

[Back To Index](#)

How Hard Can It Be?
By Martie O'Brien

This story was written just for fun and is not an attempt to make money or infringe on any copyrights or trademarks. Only the original ideas contained within the works on this nonprofit web site are the property of their authors, and please do not copy or link these stories to any other website or archive or print without permission of the author.

* * * * *

"How bad is it, then, to be misunderstood?" -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The African mainland behind him had long ago receded into hazy obscurity; now the rich, red glow of sunset painted the western sky. Ahead, over the restless swells of the Mozambique Channel, Indiana Jones could make out the irregular, sprawling outline of Madagascar's western coast, bathed in warm, oblique light.

Tall, casually dressed, the professor of archaeology leaned against the rail of the compact steamer making her way through the channel currents. A dusk wind feathered his sun-seasoned brown hair, and he narrowed his eyes against the fitful gusts.

They pulled nearer the coastline. Vague granite shapes became tall pillars and slabs of gold rising behind the white-on-white tumble of Juolalo.

Seaport city. Jones breathed in cool, salty lungful, wondering if the wind was truly bringing him that peculiar combination of fish and spice from the looming island, or if his imagination was conjuring it up in the service of his already exhilarated mood. He smiled slightly, an off-center tribute and a rueful nod to his seemingly unquenchable thirst for those waters only to be found in the exotic and far-flung wells of adventure. Presently he turned and headed for his cabin.

An atonal azan floated over the dockside as a distant muezzin called the faithful to prayer. Toting a suitcase in one hand and a battered leather jacket and carry-all in the other, Indiana looked hopefully for the

mosque. Though in and out of foreign cultures for most of his adult life, the professor had never lost a certain Midwestern delight in customs not native to the simple agraria surrounding his usual stateside academic bastion.

On the several occasions he'd visited New York, Jones had found the native customs diverting as well. He liked to tell himself he was full of scientific curiosity, but the truth was the capable, unpretentious fellow with a wry smile and the incongruous bullwhip at his belt was carrying on a sometimes tempestuous, but always persistent, love affair with life.

Standing at the foot of the steamer's gangplank amid a bustle of cargo business, Indiana looked around for his ride. The cable had been specific about that: *"Transport will await you. Stop."* He ran over the rest of the message in his mind, the summons from a long-time friend and dates and times of arrival, and found himself no more enlightened than he'd been upon receiving it back in Connecticut. But he was decidedly more excited now that he stood on Madagascar soil and watched a Rolls-Royce Phaeton pull up to a soundless halt across the wharf like a sleek panther.

The driver remained behind the wheel while his companion stepped out and around and approached Indiana. To the archaeologist's eye, both appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent.

"Doctor Jones?" the Arab inquired. He wore a simple dark business suit and the aroma of Bay Rum and Havana cigars.

"I'm Jones," the professor replied. "I expect you're from Souk Ashad."

Without receiving any reply other than the man's lowered head, which he took to be an affirmation, Indiana was ushered toward the waiting Rolls. He was about to step into the open rear door and lose himself for a moment in the elegant extravagance of the back seat when a clamor broke out behind him.

He heard hooting horns, tires screeching and...gunfire? Jones turned at the sound. Through the veil of seaside twilight, he saw what looked to be a car identical to the one beside him racing toward them down the dock. It swerved to avoid a fortunately nimble seaman, causing the two apparent gunmen balanced upon the running boards to sway precariously. The horn blared.

"What the hell?" Indiana ducked instinctively. "What's going on?" he asked the Arab, who was making himself scarce behind the Rolls' open rear door.

The second limousine bore down on them. Sailors and longshoremen were scattering. Indy was determined to get an answer out of his host's retainer. He leaned around the car door. "Hey! I said what's going on..." he began, and found himself nose to bore with one of the biggest handguns he'd ever seen, surely made even larger by its proximity to his face.

"Get in the car, Doctor Jones. NOW!" the Arab demanded.

Indiana thought about it for a second. He greatly disliked the notion that someone was shooting at him from the oncoming car but he also objected strenuously to having a gun stuck in his face as a means of persuasion. Strenuous objection won out.

He ducked back on his side of the rear door and at the same time slammed it into the Arab on the other side. The gun went off, the bullet plowing into the planking beside Jones's left foot.

Indiana jerked the door again and connected with the gunman, who swore and staggered just as the driver leapt out and drew down on the car which was almost on them.

More concerned with expressing anger than with heroics, the professor swung around the rear door and landed a right to his assailant's jaw and a left to his mid-section. The man let out a deflated sound and lurched backward into the driver, but his gun was up in an instant and Jones felt vulnerability make an icy circle around his gut. He put his head down and waded in, hearing the driver's shot split the air over his head as he grabbed his opponent's right wrist.

They grappled for a tight, sweating moment, then, with the well-bred shriek of very expensive brakes, the other limousine was beside them and gunfire became an explosive cacophony.

Amid the crack and whine of ricochet, Indiana heard someone hailing him. "Monsieur Professor!" cried a new voice, "Hold on for the life of you!" And suddenly he was lifted off his feet by a massive force he only later recognized as an arm, and velocity enveloped him.

Jones grabbed for something solid, hit a man's lapel and tried again, this time landing a groping hand on what felt like a car door handle. He steadied his footing on the running board and let the wind whip his hair out of his face.

Somehow, he was hanging onto the side of the speeding mystery car which had scattered dock workers in its charging passage. A very large man

stood behind him, at the moment engaged in firing behind them at the swiftly receding Rolls, and laughing uproariously.

"We blow them off with style, Monsieur Professor!" he bellowed. The crack of answering fire grew fainter. "I put holes in their Michelins, eh?" And he laughed again.

Indiana, who hadn't had any notion what was going on since he'd stepped off the boat, tried one more time. "Who are you?" he hollered over the wind. "Where are we going?"

"To my villa," came a voice from inside the car.

Jones braced himself on the speeding limo and peered inside. "Souk Ashad?" he asked, relieved but still quite confused.

"The same." The driver grinned at him and the professor recognized the amused countenance of his old friend -- son of a French industrialist and an Arab princess, international playboy and brilliant scholar, Souk Ashad de Tourneville.

"Quite a taxi service you have here," Jones observed. "Would it be too much to ask to ride inside?"

"Only the best for my friend, Indiana; and please, just a little further for safety's sake," de Tourneville assured him. Indy wondered whose safety his host was thinking of as they sped through narrow streets and he got flashes of onlookers, astonished at the sight of two Frenchmen and a disheveled American clinging to a careening Rolls.

Jones glanced at the hood ornament, cleaving a path down the center of the road. "Souk Ashad," he yelled, "what do you mean, 'only the best for your friend'? This isn't even a Rolls, it's a Bentley!"

"Rolls are too ostentatious," de Tourneville shook his head, whipping the wheel around to avoid a hand-drawn cart. He smiled. "By the way, Indy, welcome to Madagascar!"

