

Goodwin Harold Leland

**The Golden Skull: A Rick Brant
Science-Adventure Story**



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Brant Science-Adventure Story

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Harold Leland Goodwin

The Golden Skull

CHAPTER I

The Head-hunter

It was hot in the cabin of the freighter *Asiatic Dream*. The heaviness of the tropical heat outside the ship penetrated through the steel and flaking paint of the deck to turn the cabin into an oven.

Rick Brant and Don Scott, stripped to their shorts, were oblivious of the heat. They sat hunched over a three-dimensional chessboard, studying the complex moves of their newest hobby. Now and then they glared at each other, or paused to wipe the sweat from their faces or arms, but otherwise they concentrated on the three-layer board and the chessmen. The rivalry was intense, and had been ever since Hartson Brant, Rick's distinguished scientist father, had introduced them to the game back home on Spindrift Island.

Watching them was Dr. Anthony Briotti. Clad in tropical tan shorts and nothing else, he looked like a college athlete. Little about him suggested that he was an archaeologist with an international reputation.

Presently he rose and left the cabin, heading for the deck. He didn't bother to say where he was going; he knew the boys wouldn't even notice. On deck, Briotti leaned against the rail and peered ahead to where the rocky fortress of Corregidor loomed at the mouth of Manila Bay. His pulse beat faster at the sight of the famous island. He knew its outline. He had commanded a destroyer during World War II. Even though the faint light of a new moon showed only vague outlines, he recognized the old Spanish prison rock below the overhang of Corregidor, and he remembered that his guns had blasted at the Japanese from that very point.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a shadow move fleetingly. He turned but saw nothing. Then, because he was busy with his memories, he turned back to the dim, haunting view of Corregidor and thought no more about it.

Below, Rick Brant moved his king diagonally across the three-dimensional chessboard and said triumphantly, "Checkmate!"

Scotty rose, drew back one muscular leg as though to kick the set into the air, then grinned. "Had to let you win. Bad for morale to lose all the time. Next time I'll teach you how to lose."

Rick snorted. "You let me win like a mother bear would let me walk off with her cubs. It's my remarkable intellect that won that game, and nothing else."

"Won by your wits, eh?" Scotty mopped his wet face. "And you only half armed!"

Rick shied a chessman at him. "Wait until we teach this game

to Chahda."

Scotty chuckled. "He'll probably beat us both at once, then we'll find out he learned how to play from the latest edition of *The World Almanac*."

Chahda, their Hindu friend, had learned about America by memorizing an old copy of the *Almanac*, and he quoted from it at every opportunity. Since their first meeting in Bombay during the adventure of *The Lost City*, the Indian boy had been with them on several expeditions. Now he was to meet them in Manila to help them in their search for one of ancient history's most fabulous treasures.

Rick, a tall, slim boy, with light-brown hair and brown eyes, led the way up the ladder to the deck. Scotty, bigger and slightly darker in coloring, followed close behind. They walked toward the bow, searching for Briotti, their eyes not yet accustomed to the darkness.

Rick called, "Tony?"

"Here by the rail," the archaeologist answered.

The boys moved toward him, but someone – or something – moved faster. A shadowy form sped past them, and Rick's quick eyes caught the flash of light on steel. He yelled, "Watch it!"

Tony moved, and a steel blade clanged off the ship's rail. Rick and Scotty leaped forward, grasping for the shadow. The steel blade lifted again. Scotty grabbed a wrist and twisted. The blade clattered to the deck. Rick got his arms around a sweaty waist and squeezed, bracing his feet to lift the man off the deck. Then

an elbow caught him in the Adam's apple and flooded his eyes with tears of pain. He loosened his grip involuntarily and felt the man squirm free. Scotty yelled, "Get him!"

Tony Briotti swung a roundhouse right that missed and sent him sprawling off balance. Then the assailant was on the rail, poised. Scotty lunged for his ankle as the man dived cleanly out and away from the ship into the dark water. The three rushed to the rail, watching for the swimmer.

"Man overboard!" Tony's voice lifted in a shout that brought the crew running.

