only have assisted Jake in finding him.

Corky fought the urge to turn around and go home.

"Look at me," he said aloud. "I've only been gone a couple'a hours and I'm homesick already. How'm I gonna feel after a month?"

Moping wasn't making his decision any easier. He'd made the right decision; the *only* decision, under the circumstances.

Maybe I'll even learn to live with it, he thought grimly.

Shifting the weight of his dufflebag more comfortably on his shoulder, Corky trudged onward, wearily shifting his machete. He wanted to reach Telikohali before noon. One of the many small fishing villages that dotted the coastline, Corky

knew he could pay a native to canoe him to Kuoha, one of Boragora's sister islands. By dusk he would be well on his way, leaving Boragora and his friends -- his family -- forever.

Once Jack picked up the scent, it was surprisingly easy to follow Corky's trail. Unwittingly, the mechanic had managed to assist the search by cutting a path through the dense foliage with the machete he had lifted from the tool shed. It also helped the little group follow at a faster pace, the obstacles having been so thoughtfully disposed of by the very man they were seeking.

The deeper into the jungle they traveled, the more respect Jake had for the couple bearing the unlikely names of Sapphire and Steel. On the rare occasions when Jack lost the scent or a clearing caused some confusion as to which direction Corky had gone, Sapphire unerringly set them back on course. Watching the strange duo was becoming increasingly unsettling. Neither had seen fit to change into more practical clothing for the expedition, yet despite Sapphire's high heels and Steel's encumbering business suit they traveled comfortably and without mishap.

"I don't know who they are, but they're definitely *not* policemen." Sarah was careful to keep her voice low so as not to be overheard by their mysterious companions. She would have been disconcerted to know that not only could they hear but were capable of reading her thoughts before she gave them voice.

"I'm willing to bet they're not jewel thieves, either," said Jake. "We've been out here for more than two hours and look at us. We're sweaty, covered with tree sap, mud and God knows what else, and those two look like they're out for a Sunday stroll. There's not a mark on them."

They certainly were strange; Sarah would be the last to deny that. She chewed her lower lip thoughtfully. "You don't suppose their story is true, do you? About the curse?"

"It would explain a lot," Jake admitted reluctantly.

"But who are they?" wondered Sarah. "What are they? They hardly exchange a word yet they seem to know exactly what the other is up to. It's uncanny."

"I know what you mean. They give me the willies." Jake helped Sarah over a large, slime-covered branch that lay in their path. "I'm not anxious to find out what else our friends are capable of, either."

(Congratulations, Steel. You've graduated from a jewel thief to an enigma.)

Steel ignored Sapphire's jibe. "He passed through here less than an hour ago," he said after waiting for Jake and Sarah to join him. "It will sense us coming soon."

"It?" asked Sarah.

"The diamond." Sapphire appeared behind them, Jack trotting faithfully at her heels. "It will try to stop us."

"But it's an inanimate object!"

"With a curse," Sapphire reminded her. "The priests of the temple from which it was originally stolen were very powerful. They knew their craft."

"What can it do against all of us?" demanded Sarah, tired of referring to the Hope diamond as though it were the root of all evil. It was just a gem, after all. A rock.

"There are no ceiling fans to fall on you here, Miss White," said Steel coldly, "but a tree would work just as well." Before Sarah could voice a retort, he turned and strode away, apparently unconcerned whether they followed or not.

"Ooooo! The nerve of that man," Sarah sputtered as she and Jake hurried after. "Treating us like...like children!"

But you are children, compared to us, Sapphire thought wistfully. Still, your race has promise. If Mankind survives, it will be because of people such as you.

(Stop philosophizing.) Steel's voice snapped irritably. (We've got work to do.)

Sapphire sighed and quickened her pace.

Corky didn't feel well. It didn't really surprise him. He'd been pushing himself pretty hard. The physical effort of traveling through the humid jungle was gradually taking its toll. The duffle bag felt as if it weighed three times more than when he first set out and he could barely lift his arm from swinging the machete. His back hurt and his legs ached. Worst of all, he hadn't had a beer in more than six hours.

Even the baseball in his pocket irritated him, drawing attention to itself. It felt like a lump of lead pressed against his leg, weighing him down. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer. Dropping the bag, he reached into his pocket to remove the ball.

It bit him.

With a cry of pain and surprise, Corky yanked out his hand and stared at it in disbelief. A single drop of blood welled onto his fingertips.

Frowning, Corky reached into his pocket a second time. Gingerly, he let his fingers play around the circumference of the ball and -- there! -- he touched something sharp and pointed. Taking great care to avoid the protuberance, he pulled the ball out of his pocket. Something blue flashed in the sunlight, visible through the baseball's ripped seam. Pulling back the flap, Corky shook the opening over his hand.

The Hope diamond dropped into his palm.