"Thanks a lot," the Professor responded dryly. He hung on, deciding with conviction that there had better be a damn good reason for all these theatrics or, friend or no, he was taking the next boat back to Nacala.

* * *

"It is all because of the Sultan of Madagascar," his host sighed.

From the terrace of Souk Ashad de Tourneville's home high above the city, Indiana looked down on the twinkle of lights hemming the sea. Far in the west, where the last strip of mauve had given way to darkness, he thought he could see a faint shimmer that spoke to him of Mozambique.

"There is no Sultan of Madagascar, Souk," he replied with a trace of annoyance. His questions going unanswered even after he had been permitted inside the car, the professor had been placated with the promise of all the explanations he could desire after dinner. "We will talk over brandy," de Tourneville had assured him.

Now he had a moderate amount of excellent French cuisine inside him and a generous brandy snifter in his hand, yet Souk Ashad was still speaking in riddles.

"Madagascar's been a French protectorate for years; or hadn't you noticed?" Jones turned from the view and stepped back into the drawing room's warm glow.

"If you will sit down and stop pacing, Indiana, I can explain everything."

"Like who those two were who tried to grab me at the pier?" Indy circled before the fire and rather reluctantly took a chair opposite his host.

De Tourneville eyed him for a moment, and Indy was alarmed to see that the engaging face he had always associated with the older man was now drawn and overlaid with concern. "I told you, it is the work of the Sultan of Madagascar," and before Jones could protest, he continued, "There is a Sultan, though he had styled himself thus; it is not an hereditary title. Powerful, wealthy. His name is Zhaddi Ben-Iram, and he is a great force among not only the Arab gentry, but the native population as well. And I do not doubt that he has French officials in his pay."

"Sounds like a typical American gangster," Jones remarked.

"An apt analogy, my friend. He buys what he can and steals what he cannot buy."

"But what business does he have with me?" the archaeologist objected.

"It is, as the gangsters say, Indy, 'nothing personal.' You are associated with me, and that is enough."

"Souk, a guy like that doesn't give up so easily. If I'm a target," and Indy felt an uncomfortable certainty that he was, "they'll be back."

"My estate is well guarded. Not to worry," de Tourneville assured his guest.

"All right. But what -- you're in some kind of trouble?" Indiana leaned forward and frowned behind his round spectacles. "You're playing this awfully close to the vest, Souk. We've been friends for years; don't you think you better start getting specific?"

The French-Arab sighed again. "The Sultan stole a great treasure from me," he said.

Jones settled back in his chair feeling obscurely that the conversation was at last taking a tack he could follow. Treasure. That was something he could definitely deal with.

"He keeps it locked away in his great palace at Atrivo in the mountains to the east, and he knows I will use any methods available to me to regain it."

"Such as your old archaeologist buddy? Souk, I'm an antiquary, not a soldier of fortune!"

"But you are my friend, and you are crafty, brave and clever..."

"Wait! Wait!" Indiana waved the older man to silence. "Over the years maybe I've stretched myself sometimes, going after some relic, but you're talking Doc Savage! Besides, what could Ben-Iram have stolen that means this much? I never even knew you were a collector."

"It is not an artifact, Indiana."

"Then what?"

"It is my daughter, Anouk."

"Oh." Indy shook his head. "I'm really sorry. I didn't even know you had a daughter, but I don't know how I can help you. It's a job for the authorities. Surely kidnapping is..." The professor ran quickly out of steam as he recalled with what insouciant disregard for the law two of Ben-Iram's men had tried to nab him almost before he had set foot in Juolala.

"Yes," de Tourneville nodded mournfully, "you see how it is. Ben-Iram's agents must have got a look at my cablegram to you -- the man has spies everywhere -- and were then dispatched to waylay you. Does that not offend you, Indiana?"

"Yeah, Souk, it does, but I still don't see how my getting mad will help get your daughter back."

"She is so beautiful, my little Anouk." De Tourneville looked at his hands.

There was a momentary silence and Indiana went back to his brandy. Suddenly, something landed in his lap. He started, setting down the snifter with a ring of crystal. There, perched on his left thigh and looking up with a huge-eyed stare, was something Indiana thought belonged more properly in a painting by Bosch or Breugel. It had large ears and tiny, three-fingered hands with elaborately honed claws. It also had a preposterous, bushy tail.

Jones cleared his throat. "What," he said carefully, "is that?"

"How inconsiderate of me, Indy! I did not know the beast was nearby or I could have spared you the shock. This is Anouk's pet aye-aye."

The thing continued to crouch on Jones's leg and stare at him imploringly.

"She misses her mistress, the poor creature," Ashad said quietly.

"Souk," Indy warned, "don't try to work on my emotions; you know I don't have any."

The aye-aye was crawling slowly, step by tiny step up Indiana's stomach. When it reached the top of his trousers, it carefully unfastened the bottom button of his shirt and crept inside where it curled up.

"Souk..."

"It misses Anouk terribly."

"No, Souk."

"She is only eighteen, Indiana."

"Damn it! I'm not a commando, I'm a scientist!"

"I'll pay whatever you ask."

"There's no widow to inherit, Souk."

"At Ben-Iram's palace in Atrivo, he keeps the Eye of Heaven."

"Huh?" Jones wasn't sure he'd heard right.

"The Eye of Heaven, my archaeologist friend. Only the largest sapphire ever discovered, said to have been dropped by the gods and..."

"Souk, are you sure?"

"I have seen it with my own eyes, Indiana."

The professor was silent for a long moment while mental gears shifted. Wherefore a certain self-effacing streak prevented him from imagining himself to be a rescuer of damsels in distress, now he felt the visceral surge of archaeological pleasure. Whatever gleeful demon rode the shoulders of men whose consuming passion was their work was getting a run for his money.

"What is it, Indy? You will go for a jewel but not for a girl?"

"Souk, no...I mean, well, it's just that..."

"Have another brandy, Indiana."

The professor swallowed gratefully, then remained head back staring at the ceiling. "The Eye of Heaven," he said at last. "The government of Turkey never found out what became of it when it disappeared from the National Museum at Constantinople, did they." It was a statement, not a question.

"The man who returned it from the thieving Ben-Iram would be a most celebrated man," Souk Ashad said casually.

There it was, the kick. An unassuming college professor who could not envision himself in any of the popular heroic molds suddenly turned tiger when a significant enough bauble was dangled before his eyes. *Kind of a bastard, aren't you, Jones?* he thought.

The aye-aye shifted and snuggled more comfortably against his chest. Still, a bastard with a purpose is better than a bastard with none.

He returned his glance from the ceiling to meet Ashad's quizzical expression, took a breath and let it out slowly. "I'll go for it, uh...her, Souk," he said at last.

"Somehow I knew you would not disappoint me, Indiana. I think sometimes you are far too modest where your skills are concerned, no?"

It was an out, and Indy accepted it gratefully. "Maybe so, Souk, maybe so," he replied.