For a few moments there was confusion as the officers and crew tried to find out what had happened, and then the searchlight on the bridge was manned and its white beam cut the water.

There was no swimmer. But off toward Bataan Peninsula the light reflected from the patched sail of a *banca*, an outrigger canoe, sailing toward shore with a bone in its teeth.

A few moments later the three Spindrifters stood in the captain's office, staring at a Filipino bolo, a long, slightly curving machete with a square tip. Tony hefted it and shuddered. "If you hadn't yelled – well, this thing landed right where my head had been a second before."

"If I hadn't said anything," Rick replied, "it wouldn't have been anywhere near your neck. I put the finger on you by calling your name."

Scotty snapped his fingers. "Of course! The guy must have

been hiding, until he heard us call. Then, when you answered, he knew you were the one he was after, and he went for you."

Tony stared, incredulous. "But why? I can't imagine why a mountain Igorot would board the ship for the express purpose of killing me!"

It was Rick's turn to stare. "How did you know he was an Igorot?"

"Either an Igorot or an Ifugao," Tony replied. "I caught a glimpse of his head structure as he jumped onto the rail. Besides, the haircut is distinctive. It looks as though a bowl had been put on the head and all hair removed that it didn't cover."

Rick knew that an Igorot was a primitive native of the Philippine Mountain Province. All of them had received a series of lectures on Philippine ethnology from Tony before leaving home. The Igorots bore roughly the same relationship to the regular Filipino as American Indians do to the white American. Ifugao natives were much like the Igorots, but with a slightly more advanced culture. They, too, lived in Mountain Province, the objective of the Spindrift expedition.

The trip had grown out of an earlier expedition to Kwangara Island in the western Pacific. Dr. Anthony Briotti had helped translate the tablets found in the sunken temple of Alta Yuan, and had discovered the connection between the early people of the Philippines – of whom the Igorots and Ifugaos were the descendants – and the white dragon worshipers of Alta Yuan.

One plaque from the sunken temple had described the Ifugao

rice terraces of Mountain Province in unmistakable detail, and also had described a skull of gold which was said to have magic properties.

Tony Briotti had been so enthusiastic about locating this fabulous skull, and proving the connection between Alta Yuan and the Philippines, that Hartson Brant, head of the Spindrift Foundation, had made arrangements for the small expedition. None of the other Spindrift scientists could be spared, so Tony Briotti had only Rick and Scotty as assistants. Chahda was to join them in Manila. The boys thought that was help aplenty. No other helpers were needed.

"I don't believe it," Tony stated. "It is simply beyond possibility that an Igorot could have boarded this ship with the express intention of killing me. More likely, he boarded the ship to steal, thought he was discovered, and headed for the rail where his banca was tied. I was in the way. That's all."

"No one saw the banca approach," the ship's captain said, "but of course it could have. We've been traveling at only a few knots, and the banca could have approached from the stern, thrown a line over the rail, and tied up. Dangerous, but a clever native could do it. They're like cats. Make fine sailors." He added, "Never heard of it being done before, but there's no reason to think it was an attempt at murder. Thieves in the Orient are willing to take long chances."

Rick stared through the port at the lights of Manila. He was very thoughtful. Let Tony try to brush the incident aside. He

knew better. He knew it in his bones. There was trouble ahead for the SpindrifTERS.

He caught Scotty's worried frown, and he knew that his pal's thoughts were the same.

CHAPTER II

Manila After Dark

Out of the *Asiatic Dream's* forward hold swung the sleek shape of an airplane fuselage. Rick bristled with nervous energy as he watched. He yelled, "Watch it! Take it easy with that winch!"

Scotty patted him on the shoulder. "Take it easy yourself before you pop a gusset. They're doing all right."

Rick didn't take his eyes off the plane. "Okay. But if they drop it, we'll hike into the mountains instead of flying in style. Hey, you! Lift it! Lift it clear of the rail!"