"Wow!" he exclaimed, staring at the gem as he unconsciously stuffed the ball back into his pocket. The diamond was easily the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Its facets winked at him with crystalline brilliance, giving back hazy blue reflections of himself.

Corky couldn't believe it. It looked like a diamond. It felt like a diamond (or what he imagined a diamond should feel like, never having held one before). However, without a jeweler's loop (and the skill that went with it) or a piece of glass, there was no way to see if it was genuine. Of course, it couldn't possibly be a *real* diamond. After all, who'd be silly enough to stuff such a thing inside a baseball owned by a dumpy little mechanic?

It certainly was pretty, though. Gazing wistfully into the sparkling, pale blue depths, Corky thought he saw movement. Frowning, he peered more closely. There it was again! A sparkle *inside* the diamond. It drew him inward, whispering a siren song of beauty. He was unable to pull his gaze away from it. He couldn't seem to--

"Corky!"

The mechanic looked up with a start, fingers clenching convulsively about the gem. Jake, Jack and Sarah pushed their way through the foliage, followed at a distance by two strangers.

"Jake! Sarah!" cried Corky, surprised but no less happy to see them. He stepped forward to greet them. The diamond flared in his hand.

Puzzled, Corky looked down as the diamond began to hum. It was growing warm, too. He tried to drop it but his fingers refused to move, tightly locking the gem in a cage of flesh. Desperately he tried to pry his fingers free or to shake the diamond loose, only to be met with the same resistance. His body would not respond to his mental commands. To his horror, a strange, pulsing glow began to emanate from the stone, engulfing his hand in a swirling blue haze. The aura began to creep up his arm.

Jake ran forward to offer his assistance. There was a brilliant flash from the stone in Corky's hand and Jake flew backward as though jerked by an invisible string. He bounced off of a tree and fell in a heap on the ground.

"Jake!" Sarah ran to help him as he unsteadily tried to regain his feet. "Are you all right?"

"I'll let you know." He shook his head and winced, then turned and stared at Corky. The glow had crept up to his elbow.

"It's trying to control him," Steel calmly explained.

"Not if I can help it," snarled Cutter, shaking off Sarah's restraining hand and starting forward. Steel stepped between the angry pilot and Corky. Jake tried to push him out of the way. He may as well have been using a feather for all the good it did. "Move, damn it!"

Steel's hand shot forward like a striking snake. Grasping a fistful of jacket, he effortlessly lifted Jake until his feet dangled six inches above the ground. "You don't learn from your mistakes very well, do you?" he asked tersely. "Force is not the answer. Not yet." He opened his fist and Jake hit the ground with a thud, accumulating several additional bruises.

The glow had crept to Corky's shoulders.

"At the moment it controls his body, not his mind," said Steel, answering Jake's expression. Reaching down, he clamped a hand on Jake's shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

"We can't just leave him like that!" protested Sarah.

"We won't." Steel critically assessed the situation. His was the attitude of a man who took such strange phenomena in his stride; and dealt with it. Dispassionately. "Talk to him. Draw his attention away from the diamond."

"Then what?"

"We'll do the rest."

Sarah slipped her hand into Jake's, her expression one of distrust and confusion. "What should we do?" she asked, not caring if Steel overheard.

"What the man says," Jake said bitterly. "Come on."

Hand in hand, they cautiously moved toward the mechanic. The glow was beginning to spread across his chest now. Soon it would envelope him completely. The diamond's humming rose in pitch as they approached.

"Corky?" Jake nervously watched the aura spread another inch. "Corky, it's me. It's Jake. Can you hear me?"

"We've come to take you home," said Sarah, trying not to look at the diamond clutched in his hand. "We want you to come back with us."

"Don't come near me!" The mechanic's eyes were wild with fear.

My God. What's that thing putting him through? Jake wondered grimly. "It's okay, buddy. Everything's going to be fine." *I hope*, he added mentally. Jake edged closer, placing Sarah slightly behind him. He wasn't about to have her in the line of fire now that they were deliberately trying to provoke it. "Half the island's out looking for you, you know."

"Louie and the Reverend," volunteered Sarah, following Jake's lead. "Even Dowser and Matilda. They're all worried about you." A tear spilled down her cheek. "I'm worried about you. Come back, Corky. Please?"

"I...I can't." His voice trembled.

"You've got to," said Jake. "Where else am I



gonna find someone to fix the *Goose* when she breaks down?" Was it his imagination, or did the aura recede a little?

"Who's going to listen to my singing?" added Sarah. "You're my best audience."

Jack trotted forward to join Jake and Sarah and bark his encouragement.

"There, you see?" said Sarah. "Even Jack wants you back, isn't that right, boy?"

The little terrier barked twice, signifying his agreement. The aura visibly lost some ground this time, receding a full two inches.

Jake hazarded another step forward.