"Would you like to rest now?" de Tourneville asked. "It has been a tiring day, I would imagine. The servants have put your things in our finest guest room -- it overlooks the sea below and the cliffs above." He rose and lead the way into the hall.

"My things? I figured they were still in the back seat of the Rolls."

"Mon dieu, no, my friend!" His host was beginning to look and sound his old self again. "Henri covered Gervais and Gervais made sure your luggage was with us before he grabbed you!"

"Things do seem to be the priority around here, not people," Indy muttered as he followed de Tourneville across the room and down the long, echoing hallway. Inside his shirt the aye-aye wriggled happily.

* * *

Indiana held the ornately framed photograph and admired its subject. "She's lovely, Souk," he said, "how did you ever manage it?"

"Her mother was a great beauty. Which can sometimes be a curse rather than a blessing."

"I suppose he'll keep her in the seraglio...Hey!" This last to the aye-aye, who had scrambled out of his shirt and jumped on top of his head.

Indy set the photograph down on the glass table from which he and Souk Ashad had taken an excellent al fresco breakfast. Patiently, he plucked the little creature out of his hair and put it down next to his coffee cup. He handed it a grape, which it immediately popped inside his shirt, as though storing things for the winter, then followed it.

"She was to become a concubine, Indy."

"You said you had a map."

"Ah, yes, of course." Souk Ashad produced a small piece of worn paper from his breast pocket. "It was made long ago, before Ben-Iram's time," he explained. "You can see the arrangement of the rooms, with the seraglio amidmost."

Jones hooked his spectacles and peered closely at the maze-like design. "What's that pool, Souk?" he asked.

"I believe the palace has many of them. Perhaps the early engineers contrived water courses...see, here," he pointed. "There appears to be a cistern in several chambers. What do you make of it, Indy?"

The archaeologist stared at the map a moment longer. "I'm not sure, Souk, maybe nothing. How about the Eye of Heaven?"

"In the throne room...and elsewhere," de Tourneville looked uncomfortable.

"Go on, you said you'd seen it, Souk; where?"

His host spoke reluctantly. "I was once the Sultan's guest, you see, before this matter of my daughter came between us. I saw the Eye when we dined together. He wears it as a gem upon his forehead, so," he demonstrated.

"Oh, great." Jones smiled sarcastically. He looked up at Ashad from beneath lowered brows. "This just gets better and better and better." Removing the aye-aye from his shirt, he held it contemplatively. "Want to come along?" he asked it. The huge lemur eyes stared into his. "You can be comic relief."

"You're doing a fine thing, Indy," the older man said.

Jones tucked the aye-aye back in, then rose and went to the eastern wall of the terrace. Squinting against the morning sun, he looked up at the lowering cliffs, now black in shadow. An offshore breeze plucked at his rolled shirt, sleeves and stirred his hair. It was a beautiful morning. Indy paced back to the breakfast table where de Tourneville waited, watching.

"I took an 'emergency' leave of absence from my college, you know," he told Anouk's father. "If I don't come out of this one looking awful good, I can probably kiss my teaching career goodbye."

"I have every faith in you," his host said.

Indy grunted noncommittally and poked the small lump in the front of his shirt. "What do they call you, huh?"

"A joke of Anouk's, Indiana. She is an aye-aye, so my daughter calls her 'Affirmative.' Is that not propitious?"

Jones eyed the cliffs again and nodded absently. "Propitious. I have a feeling I'll need all the luck I can get my hands on," he muttered.

* * *

It felt good to be on the road again. Though his destination was full of danger, and the route fraught with as yet unknown peril, Indiana felt the buoyancy and lightness of spirit that always seemed to accompany the beginning of a venture.

His old fedora jammed comfortably over his forehead, whip coiled at his side and carry-all slung across his shoulder, Jones felt wrapped in familiarity and, therefore, optimistic.

The day was sunny and full of breezes and bird cries, and the road beside him empty and quiet as it made its way into the hill country ahead. He'd recovered his revolver from the suitcase and it now hung comfortably upon his right hip. The few oddments his carry-all would not hold were stowed in a hiker's pack and tossed in the bed of de Tourneville's Landrover. The vehicle itself gave him as much assurance as anything with its indomitable nature.

All in all, the archaeologist decided, things could be worse.

"Monsieur need do nothing but follow the highway and it will bring him to Atrivo," said Gervais, the big Frenchman who'd plucked him from the clutches of Ben-Iram's men only two nights before.

Indy nodded, looking at the dusty track and wondering what sort of European tact made Gervais refer to it as a highway.

A furry squirming inside his shirt front reminded him of his fellow traveler and he smiled. "Sleep while you can, kid," he told the aye-aye. The creature appeared to have adopted him. She stored fruit and berries in his shirt, and this morning he'd found glass beads in his boots.

"Gervais, tell Souk Ashad he'll be hearing from me," Jones said clasping the big man's hand. "I'll be back with the girl."

"Of a certainty, Monsieur, good luck to you."

Indiana allowed Gervais to step down from the open-top Rover, then he put it in gear. "So long," he called.

Gervais held up a hand in farewell salute and Indy set off into the morning up the Atrivo road.

By noon the professor had shed his leather jacket. The day was hot and muggy, morning's sea breeze lightness having fallen into a gravid

afternoon, and the road wound ever higher into the overgrown hills as if seeking a way to the sun.

All around him life flourished, encroaching on the road by way of palms whose massive boles jutted out into the narrow way and crowds of leafy shrubs and creepers. Insects of all sorts -- flying, crawling and leaping -- appeared to make their home in the Landrover's path.

Indiana swerved to avoid a swaying salamander, then speeded up to run over a particularly unpleasant-looking snake, wincing as he did so.

Occasionally, he passed sparingly shod country folk from the hillside villages whom he supposed were, like him, on their way to Atrivo. They glanced with wary interest at what they assumed was a European behind the wheel of a truck that kicked up far more dust in its wake than their burden-bearing livestock.

Jones continued to wonder just how far-flung the spy network was and how clever were the spies of the Sultan of Madagascar. De Tourneville had sent him on the back road rather than the better traveled thoroughfare which took to the highlands and passed through Atrivo before turning south for Tanarive and the resort city of Antsirabe.

Were they likely to know which road he'd taken? Or what sort of nebulous plan he'd concocted to relieve their boss of one girl and one blue stone? Jones's jaw tightened and he shrugged inwardly. By attempting an ambush at the docks, they'd made him part of their feud with de Tourneville. Setting friendship and justice aside, Indy felt strongly that someone in Atrivo owed him, and he meant to collect.

He thought about the main road. Then he considered the jarring Landrover ride which felt as if it were putting his bones out of alignment and decided that the latter made him feel just a bit predatory. That feeling, and its attendant righteous satisfaction, carried him over the last few miles of his journey.

* * *

As late afternoon light began to paint long shadows down the road and deepen darkness in the precipitous river valley winding on its northern verge, Indiana came to the first outlying settlements of Atrivo. He could see the palace walls glowing with sunset light and jutting out of a tangle of trees not a mile further on.