The plane was Rick's new Sky Wagon, a powerful little four-place job that had replaced his beloved Cub, wrecked by saboteurs, as related in *Stairway to Danger*. It had less than ten hours' flying time, and he didn't want it wrecked by having a careless winchman bash it against something. But in spite of his fears, the fuselage was lowered safely onto the waiting truck, the wings in their crates were brought out, and in a short time the boys were riding with the plane out to Manila International Airport.

The day was still young. The freighter had anchored off the Manila port area during the night, berthing in the early hours. The Spindrift party had checked into the Manila Hotel, and Tony, leaving the boys to supervise the unloading and

clearance of their equipment, had gone off to the University of the Philippines. Now the crates of equipment were in the customs shed waiting to be picked up, and the plane was en route to the airport to be assembled. Everything was going smoothly, except

...

"Chahda," Rick mused. "Where do you suppose he went?"

"The day I can figure out Chahda's comings and goings is the day I polish my crystal ball and solve the rest of the world's mysteries. He's probably off studying *The World Almanac*."

Chahda had been registered at the Manila Hotel but had checked out three days before their arrival. He had left no forwarding address and no message.

"He's probably somewhere in the Indian colony of Manila," Rick speculated. "Quite a few Indians here, mostly Hindus. They call 'em Bombays, Tony said."

"He'll show up," Scotty said. "He always does. Wonder how Tony is making out?"

Tony had gone to see a colleague, a Filipino archaeologist by the name of Dr. Remedios Okola. It was through Okola that arrangements had been made with the Philippine Government for their expedition – or would be made. Their permit had not yet been issued.

"I didn't know they had a university here." Scotty added, "Until Tony started writing to this Filipino scientist."

"You should read the stuff Tony brought," Rick replied. "The Philippines has a dozen universities."

Scotty grinned. "Chahda is probably taking a course in one of them. Getting a degree of D.D."

Rick took the bait. "What? Doctor of Divinity or Doctor of Dentistry?"

"Neither. Dean of Disappearances."

Rick groaned. Still, it was true. Chahda was the most disappearing person he had ever known. The truth was, as he well knew, Chahda loved the dramatic. The little Hindu boy thoroughly enjoyed baffling his pals with theatrical appearances and disappearances. Not that he did his vanishing act just for fun, however. There was usually a good reason.

Arrangements had been made by mail and confirmed by phone that morning for hangar space at Manila International Airport. While giant transpacific passenger liners landed or took off, and while the busy twin-engined island hoppers of Philippine Air Lines kept the field active, the boys assembled the Sky Wagon.

Even allowing for Rick's pride of ownership, the Sky Wagon was a beauty. It was painted pure white with a red strip along the fuselage. It could carry four, plus a fair amount of cargo. It had flaps which permitted slow landings and short take-offs, and it had retractable landing gear and variable-pitch propeller.

Under the rear seats was a special feature – a small hatch through which a winch-driven cable could be operated.

This was a typical Rick Brant labor-saving device. Back home, Rick was the errand boy for Spindrift Island, an island off the

New Jersey coast where the famous Spindrift Foundation was located. Until he acquired the Sky Wagon, his grocery shopping meant landing at Whiteside Airport, hiking into town, picking up the groceries, lugging them back, loading them in the Cub and flying back to Spindrift.

Now he could phone in his order, get into the Sky Wagon, lower the weighted cable, and swoop low over the grocery store, which was located on the outskirts of Whiteside. The hook at the end of the cable snagged another cable hung between two steel poles on the roof of the store. The sack of groceries – it was a special strong canvas sack – were on the cable and needed only to be reeled into the plane.

It worked fine. The only trouble was that Rick had never collected eggs intact. The shock of the pickup was a little too much. When he solved that problem, he would make arrangements with the electronic supply house in Newark to let him put up the same kind of rig. Eventually, he hoped, he would get so efficient that he never would have to land on the mainland except to deliver a passenger or to pay a personal visit.

Rick and Scotty checked the plane over with the greatest of care, and then Rick got in and started the engine. He let it warm up, watching his instruments. Everything was fine. He motioned to Scotty, who was watching and listening from outside.

Scotty got in, and Rick taxied to the end of a runway. While he revved up the engine, Scotty obtained take-off permission from the control tower, and in a few moments they were air-borne,

enjoying the sudden drop in temperature.

