

Cocos Island continued

"You've got to be making that up."

"Oh yeah? We'll see about that," the mercenary challenged. "Guess who's coming to pick me up by helicopter, this afternoon?" He grinned in defiance, as Freebie turned a whiter shade beneath his sunburn.

Click.
"That's better," said Maria, as Sam's flashlight illuminated the solemn cavern. They carefully followed the twistings and turnings of the (now) subterranean creek until they were well out of sight of the opening in the mountainside. The creek no longer ran at a noticeable incline, but flowed sluggishly and noiselessly, its gentle ripples echoing off the cold, damp walls of the passage. This was offset by the steady drip, drip of mineral from the rocky roof.

"There's one thing that puzzles me," Sam broke the near-silence with his words. "This cave is going up, but we should be going down, if this joins the underwater grotto you found."

"Maybe this is the wrong cave," suggested Maria. "After all, we did leave the path to find it."

Their doubts were silenced quite soon, when the creek branched into two, one fork delving into the heart of the mountain. The two crossed the stream on conveniently placed stepping stones and began to descend alongside the opposite fork. soon the air

became thicker and harder to breathe, and the darkness enveloped the pair like black velvet.

"Isn't this romantic?" gushed Maria. "Us two alone, in the darkness, somewhere below Cocos Island?"

"You got anything in mind?" Sam insinuated.

"Just give me a little time, and you never know what might happen!" whispered Maria suggestively.

Before they could get it on, the sides of the cave began to glow, mysteriously. They gave off a cool blue phosphorescence which dimly lit up the passage, giving it a mystical appearance.

"Is this ever weird," remarked Maria.

"I think it's mood-enhancing," Sam returned. "It reminds me of a moonlit night in late August, on Waikiki Beach. There I was with a Polynesian girl named..."

"Never mind your fond reminiscences," interrupted Maria. "It looks like there's something significant around the next corner."

She said this because of the eery reflections which flickered against one wall of the cavern. They rounded the corner to find themselves at the edge of a perfectly circular, totally placid subterranean pond.

"It's beautiful!" said the awestruck Maria.

"Not only that, but this is the place," Sam added.

"You mean...?"

"Yes, the treasure is hid-

den here, according to the mercenary's map."

"But where could it be?" Maria queried. "We've come to the end of the path, and there's nothing here but this lake."

"Exactly," said Sam the Man Unusual. "What better place to conceal the treasure?"

The two removed their footwear and waded into the ice-cold water. It got deep very quickly, so Sam removed his shirt and dived into the drink, while Maria scanned the shallow edges of the pool. Moments later, Sam surfaced with the news:

"I found it."

"What?"

"A big, wooden chest at the bottom of thislake, in the very center

"Oh, is that all," Maria feigned nonchalance. "Did you open it up?"

"All in due time. As a matter of fact, it'll take at least a crowbar to open the chest."

"Well, couldn't we haul it out of the pond and open it up at our boat?"

"Not a chance. That chest weighs a ton and a half, if an ounce. The only feasible way to remove the treasure is piece by piece of eight."

"Great. This could take a week," groaned Maria.

"Don't worry, it's probably worth a fortune. Unless..."

"Unless it's a dud or a decoy," Sam concluded.

"Fantastic! Here we are after all this fuss, and the treasure might be worthless!" Maria was on the point of hysteria.

"It's just an idea," admitted Sagacious Sam. "But don't forget, there are two other treasures."

"That's right," Maria brightened up, although it was hard to see in the grotto. "Besides, I did see some gold coins at the bottom of Wafer Bay."

"Let's hope they weren't fool's gold!" Sam commented slyly.

Maria grimaced. "We'd better head back," she suggested. "You never know what that Ingula guy might be doing to Freebie."

They started to retrace their steps, but suddenly felt a slight tremor.

"What was that?" asked Maria.

"That's what they refer to, in New Brunswick, as an

earthquake," replied Sam. "It's nothing to worry about."

They continued on their way unhindered until a rumbling sound became audible in the rock around them. It built up to a dull roar, and then all chaos broke loose. A giant crack formed in the ceiling, and rocks began to crash down around the pair. Maria crouched down and covered her head, while Sam braced himself against the wall. Then the path beneath them collapsed, and the two tumbled into the stream. They struggled to crawl out, but the newly-energized current swept them away...

Meanwhile, off in a Paris bistro, Louise D'Aupres was discussing her budding modelling career with her close friend Jacques. As they sipped their pink champagne...oops! Wrong story!

From above the mountainside clearing came the whirr of a helicopter. Freebie looked up in apprehension and saw it appear through the tops of the trees.

"Is that your friends?" he questioned Igula.

"No, it's the mail service delivering my birthday presents!"

Freebie grimaced. Slowly but inevitably, the 'copter lowered into the clearing. It landed twenty feet from where the mercenary was tied up, and briefly blew the vegetation in all directions. Then the motor stopped and two men stepped out. Both wore camouflaged army fatigues, and dark sunglasses. One had a stylized mustachio and profile that Freebie immediately recognized as belonging to none other than Carlos.

"Uh oh, this is it," thought Freebie as he braced himself for the onslaught.

The two men looked surprised to see him, and Igula tied to a tree, but only hesitated a moment before moving in on Freebie. With a violent flourish, Freebie drew out the machete and threatened to cut the throat of the captive mercenary. This surprisingly bold gesture held back the new arrivals momentarily, and a tense paralysis settled on the four figures. Then Igula's hands shot out with lightning speed to snatch the machete from Freebie's hand. The tables were turned, and Freebie was left

defenceless at the hands of the mercenaries. Just as Igula was about to slice his throat, Carlos stopped him with the words, "Leave the kid alone, Cal. What can he do to us?"

The mercenary complied, and climbed into the helicopter with his two cohorts. As Freebie stood helplessly by, they took off. A feeling of failure and guilt mixed with anger at both himself and the terrorists filled Freebie. Then he got an idea.

"I'll show those creeps," he resolved. "So they think I'm harmless, do they? We'll see about that."

So muttering, he left the clearing at a trot and headed for the boat. When he reached it, he turned on the short-wave transmitter, and sent out a message to any ships at sea that could receive it: "S.O.S. Emergency call. Have sighted Carlos and two other mercenaries on Cocos Island. They are now flying by helicopter to Panama, where they plan to take over the canal, with the help of other guerrillas."

It wasn't long before he got a reply from a US Navy Cruiser, which was positioned near the Costa Rican mainland. They signalled back: "What kind of bull is this? You got some proof, kid?"

Freebie was taken aback, but eventually managed to convince the authorities of his verity: They agreed to contact the government in Panama, and inform them of the situation. With this task out of the way, Freebie had nothing to do but wait for his friends to return. He had a long wait ahead of him...

Finally, he heard someone calling to him from the beach. He tensed up and peered through the porthole, half-expecting to see the merciless mercenaries once more. Instead, there were Sam and Maria, intact although totally soaked. Eager to share his good news, Freebie rushed to the deck.

"Hello, sailor," greeted Sam. "Do you think you have space on your barquentine for two weary travellers?"

"Let me guess," answered Sam. "You were over-

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