Here he pulled the Landrover well off the road and, in the dense growth, he camouflaged it as best he could. Then he hoisted the hiker's pack to

his shoulders and, plunging into the shadows on the other side of the road, he set off up the valley in search of the old watercourse and a secret way into Zhaddi Ben-Iram's stronghold.

It was close on midnight before he found what he wanted, but a diligent search at last rewarded him with the overgrown, crumbling remains of stonework on the steep hillside below the palace's western walls.

Even as he listened for the sound of moving water, his archaeologist's eye was appraising the brick and mortar of another day, dating it, estimating the probable origins of its builders, and filing the information away for future reference. Perhaps a paper on the significance of Arab influence in the... There it was, the unmistakable sound of water. Jones followed it, moving carefully in the dense underbrush with only the moon to light his way.

A few paces along the hillside brought him to the ancient aqueduct, a four-foot-high passageway bored into the hill and, as far as he could tell, under Ben-Iram's fortress.

Its floor ran several inches deep with seepage which passed out of the masonried mouth and down a deeply cut channel to find the river in the valley below. Indiana lit a match and had a look inside, noting with apprehensive interest the crumbling stonework slick with moss. Still, he reasoned, it had stood for centuries and would surely bear the intrusion of one wayfarer after the magnitudes of water it had once carried.

He unslung the knapsack, setting it to one side, and, going by feel, he found what he wanted -- a small carbide lantern and a knife with an eight-inch blade sheathed in leather. Jones fixed the knife to the back of his belt and lighted his lantern. *Snakes do not like damp places,* he told himself firmly and, bending low, stepped into the dripping tunnel.

Snakes did not, perhaps, care for the moisture but many other creatures apparently did. He allowed the salamanders and newts to scramble aside unmolested, though he could not refrain from stepping with a satisfying and watery crunch on the enormous cockroaches which attempted to hustle out of the way of his light.

Affirmative was by this time awake and ready for whatever fun and games her kind enjoyed, so Indy allowed her to scamper about in the shadows behind him and ahead, hopping hungrily on the smaller insects.

The tunnel continued straight on into the hillside. Here and there it branched off into darkness, but Indy followed his instincts at each juncture, as well as the steady flow of seepage. Around him the stonework

became more finished as he made his way beneath the palace proper. Here, Jones supposed, maintenance had at one time been fairly routine. The mortar was of a more recent vintage than that at the tunnel mouth; the bricks were in better repair. The tunnel began to slope sharply upward and he looked ahead eagerly as the shadows retreated before his passage.

Perhaps fifty yards further along, Jones found the shallow stairs. He knelt, for the moment oblivious to the damp, and shone his lantern upward. There, rimmed with dripping, mossy growths, was the circular outline of a cistern lid. From its edges water drained in a steady trickle, feeding the channel that ran through the tunnel.

Indiana collected the aye-aye and tucked her in his shirt, looking up wondering, calculating how much water was above him and exactly where in the Sultan's palace he would emerge. *Not that it matters a great deal,* he thought, drawing the knife and cleaning the moss and slime from the lid's edges. No one was likely to be in the kitchen or wherever at 3:00 a.m.

The water began to flow faster as the vegetation was removed from the seal that held it in. He was getting wet and he wished it were warmer in the tunnel. Presently, Indy sheathed the knife. Water splattered all around him. He crouched on the low step, placed his hands flat against the lid and pushed. Nothing happened. Jones tried again and was rewarded with a bit more water splashing on his shoulders, but nothing else.

A tenacious look grew in his face. Shifting around in the cramped tunnel, he put his back on the broad, shallow step and his feet to the cistern lid. Knees flexed, he slitted his eyes, clenched his teeth and pushed again.

"Oh,sh..." was all he had time for before the descending wall of water hit him. The lid grated, flipping perpendicular to the floor level and a deluge poured down into the tunnel. Instinctively protecting the little aye-aye at his middle, Indiana struggled to right himself against the flood. He managed to fling a groping hand over the circular opening and hang on in a somewhat upright position while the inundation rushed past him and flooded the old tunnel.

Strike one option for getting out again, Jones thought grimly. He held his breath, fought to push himself up the steps against the liquid weight. Just a little further. He hit the top step and surged upward, battling the ferocious suction, found his footing and, at last, broke the surface. He staggered in the eddying currents that swirled around his hips and gasped gratefully for several much-needed breaths as the thoroughly soaked aye-aye scampered up out of his shirt and onto his hatless head.

Indy swiped water from his eyes, looked around him, and gasped again. The God of Archaeology had decided to smile on Indiana Jones, or else a steamy adolescent fantasy has just become reality. He'd come up for air in the seraglio. And by the look of things, 3:00 a.m., was not exactly down-time in the harem.

The sudden "slurp" as Jones kicked the cistern lid open, and the resultant emptying of their bathing pool, had roused the ladies from the nocturnal activities common to a closed society of young, healthy women who do not enjoy the favor of young, healthy men.

As these unfortunate victims of a Sultan whose eyes were always bigger than his stomach registered a tall, well-favored fellow rise wetly from their pool, the dropping of dildoes was a cacophony, and the collective moan of ecstasy fairly shook the walls.

This time he managed to say it. "Holy shit!" commented Indiana as he surveyed veritable acreage of smooth, nicely rounded flesh. For a moment he was so bemused by the quantity of undraped pulchritude, he forgot to look for Anouk; he just looked.

One by one, the scantily- and un-clad girls began to converge on the pool, eyes wide and smiling mouths full of hungry teeth. Jones found it at once erotic and rather threatening. He started to back up a step, then remembered they were behind him, too.

Uh, ladies..." he began.

"Hey!" came a female voice from out of the shadows to one side of the luxuriously appointed room, "you look like the punchline to that old joke: 'Help me, doc! How do I get this thing off my feet?'"

Jones was suddenly aware of the aye-aye crouching on his head and he ducked, gingerly plucking it out of his dripping hair.

"Honey," he called in the direction of the derisive voice, "since you speak English and I don't speak Arabic, why don't you tell the welcome committee that I have a headache tonight?"

"And what makes you think I speak Arabic?" The voice was given form when a woman emerged into the torchlight. Her blonde hair in a short bob, slender and nearly as tall as Jones himself, she stepped forward, and to his relief, she was close to being dressed.

The bravest of the harem had already climbed into the emptying pool and were wading toward him, cooing like doves, perfect breasts swaying

hypnotically. Indiana wet his lips, fighting a ripening urge to sample just a few of the Sultan's fruits before he got down to business, but with some regret, he decided dealing with the English-speaking woman should take precedence over carnal indulgence. Though she was flippant, she appeared at least logical and he was, after all, here to perform several tasks, both of which required the employment of logic. Besides, he thought, she'd probably laugh herself silly watching him engage in a turbulent menage a...