"Don't!" cried Corky, jerking backward. The aura pulsed angrily. "It'll hurt you, Jake. It'll *kill* you!"

"You won't let it." Jake defiantly took another step forward.

"I can't help it!"

"You can."

"I *can't*!"

"Yes. You. Can!" Cutter sharply punctuated each word.

"You can do it, Corky!" cried Sarah. "Please!"

Jack trotted forward another foot, adding his voice to their pleas.

Caught between three verbal assaults and Corky's own distraught emotions, the blue aura fluctuated, wavering indecisively. It lost another inch of ground.

(Now, Sapphire!) Steel's voice thundered. (Before it can focus itself!)

Sapphire stepped forward and turned to face Corky. Her eyes suddenly blazed with the color of a thousand sapphires, clashing with the pale blue of the Hope diamond's aura. Reaching forward with her consciousness, she focused on the diamond itself; striking at the heart of its divided will while its concentration was spread too thin.

A thousand hateful, evil sensations trilled through her as she touched the gem's psychic aura with her mind. She saw the past unfold in a kaleidoscope of fury; an ebony idol with a hollow eye, damaged by a thief's chisel; linen-clad priests, long dead, chanting at the new moon, beseeching Kali to bestow death and damnation on the defilers of the temple, waking the elemental within the gem's heart. A parade of faces flashed by; previous owners of the Hope diamond. Gaius Caligula. Nero. Ghengis Khan. Marie Antoinette. Mary, Queen of Scots. J.P. Morgan, trapped aboard the doomed *Titanic*. In and out of history, the gem bore its curse, bringing misfortune and destruction to everyone who owned it.

Sapphire's fiercely glowing eyes were the only physical manifestation of her efforts as she wrapped the diamond with her will, forming a mental barrier. The aura surrounding Corky shivered as it felt its life-source severed. Steel moved past a startled Jake and Sarah with incredible speed. He walked right up to the mechanic before anyone really knew what was happening. Grasping Corky by the wrist, he squeezed. Hard. The gem hummed in angry protest but found that it could not penetrate the shield Sapphire had woven around it. The muscles in Corky's arm responded to Steel's pressure. His fingers opened like the petals of a flower. The diamond fell.

Steel immediately snatched a small, dark grey box from a pocket of his suitcoat. Bending, he scooped up the diamond and shut the lid with an audible "snap".

The blue glow around Corky winked out the moment the box was closed. Suddenly free of the force that had been restraining him, he staggered and would have collapsed had Jake and Sarah not rushed over to support him. They each grabbed an arm, Jake taking most of the weight on himself. While Jack leaped about and barked his delight, Corky gladly endured Sarah's tears of joy and kiss on the cheek, as well as Jake's strong hug.

"Are you all right?" Cutter asked, somehow finding his voice.

"I feel kinda funny," Corky admitted awkwardly, acutely aware of Sarah possessively holding onto his arm, "but I guess I'm okay."

"Feel like going home?"

A shadow clouded Corky's face. "But what about--"

"It's been taken care of." Steel exhibited the box in the palm of his hand. Beside him, Sapphire smiled knowingly.

"What's stopping the curse working from inside there?" asked Jake.

"Lead." Steel slid the box into his pocket. Curiously enough, it didn't leave a bulge.

"What're ya gonna do with it?" Corky asked warily. He wasn't exactly sure of what had transpired -- nor would he ever be certain -- but it didn't take a genius to realize the diamond had had a lot to do with it.

"We'll return it to its rightful owner," Sapphire assured him. "After this, they'll be sure to see it's better protected in the future."

"But won't it cause them the same problem it caused us?" asked Sarah.

"Nothing as serious as what it could have done here."

"You mean it would'a done somethin' worse?" Corky asked uneasily.

"Infinitely," replied Steel.

"If it had left the island, it would have started a war," Sapphire explained.

Corky uttered a low whistle.

Sarah looked doubtful. How could a diamond start a war, for pity's sake? Then again, how could it cause all the bad luck of the past week? It was all very puzzling.

Jake also found it hard to believe. *But they seem so sure of themselves*, he thought. *Was it possible they could see the future? Could it be that they were from the future?*

(Sometimes. But not always.) Sapphire's voice spoke within Jake's mind, causing him to jump with surprise.

"Hey, Jake, you all right?" asked Corky, puzzled by the pilot's curious behavior.

"Uh...yeah. Fine." *I hear voices in my head every day.*

(Really?) Steel's voice this time, dry and crisp.

(Who are you?) Jake felt silly addressing his question mentally, but at the same time wondered if they could hear him. They did.

(We're guardians.) Sapphire.

(Of what?)

(Time. We prevent historical chaos.) Steel.

(You're not human, then, are you?)

(Not in the sense you mean.) There was amusement in Sapphire's voice. (It depends on how you look at it.)