"First time I've stopped sweating in a week," Scotty said.

Rick nodded and motioned to pump up the landing gear. The hydraulic system worked on a hand pump between the two front seats. It was not as satisfactory as a motor-driven pump, but it took no electric power and used up no valuable weight. Besides, a few strokes on the pump did the job. He leveled off at five thousand feet above the city.

Below, the Pasig River cut the city in half. They traced the line of the great wall around Intramuros, the ancient walled city, and they found the white mass of the American Embassy across Dewey Boulevard from some very modern apartments. They passed over the Manila Hotel, then saw the ruins of infamous Fort Santiago.

Inland, the land was lush green with high mountains rising in the distance. To the north lay Mountain Province, and behind the screen of mountains was their destination.

There was still work to be done, so Rick reluctantly took the Sky Wagon down again. It was in perfect condition; no need for further flight.

They lunched at a modern drive-in on Dewey Boulevard, the split-lane highway that runs along the edge of Manila Bay, then picked up their crates of supplies at customs. This was a light expedition, so there were only three crates. One held their camp gear and trail clothing. Another crate held Tony Briotti's special tools and reference books. The third held the most important

object of the expedition – the Spindrift Experimental Earth Scanner, called SEES for short, and further abbreviated by the boys to a sibilant hiss.

"How's the SS working?" Scotty would ask, and Rick would answer: "'Sfine 'scan be."

The boys were old hands at expeditions and they had learned from bitter experience about the number of unexpected things that can happen to baggage, so in spite of some opposition from the hotel clerk, they insisted on stowing the supplies in their room. This done, they got into bathing trunks and cooled off in the hotel pool. There was nothing to do now but wait for Tony – and Chahda.

When they returned from their swim a message was waiting, brought by a messenger from Tony Briotti. Rick read it, then handed it to Scotty. They were to have dinner with Tony's colleague Okola, and an Assistant Secretary of the Interior, a Mr. Lazada, at the latter's house. Dinner was at ten. They were to arrive a half hour early, and wear dinner jackets.

"Dinner at ten!" Scotty was stunned. "It must be a mistake. No one could live until that hour without food."

The desk clerk overheard the comment and smiled. "Old Spanish custom, sir. Many Filipinos follow Spanish custom."

"Very fine for those who are used to it," Rick said. "But here's one Americano who is not going to follow Filipinos who follow old Spanish custom."

"Two Americanos," Scotty corrected. "We will follow old

American custom of snack early, English custom of dinner at eight, and then Spanish custom of dinner at ten. That way we get plenty chow, hey?"

This exchange was for their own benefit. The clerk did not overhear because they were hurrying to their rooms to change.

It was not too early to get into dinner jackets. They hauled out what Scotty called their "penguin rigs" and got into them. In spite of feeling a little self-conscious, they looked brown and handsome in their white tropical jackets with maroon bow ties.

They found a table on the porch, looking out over Manila Bay and the great field called The Luneta. By turning a little Rick could see the traffic on Dewey Boulevard. Rick had never seen anything like it. Apparently Filipino drivers were all mad at something, and all under the impression that no other vehicles were on the road. Also, Filipino drivers obviously had wild affection for their horns. They tooted constantly.

"The life of a pedestrian must be less than ten minutes in this town," Scotty commented.

"Pedestrians are nothing but the raw material for accidents," Rick agreed. "Look at that!"

Among the busses, the cars, and the jeeps that ranged the boulevard trotted a half-dozen two-wheeled carriages drawn by tiny horses. These were the *calesas* of bygone days, still competing with Manila's countless taxis for passengers.

"We should hire two and have a chariot race," Scotty suggested.

They had a sandwich and a cold drink made with *calamansi*, the pungent small Philippine limes, then walked across the boulevard to where the great wall of the old city rose high in the air. The wall was of huge stone blocks, rising about four times the boys' height into the air. It was perhaps twenty feet thick at the base.