Jones ordered himself to relax, and after a moment he and his body came to a grudging truce. That shaky truce almost dissolved when several of the concubines attempted to coax him out of the pool by a delightfully unique method, but Indy remained unyielding. "Look, honey," he addressed the tall woman, "I need some information; I'm looking for someone. How about a deal?"

She came to the pool's edge, towering over the darker, well-rounded Arab girls. "What have you got to offer?" she asked, smiling lazily at his discomfiture.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you to keep your hands to yourself?" he admonished one of the concubines, who had a disarmingly direct approach. Then, to the woman, "Name it, honey. I can get you out of here, for one thing." *Sheer bravado,* he thought. At the moment he wasn't sure he could get himself out.

The woman seemed to think about it, her light eyes sparkling in the flickering illumination. "Tell you what," she said at last, "we'll talk it over, all right?"

"Sure," Indy readily agreed, "just get the Ladies' Aid off me."

His rescuer nodded. She clapped her hands and spoke in rapid Arabic. At once, the harem cried out in obvious disappointment; their pretty faces fell and they went disconsolately back to their cushions and couches to pout.

The blonde busied herself covering the tunnel opening. Then she turned on an inflow system and, from several gaping lion's mouths, water began to refill the pool.

Jones walked over to her in patent stupefaction. "What in hell did you tell them?" he wanted to know.

She took his arm and led him toward the semi-private alcove from which she'd come. "I told them you'd got in here by mistake," she explained. "I said you were a catamite for the sultan's other bagnio." Jones gave her a

withering look, which she met with laughter. "I could, of course, have said you were a eunuch."

"Thanks for small favors," the archaeologist muttered.

They halted before the curtained doorway and she gave him an enigmatic smile. "You'll thank me, all right," she said and drew back the curtain.

There, curled up on a couch in a richly embroidered dressing gown, was the darkly beautiful Anouk. "Professor Jones! It is you!" she exclaimed in accented English.

"Anouk! But how do you know who I am?"

"My father has told me about you. I knew...I HOPED, that when the evil Sultan abducted me, he would send you to find me." She looked at him with frank hero-worship in her eyes. "My father says you are the bravest man in the world."

"He just faced down an army of sex-starved concubines; you bet he's brave, Anouk," the blond put in with good-natured sarcasm.

Jones turned his attention to the taller one for a moment. "What's your name, anyway?" he asked.

"Me? I'm Ricky Kinsella. And what's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this, right?"

"That's not exactly what I was going to say," Indy replied.

"Well, come on in and listen anyway, Professor, because Anouk has filled my ears up with bunk about you ever since we landed in this elegant dump." She led the way in and dropped onto an overstuffed pillow.

Jones pulled the curtain and sat down next to de Tourneville's daughter on the silk-covered sleeping surface, whereupon Affirmative emerged from his shirt and, with many a little cry of bliss, scampered over to Anouk. There followed a tearful, ecstatic reunion.

"As I was saying, Jones," Ricky continued, "I'm a writer. I was getting local color for a book here in Atrivo when Ben-Iram's men snatched me. Seems there's a dearth of tall blondes around just now. That was a month ago. A not very nice month." She looked up at him, her expression eloquent of rebellious anger, and Indy imagined no one had enjoyed her longitudinal delights without a scrap.

"A couple of weeks ago they brought Anouk in, and at least I had someone to talk to. We've sort of kept each other company, if you know what I mean," she said, cocking her head in the direction of the harem. "They've been here longer. They've got a perverse outlook," she shrugged.

"You mean you and Anouk...?"

Jones wasn't exactly shocked; he was, after all, a scientist, but he was obscurely relieved when Ricky snapped, "Of course not! I mean, we DON'T -- but I let those crazies out there think we do, and so they leave Anouk alone. I can be intimidating when I want to be," she grinned.

"Oh, I'll bet you can," Jones agreed.

"So. Since you found a way in, reckon you can find us a way out?"

"I'm working on it. But there's one other thing before we take off."

"Such as?"

"You've seen the Sultan?"

"Have I seen the Sultan?" Ricky mimicked. "Jones, I've seen the Sultan in more ways than you could imagine."

"Ever seen him with his clothes ON?" Jones persisted.

"Yeah, yeah. So what?"

"Recall a blue stone, a sapphire he wears like a diadem?"

Ricky thought a minute. "Yeah, I've seen it. Big, very bright. I always figured it for a fake."

"Nope, honey, it's the real thing. And we need that before we go."

"Anouk, I thought you said this guy was an archaeologist. He sounds like a second-story man to me."

"Professor Jones is an eminent archaeologist," Anouk insisted. "He is only mildly eccentric."

Indy grinned crookedly at the girl who cradled her pet, then returned to Ricky. "See? A testimonial," he told her.

"Well, if you're going to..." the blond stopped suddenly. "Omigod," she whispered, glancing toward one of the high eastern windows. "Quick, Jones! Under the bed!"

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's almost dawn, that's what it is!" Ricky snapped. "LaRoche will be here any second!"

"Who's LaRoche?" Indy was already down on his knees trying to angle his six-foot-plus beneath the decorative but not very commodious bed.

"You do not want to meet him," Anouk whispered. "He is the keeper of the seraglio -- a huge and brutal man."

Across the room a door slammed open and a booming voice called out in broken Arabic.

"He wants to know who left the water running all night," said Anouk. She and Ricky hurriedly draped the silk coverings around Indy as well as they could, then they sprawled in attitudes of torpor.

Unable to contain his curiosity, Jones peeked from beneath the bed. Coming their way, stepping over naked bodies, was the biggest man he'd ever seen. Not fat, just big, from his shiny bald head and great shrub of a moustache to his huge boots. He was dressed as a horseman and he carried a crop with which he occasionally prodded one of the concubines.

His question about water went unanswered, and Indy guessed Ricky was just as intimidating to the other girls as she'd boasted. He shifted uncomfortably, and out of the corner of his eye saw something that made him more than uncomfortable. Somehow his whip had come uncoiled and at least half of it, now that Anouk and Ricky had moved away from the bed, was exposed on the chamber floor. Indy started to inch it back to him under the silk spread, then halted.

"Englishers!" LaRoche growled, and Indy could have reached out and touched the man's boots. "You make the water, huh?"

Ricky yawned. "No, LaRoche, YOU make the water. Go piss on a wall."

"Huh?"

The blonde said something in Arabic which seemed to mollify him. He turned, then stopped, laughing and Indy went cold all over as he saw a giant hand reach for the exposed portion of his whip.

"You two make some fun, eh?" he chortled. "Don't make no scar or you get big troubles." LaRoche grasped the whip. Anouk sprang up and chattered at him in French and Ricky tried to kick the whip back under the bed, but the big man shoved them away. "I take your toy now," he said, and pulled.

Indiana did the only thing he could think of; he unsnapped the hasp that fixed the bullwhip to his belt. *Better lose my whip than my ass,* he thought.

LaRoche grunted in surprise as he extricated foot upon foot of braided leather. "Big fun!" he exclaimed as he finally reached the handle with its wrist thong. "Where you get this? You crazy broads, no lie! You got more under there, huh?" And to the horror of all three, he dropped the whip, knelt down and lifted the bed spread.