Sarah had the distinct impression she was missing something important as an awkward silence fell among the little group. She was also becoming irritated with how intently Jake was staring at the attractive blonde. "Excuse me," she said loudly, drawing everyone's attention to herself. "But will someone please tell me what we're supposed to do now?"

"Go home, of course," replied Sapphire.

(Immediately, if possible.) Steel no longer projected his thoughts to include Jake. (We're wasting time. Our job isn't finished yet.)

(I haven't forgotten. Don't be such a nudge.)

(A what?)

(Never mind.)

"Can we...I mean, can I go home again?" asked Corky. "Is it safe?"

"Perfectly," Sapphire assured him. "You were never the cause for your friends' misfortunes. It was engineered by the diamond."

"So Corky would blame himself and leave, taking it with him!" Sarah suddenly realized.

(Brilliant. Did it take her this long to figure that out?)

(Manners, Steel.) Aloud, Sapphire explained, "Christensen hid it among your personal effects when he realized we'd followed him here. He planned to recover it after he proved to us that he didn't have it."

"But it had other plans," said Steel. "It played on his paranoia and he panicked."

"That's why he fell," concluded Jake, fitting the last piece of a very complicated puzzle. "He was running away from you."

"From the image of us the diamond projected," Sapphire corrected.

"And it really could've started a war?" asked Corky.

"Really."

(Sapphire.) Steel was becoming impatient.

"I think it's time we return it to its owner," said Sapphire, glancing at Steel.

"We can radio them when we get to the bar," suggested Sarah.

"Thank you, but they'll have it back by then."

Before Sarah could question this statement, Sapphire and Steel exchanged glances and, turning, walked away. Sarah immediately lost sight of them as they stepped into the foliage. Had her eyes deceived her, or did they actually fade away as she watched? The only thing of which she was truly certain was that they were gone. Something in the atmosphere changed with their passing, like a light switch that has been turned off.

Corky didn't particularly care who they were or where they were going. The diamond was gone and he was going home; that was all that mattered.

Only Jake and Jack had an inkling as to the true nature of the mysterious couple. Jack couldn't say anything and Jake wouldn't. Ever. He still found it hard to believe everything that had transpired, much less try and convince someone else to believe him. Personally, he had no desire to see the interior of a sanitarium any time soon.

I don't know who or what you are, Jake thought as they disappeared, *but thank you.*

(You're welcome.) Sapphire's voice was faint, as though spoken from a great distance, and then it -- and they -- were gone.

Corky's homecoming party was an even bigger success than the birthday party more than a week before. It lasted into the wee hours of the morning, the participants celebrating both Corky's

return and the end of the "Boragora Curse".

Jake and Sarah spent a good portion of the evening trying to explain how they'd been able to find Corky so easily when fourteen search parties could not.

"I was black and blue by the time we finished searching the beach," said Willie. "Matilda was villing, but my anatomy was not."

At the mention of her name, the mule looked up from her bowl of champagne and brayed. It sounded very much like a laugh at the reverend's expense.

"It still does not explain what happened to the couple who accompanied you," said Louie.

"I think they mentioned something about returning an item to its rightful owner," Jake replied evasively, sipping his beer.

"I see." The magistrate's tone, however, clearly said that he did not. "Hopefully they will return soon. There is a matter of a hotel bill to be accounted for. As there was no diamond, I must assume that they are not jewel thieves looking for a hasty means of escaping the island." He scowled at Jake and Sarah, misinterpreting their expressions as they exchanged glances. "You did say that there was no diamond, did you not?"

"That's right," said Jake. "No diamond. Right, Corky?"

The mechanic sputtered, almost dumping the contents of his mug on Jack snoring at his feet. "Diamond?" he asked, avoiding Louie's gaze. "Gee, Jake. I don't remember anything about a diamond."

"You see?" said Sarah. "Corky wouldn't lie."

"Uh-uh," the mechanic replied as sincerely as he could.

In the background, someone cranked up the victrola. As the first notes of Slam Willis' "Joy-ride" began to play, an indignant voice cried, "Hey! Who switched the labels on Al Jolson?"

Corky grinned sheepishly.

Jake laughed, affectionately patting the mechanic on the shoulder. "Welcome home, buddy."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Sapphire & Steel* was a BBC production. Joanna Lumley played Sapphire and David McCallum was Steel. The Hope diamond currently resides in the Smithsonian Institute's Museum of Natural History, safely out of mischief for the time being...

WOULDN'T YOU THINK...?

...there'd be a lot of suspiciously Teutonic-looking little native kids running around Boragora?

...somebody who didn't happen to have a one-eyed dog would ask "But what would I do with a jeweled glass eye, even if I won/bought/stole it?"

...Our Side having spies like Sarah in the South Pacific at this time might help to explain Pearl Harbor?

...Kogi would just have Jake kidnapped and delivered to her boudoir and be done with it?