Within the walls there had once been a city of a hundred thousand people, but it was there that in World War II the Japanese had chosen to make their last stand. Most of the people of the city had been wiped out, along with their Japanese captors, and of the ancient buildings only a cathedral remained. The area had been bulldozed flat in most places, and Quonset-type warehouses, called *bodegas*, had replaced the ruined Spanish buildings.

"Rick, look at this!" Scotty called, pointing to a fern-like plant that grew near the wall. "Watch." He touched it and the leaves rolled into tight tubes. "How about that?"

A Filipino gentleman, immaculate in a white nylon suit, watched them for a moment, then joined them. "The plant is strange to Americans, I think. It is a sensitive mimosa. You have the mimosa in America, but not this variety."

"It's good of you to explain, sir," Rick said.

"Not at all. In Tagalog, the plant is called *makahiya*. It means, literally, 'I am ashamed when you touch me.'"

"It's ashamed, so it closes up," Rick said. "That's charming. Tagalog must be a picturesque language."

The Filipino nodded. "It has a certain flavor. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Colonel Felix Rojas of the Philippine constabulary."

Rick took his first good look at the Filipino and immediately recognized the soldierly bearing and lean fitness of the professional soldier. He introduced himself and Scotty.

Colonel Rojas smiled. "The young men who are going to dine with the esteemed Assistant Secretary tonight, eh? Welcome to our country." He bowed and walked away, leaving them openmouthed. Then, as an afterthought, he turned. "Surprised? Don't be. We are interested in strangers until their intentions are known. Yours are above reproach." His smile faded. "However, you may be interested in another bit of Tagalog." He spoke briefly a phrase that seemed to be mostly vowels.

"What does it mean?" Scotty asked.

The colonel's eyes searched theirs. "What good is hay to a dead horse," he said and walked away.

The boys stared at each other.

"A very good question," Rick said at last. The colonel had vanished into the Manila Hotel. "Scotty, what good is hay to a dead horse?"

"The deceased equine has little use for hay," Scotty said. "Obviously. Was that a warning?"

"I don't know what it was," Rick said. The phrase could have been a warning, but of what? And how had the colonel known where they were dining? He put the question aloud.

Scotty shrugged. "Doesn't the constabulary come under the Department of the Interior? Maybe Lazada told him. A colonel would be pretty high rank in the constabulary; he could even be the commander."

The Philippine constabulary had a long and distinguished history. It was similar to a police force, but was a military organization. It was, Rick thought, something like a cross between the American state militia, the Texas Rangers, and any good state police force.

"I'm snowed," Rick said at last. "The only thing I'm sure of is that he wasn't looking for information when he asked what good is hay to a dead horse. Come on. Let's start for Lazada's."

The way led across busy Taft Avenue, named for the American president, across the Ayala Bridge which spanned the Pasig River, and past Malaccan Palace. The palace was the equivalent of our White House. In its time Spanish, American, and Japanese conquerors of the Philippines had lived there. Now it housed the president of the Republic of the Philippines.

It was very dark by the time they passed the palace. They left the street-lighted area and entered an area of old Spanish houses. The Pasig River was very close. They could smell the water hyacinth which floated endlessly down to the sea.

The air was heavy with unshed rain. The boys had long since shed their jackets and were carrying them. Now the heat seemed to push down on them, muffling even the sound of their leather soles on the cobbles. They passed a solitary street light and Rick

read the sign. They were on the right track. The hotel clerk's directions, obtained before they ate, had been very good.

"Almost there," Rick whispered, then wondered why he hadn't spoken aloud.

Apparently Scotty was feeling the same physical oppression because he didn't comment on the whisper.

The houses were two-story, old Spanish style, with much wrought-iron fancy work. Few lights showed. Such houses presented only blank faces to the street. The life inside them found its open air in secluded patios in the rear.

"We must be getting close," Scotty said. His voice was very low.

Rick unsnapped his key ring. It had a pencil flashlight attached. He shot the light over the house fronts, searching for a number. A cream-colored lizard darted frantically out of the circle of light into protecting darkness.