Face to face with LaRoche, Indy grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Bona serra," he said, tossing another carrot into the linguistic soup.

The giant grunted again; his eyes widened. He thrust out a hand and wrapped it around Indy's jacket front. "Big trouble, hey. Dago!" he snarled, hauling the professor out from beneath the bed.

"Oh, Doctor Jones, be careful!" Anouk squealed.

"How tough can he be, Anouk?" Indy laughed mirthlessly as LaRoche hauled him to his feet. "He's keeper of the harem -- a eunuch, right?"

"Wrong, kiddo," said Ricky solemnly. "He doesn't have to be a eunuch to guard the harem."

"Why...why's that," Jones asked, looking a foot up into LaRoche's beady-eyed stare.

"He's a confirmed necrophile."

Indiana's "Oh, Jesus!" was lost in the general scuffle and tumble as LaRoche flung him through the curtains and out into the main room. He tripped over a concubine and went sprawling among gaily-colored cushions, LaRoche right behind.

The commotion roused the harem, who sat up, excited to watch a pair of men doing something for a change, and Anouk's frightened cry was drowned in their shrieks of delight.

Indy twisted away from the big man's grasp and landed a booted heel on his shin. LaRoche appeared not to notice, and hauled Indy to his feet once more, whereupon the professor connected with a right cross that jarred his shoulder with its stunning impact.

LaRoche grunted, then narrowed his eyes and delivered a blow to Indy's solar plexus that lifted the American off the ground. Jones dropped and rolled, but the giant was on him almost immediately, dragging him up for more punishment.

Anouk was the more vocal of the two, but Ricky the more adept at direct action. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her approaching at a run with an urn held high. Indy swung on LaRoche at the same instant that Ricky did, and the man's knees buckled briefly before he righted himself and hammered away again at the archaeologist.

Jones slammed a knee in his assailant's groin and was rewarded with a derisive laugh. "What the hell is with this guy?" Indy panted. He slugged him again, a right to the jaw that should have shattered bone, but LaRoche returned it with a blow which staggered Jones.

"I think he considers it foreplay!" yelled Ricky.

"Oh, great," Indy muttered, ducking.

LaRoche lunged, and he and the professor went down in a flailing tangle beside the pool. Dazed, Jones had only a second to realize the enormity of his peril before the huge man hauled him up bodily and plunged him over backward, head first into the water.

Holding his breath was the first priority. Indiana struggled futilely against the enormous strength forcing him down to his death. To rise...only to reach the air... He wanted to take a breath more than he could remember ever wanting anything in his life. Instead he played the only trick he had.

Jones released his frantic grip on LaRoche's imprisoning hands at his shoulders and, fumbling a bit, grabbed his opponent by the ears. Then with the last of his strength, he rocked backwards and pulled. With a startled cry, LaRoche pitched forward, over Indiana, and splash-landed in the pool. Jones came up gasping. Here, near the edge, the water was no more than waist-deep. He shook his hair back out of his eyes, getting his bearings.

LaRoche, further into the pool and still waist-deep, roared his displeasure and started for the professor, but the watery ambience hampered his bulk, while it gave Indy an advantage in speed.

Still, he reasoned, backing through the water as the concubines cheered, it was only a matter of time before the giant would have him again.

"Jones!" It was Ricky behind him.

"Ricky! Throw me an end of my whip," he called to her, thinking extemporaneously. "Anouk! Find the lever that empties the pool!" As the women hurried to do as he asked, Indiana continued to back warily away from the angry, wet harem-keeper.

"Catch!" yelled Ricky, and he reached out, snagging the leather coil just as LaRoche closed on him and made a dive for his throat.

"Any time now, Anouk!" Indy shouted, bringing his feet into play. "And hang onto the other end of this thing!" He wound the whip about his wrist.

"Now!" Anouk called, and suddenly a startling thing happened.

A sound such as Jones imagined might come from a whale feeding filled the room, a huge, voracious SUCK, and at the same time his body was assaulted not by LaRoche, but by a dreadful watery vacuum that seemed intent on dragging him down into the pool's deep center.

As he clung to the whip, feeling the leather braid bite into his flesh, he saw LaRoche, his face contorted with panic, go spinning crazily away. The giant was whipped around and around by the whirlpool, then he disappeared; the churning waters closed over his head, and at once the terrible suction stopped.

"Jesus Christ." Indiana staggered to his feet, still waist deep in water, still clutching the bullwhip in his abraded hands. The tall blonde reeled him in. "Why'd it stop?" he asked. "It should have emptied the pool."

"Where did LaRoche go?" Ricky looked as puzzled as Indy did.

"I think, Ricky," Anouk said softly, peering over the side of the pool, "that Monsieur LaRoche has become a bathtub stopper."

Jones decided he could pass on checking out the veracity of her statement. He climbed out of the water for the second time and nodded his thanks to the two women. Ricky returned his whip. "Don't know if my gun will be much use after that dunking," he said, "but I've still got this."

Jones fastened the whip back on his belt. "So far, I've lost my knapsack, my lantern, my hat, and now my gun's out of commission," he tallied. "What more could I lose?"

"Just your ass," said Ricky.

"Correction." The man's voice came from the seraglio gallery and it held the unmistakable ring of command. Ricky swore, Anouk gasped, and Jones looked up with a strange expression on his face that somehow managed to combine a smile and a sneer. The concubines became very quiet, and into the sudden hush the Sultan of Madagascar continued, "Your posterior is not at stake, Doctor Jones. The portion of your anatomy which I intend to have removed is located in a different area of your person." The Arab riflemen lining the gallery cocked their weapons.

Indiana didn't even bother to reply, he just looked glum.

* * *

So this is a Medieval Madagascan dungeon, thought Doctor Indiana Jones. Nice archways, very good brickwork on the floor. A truly notable frieze of a man being disemboweled. And the instruments of mayhem! Sophisticated ironmongery, if he was any judge.

"Nice place you have here," Jones remarked.

Zhaddi Ben-Iram leaned over the table upon which Indy was securely bound. The only thing Jones found even remotely pleasant about his proximity was the jewel upon his forehead. The Eye of Heaven flashed like a blue flame, like the all-seeing Third Eye of legend.

"You need not try to be brave, Doctor Jones," the Sultan told him. "Very shortly you will be minus your most treasured artifact; in such a circumstance a man must be allowed, shall we say, a certain latitude in behavior."

Indy chose silence as his rejoinder, although he permitted himself a glare so malevolent his captor drew back a fraction.

"But you Americans are so rugged," he sighed, "such courageous individualists. Very well; meet your fate with jutting jaw." He turned away and Indy began to breathe again. Only for a moment as, at the Sultan's signal, several robed figures, their faces veiled after the manner of Arab women, entered bearing a tray with an array of what looked to be surgical instruments. Indiana took a deep, shuddering breath.

"Do you know, Doctor Jones," the Sultan said conversationally, turning back to the archaeologist, "what a life of concubinage can do to certain women? Have you any idea of their repressed hatred of men? They dream of killing and torture, don't you, my dears?" He smiled fondly at the three women, whose eyes gleamed with feral anticipation above their veils.

"You were most unwise to have ventured here at the request of your friend. Your impetuosity will cost you dearly, I fear." He bent over Indy once more as if for a last word. "I shall leave you to their tender care. They have, by the way, strict orders to spare your life. Like Shylock, they only want their pound of flesh." Zhaddi Ben-Iram laughed evilly and swept out of the room.

"Look, ladies," Jones began as they gathered round him. "You don't really want to do this...have you ever read Freud?"

The shortest of the trio set down her tray on an adjoining table and stepped to his side. Slowly, she reached for his belt buckle and unfastened it. There was a concerted gasp of anticipation, the loudest of which was Indiana's.

He winced as the Arab woman lost no time in partially disrobing him. *This is crazy,* he thought; *this can't be happening!*

Suddenly the door opened. Indy could see it beyond the women about him. Feeling inexorably beyond rescue, he only hoped it was a man, someone whose presence might curb the women's less than nurturing inclinations, but it was only more women.

Your luck just ran out, Jones, the professor told himself as he felt unaccustomed, ungentle hands touch him. He screwed his eyes shut, locked his jaw.

"Not bad, Jones," said a familiar voice.

His eyes flew open. "Ricky?"

"You got it," the tall blonde replied, bringing an ornately carved dildo down on the head of Indy's chief tormentor. Across from her, Anouk applied similar logic to the second of the dismemberment brigade, while Ricky dispatched the third with a left jab straight from the shoulder.

"Where'd you learn to punch like that?" Despite their peril and his state of undress, Indy couldn't help asking.

Ricky whipped off her veil. "A bar in Pangorora's no rougher than a rumble seat in Cortez, Colorado," she replied, "now let's get you out of here." She made short work of his bonds, and soon Indy was freed and decently attired once more.

"Right," Jones agreed, "but first the Eye of Heaven."

"Aren't our lives more important than a jewel?" Anouk asked.

"Just what I was wondering," added Ricky.

Indiana decided there simply wasn't time to explain. He replaced his gun, knife and whip, which Ricky had secreted under her robe. "Look, I have it all figured out. Just stick with me and we'll be fine," he told the two women. "Anouk, where's Affirmative?"

"Right here, Professor Jones." She indicated the interior of her robe.

"Okay. Wake her up and give her to me."

Stealthily, the threesome made its way out of the dungeon and up the first set of stairs toward the ground floor of the palace. "He'll be back to see how they did," Jones said as they reached the landing. "Will he have guards with him?"

"Probably a bunch; paranoia's one of his more attractive attributes."

"Either one of you handy with a knife?" Anouk shook her head, eyes wide. Ricky smiled wickedly. "I should have guessed," Indy said. He handed her the blade, and she hid it in the folds of her robe just as the clatter of footsteps on stone came echoing from above them.

Jones pressed the two women back into the shadows. "Get ready to run when I tell you," he whispered. Then he removed the lemur from his shirt and looked it straight in the eye.

The Sultan and his party reached the landing.

"Bring me a pretty," Indy told the little creature and, stepping out into Ben-Iram's path, he tossed it onto the Sultan's head.

"Go!" he shouted, punching and kicking his way past the startled guards.

Ricky dragged Anouk from their hiding place and pulled her along the wall toward the stairs.

"Behind you!" Jones yelled. He dodged a rifle butt, kneed its wielder, and put his elbow in another's larynx.

Hampered by her long robe, Anouk tripped, shrieking as one of the guards grasped her arm. Ricky pulled harder, but the guard's grip was tenacious. She swore, digging in her robe for the knife, came up with it and slashed at the man's exposed wrist. Blood exploded like a fountain, and he reeled back, wailing. Ricky jerked Anouk into motion.

Ducking again, Jones managed to appropriate the rifle aimed at him. Using it as a staff, he parried the blows of the two foes between him and the women. He got in a lucky swing, knocking one of them cold, dove past the other, and turned, firing into their midst. Above him, Ricky and Anouk had reached ground level and they cheered him on.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" he yelled. He fired on the run, barely noticing if his man fell. His split-second glance was fixed wholly on the Sultan, cursing in several languages and damning to perdition the small, furry beast that whisked up the stairs right behind the archaeologist's pounding boot heels and sprang up his back.

Indiana saw a beautiful flash of blue as he tucked the eye-eye into his shirt. Dodging rifle fire, running for his life, he grinned happily.

Over the stone floors he gained on the flying white robes before him. "The second floor," he called to them. "We'll never make it out the gates -- we'll have to jump for it!"

Ricky and Anouk changed direction and Indy followed, up more stairs and along a corridor open both to the main hall below and the outside through unshuttered windows.

"Does the Sultan have a phone?" Indy asked between breaths.

"Why? Do you want to call for help?"

"Ricky, will you quit being a smart-ass for a minute and just give me a straight answer?"

"He has phones, yes," Anouk put in.

"Okay, good. Keep checking for phone wires."

"Jones, you're crazy."

"Run," was the professor's laconic reply.

Fortunately, there was only a small number of retainers about that morning, but those few went sprawling before Jones and the two women who fled down the gallery. Rifle shots from behind ricocheted around them as the Sultan's men gave chase.

Suddenly Ricky, slightly in the lead, yelled, "Phone wires!" and the trio skidded to a halt. Indy turned and fired again, holding their pursuers at bay.

"Get those things off, they'll slow us down," he ordered, gesturing at their voluminous robes.

The women exchanged a look, then shrugged and ducked as gunmen from the opposite end of the corridor opened up on them. Quickly they doffed their robes as Indiana made fast the end of his bullwhip about the bulky cable which entered the house beside an arched window. He looked up. "You ready...hey! You're nearly naked!"

"We're CONCUBINES, goddamnit! Do you think they outfit us at Saks Fifth Avenue?"

Bullets were zipping and cracking all around them.

"Jesus," he muttered; then, "Okay, we go. Everybody -- one hand on the whip, and one hand on me, got it?" He slung the rifle over his shoulder.

Anouk clung to him as they climbed up onto the window ledge. Ricky wrapped an arm about his waist and hooked her fingers around his belt. Rifle fire tore out a chunk of brick just shy of his heels. Indy simply quit thinking then, took a two-handed grip on the whip and kicked off into space.

Their combined weight made them fall like a stone, plummeting down the swag in the cable. "Drop when the line breaks!" Indy shouted above the gunfire and Anouk's high, thin scream.

They raced toward the apogee of their arc, and at the precise instant that their weight fell equidistant between the palace and the telephone pole across the road, the overburdened cable parted company with the stucco wall of Ben-Iram's stronghold and followed them down toward the ground.

"Yeow!" Ricky exclaimed as she and Anouk let go of Indy and fell the remaining dozen or so feet into the bushes on the south side of the dusty way.

Jones rode the descending cable into a further clump where he landed gracelessly but all in one piece. He ran his whip off the broken telephone line, then scrambled through the underbrush and collected the two scandalously unclad women.

"What now?" Ricky wanted to know. "We're really not dressed for the bus and I didn't bring my running shoes."

"I've got a car," Jones replied.

"Yeah? Well, ol' Zhaddi Ben-Whoosis has a car, too."

"Come on," he growled, wondering why on earth he had to pick the ones with the mouth, and charged into the underbrush. Herding Anouk before him, Jones shrugged out of his jacket and offered it to the younger woman who pulled it on gratefully.

"How about me, Jones?" Ricky demanded.

"Give you the shirt off my back," he said with mock chivalry. He stripped to the waist and tossed her the only garment he could spare. They kept running.

Indy nearly crashed into the Landrover before he realized it was upon them. "Quick," he said, "clear off the branches while I start it up." Pulling himself into the driver's seat, Jones fought with the recalcitrant ignition, swearing as it failed to turn the engine over. From the east, they could hear the sound of motorized vehicles coming down the steep road from the palace.

"Get this thing moving, Jones!" Ricky jumped into the bed behind the seat and crouched, grasping the roll bar overhead. Beside him, Anouk shivered in the passenger seat.

The engine caught. Indiana slammed it into gear and tore out onto the road, trailing palm fronds and other bits of vegetation. Less than a quarter mile behind, the Sultan and his men careened after them in a fleet of trucks, guns blazing.

"I hope you can drive like Barney Oldfield!" Ricky yelled over the wind of their passage. Indy gritted his teeth and attempted to do just that.

But the road was treacherous, with a precipitous cliff on the right and too many hairpin turns to allow much extended top end. And there was traffic of sorts.

Jones, for all his occasionally shady dealings when it came to the obtaining of artifacts, was not the type to run elderly peasants off the road; he swerved to avoid them, a thing the Sultan did not do, and as a result, the Landrovers full of gunmen gained little by little on Indy and his passengers.

He slung the Rover around another curve, hearing the protest of tires and frame and seeing, peripherally and in the mirror, Anouk and Ricky hanging on for dear life against the forces of gravity. Bullets pinged off the tail gate and the blonde yelled an obscenity. "Damnit, Indy! I can't shoot back! I can't let go!"

"Just hang on!" he called over his shoulder, thinking how frightened she must be to use his first name for a change.

Suddenly, Anouk screamed as a huge shadow fell across the road; it blocked the sun, casting a cool gray veil over the scenery.

"What the...?" Jones spared a look up. There, looming over them and seeming to scrape the topmost trees on the hillside to their left, was a dirigible.

"Pappa! Pappa!" Anouk called. The hatch opened almost directly above them and de Tourneville leaned out. He began to lower a sky anchor toward the Landrover

Indiana wondered if any of this was going to make sense in the morning. Unable to spare more than a glance at the action taking place above, he continued to throw the Rover along the road in a desperate race. Gunfire sizzled past them. Two tires exploded.

At once Jones knew he'd lost it. The Rover's steering tightened so fast that his arms were wrenched painfully as he fought the wheel. Muscles straining, he struggled to regain control, but the wounded vehicle raced straight on for the cliff's edge. He braked hard, trying to throw it into a broadside skid. Nothing even slowed the Rover's rush to destruction.

Behind him he heard the clank of metal on metal. "Hold onto the wheel, Indy! Whatever you do, don't let go!" Ricky yelled. From the corner of his eye, Jones saw Anouk scramble back beside the blonde. He gave the brakes and unresponsive wheel one more try.

"Sonofabitch," he said as the Landrover sailed off the road, out, out into nothingness. And kept right on going.

The extra weight in the back balancing the engine, it even maintained a fairly tolerable equilibrium as the dirigible towed it out over the dark forested valley, away from the Sultan and his cursing, railing crew, out through the open sky and down, in a joyful, exhilarating and memorable ride, to the sea.

* * *

"...but, Souk, your villa, the artwork, the furnishings, your Bentley!" Indiana objected. "Leaving it all for Ben-Iram to plunder; how can you do it?"

De Tourneville made an airy gesture. "I have the only treasure I require," he said, fondly eyeing the lovely Anouk, who curled in a canvas chair on the deck of her father's yacht. The dirigible, after depositing the Landrover near the forecastle, had departed, with Gervais at the helm, for the African coast, and the luxurious sea-going vessel was now cutting the waves in her wake.

"I was becoming weary of Madagascar anyway," the Frenchman confided, "and I have other estates. Anouk and I will perhaps spend some time at Selenicus, and then...who knows? Perhaps I will show her the Aegean."

Jones watched the fortunate young woman who was clad now in a floral sundress much more suitable to her ingenuous charm than the brief harem outfit. She was stroking the aye-aye in her lap and smiling. Looking up, she caught his eye and her smile widened.

The professor winked at her and sighed contentedly. Close by, Ricky Kinsella stretched out on a lilo mattress soaking up the rich, golden rays. Having found nothing aboard the yacht to her liking, she seemed content to remain in her tiny silken scrap and Jones's old shirt. The archaeologist admired the pleasing horizontal pattern.

"Ricky," he said after a moment, scratching his two-day beard thoughtfully. "When we make port and scare us up some clothes, how about a tour of Nacala? I can show you all the sights."

The blonde turned her head, eyes hidden behind dark glasses and said, "Better make it dinner and a good movie, Jones. I've already seen all your sights."

"Not exactly," he said. She laughed, comprehending and accepting at the same time.

Indy reached for the leather pouch resting among glasses on the table between himself and Souk Ashad. "You radioed the Turkish authorities?" he asked for the second time, taking out the Eye of Heaven for another look.

"Of a certainty, Indiana," the older man assured him. "They will be waiting for us at the hotel in Nacala, where I am sure you will be given a hero's welcome."

Jones shrugged self-deprecatingly, though his eyes held a certain spindrift glow that transcended the obvious oceanic metaphor. "I really hate to let it go," he said softly, wanting to plumb the stone's ancient depths.

"Your reputation in archaeological circles cannot but be enhanced, Indy. Your name will be internationally celebrated."

The professor looked up with a sideways smile, squinting against the light. "It'll get blown out of all proportion, Souk. Rumors will get started..."

"I'll never tell," said Ricky.

"Take it with a grain of salt, Indiana! You are a fortunate and resourceful man -- enjoy the moment!"

The professor laughed quietly. "I expect that's the thing to do, Souk." He dropped the Eye of Heaven back into its pouch and replaced it on the table.

Turning to his old friend, Indiana frowned assessingly for a moment, then relaxed and lay back with a smile, letting the sun and wind have their way with him. When he spoke again, there was laughter in his voice.

"I can always," he said, "tell them the Sultan and I had a misunderstanding."

END

[Back To Index](#)