"Two more numbers," Rick said. "Must be the house after the next one." He flashed the tiny light ahead and froze as he saw the shape of a man. Beside him, he felt Scotty tense.

It was silly to stand frozen. Rick moved ahead, slowly, and the shape took form. Turban, flowing tunic with sash. Fiercely whiskered face. A Sikh guard.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Sikhs – Indians – were noted for their bravery and fighting ability, and they could be found in most cities of the Far East, usually employed as private guards or police.

The Sikh came to attention and Rick noted that he was rather small for his race. Most Sikhs were big men. He had kept the light on the bearded face, noting that the beard was neatly tied in the Sikh fashion. Brown eyes stared unblinkingly. A hoarse voice said, "This ees house of Meester Secretary Lazada. Please to enter."

Suddenly the voice changed and Rick nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Go right on up the stairs, meatheads. Scotty must be hungry. He always is."

Rick choked.

"Chahda!"

CHAPTER III

The Gods of Banaue

Scotty reached out for the Hindu boy, but Chahda stepped nimbly aside. "Not time for horseplay now," he said. "Or talk either. Houseboy will hear. It important I stay under cover. You go up and eat. Later, if I can, I will come to Manila Hotel. If I cannot, I will meet you in Baguio."

The boys knew better than to argue. They each punched Chahda affectionately as they passed him, then Rick knocked on the door, which was instantly opened by a Filipino houseboy.

The houseboy led them up a steep flight of stairs into a huge living room, sparsely furnished after the tropical fashion, but with exquisite and expensive Chinese furniture of rosewood and teak. Tony Briotti came to meet them, then introduced them to Dr. Remedios Okola and the Honorable Irineo Lazada.

Dr. Okola, obviously, had a great deal of Spanish blood in his ancestry. He was tall and lean, with a deeply lined face and a magnificent hawklike nose. His hair was iron gray. He wore black dress trousers and an open-neck slipover shirt of a very fine, almost transparent, fabric heavily embroidered down the front. The shirt hung outside his trousers in traditional style. This was the *barong* Tagalog, the native Filipino costume.

Where the Filipino archaeologist showed his Spanish blood,

the Honorable Irineo Lazada's face betrayed his Chinese ancestry. He was round of face, and his eyes had the typical Mongoloid fold. He was dressed in an expensive white sharkskin suit with a white American-style shirt and a black tie. The tie was held in place by the biggest diamond Rick had ever seen. He assumed it was real; no one would wear a phony one that big.

Lazada had a huge Manila cigar in one hand and a fan in the other. By some feat of legerdemain he managed to shake hands with the boys without letting go of either.

"Come in, come in," he said genially. "Welcome to the Philippines. You will have some refreshment? How about a coke?"

That suited the boys fine. Lazada waved a pudgy hand and a slippered houseboy appeared like a genie, carrying two iced glasses of coke. Rick was not in the least surprised. He had had his favorite American beverage in more unexpected places than this.

Tony Briotti explained, "Dr. Okola and I just got here. We had a most interesting day at the university. I was beginning to go into the details of our expedition with Mr. Lazada."

"Please continue," Lazada said expansively.

Rick, who was sensitive to voices, had the impression that Mr. Lazada's voice passed through a bath of highly refined oil before it emerged from his thick lips. It wasn't exactly oily – just sort of overlubricated.

Lazada alternately smoked and fanned. "You were telling me

of Spindrift Island. Am I to gather that you are the only Spindrift scientist on this expedition? And that these young men just came for the voyage?"

"By no means." Tony set Lazada straight. "Rick is our pilot and electronics technician. Scotty is mechanic and camp manager."

"Pilot?" Lazada looked surprised.

Dr. Okola hastened to explain. "I neglected to tell Mr. Lazada that you are bringing your own plane. Of course, sir, permission was obtained in advance from the Philippine Aeronautics Authority."

"A helicopter, of course," Lazada said. "Nothing else would be of value in Mountain Province. The only air-field is at Baguio."

"It's a four-place Sky Wagon," Rick said. "We hoped there might be some suitable landing places."

Lazada shrugged. "Perhaps there are, but they are not regular airports. Planes do not fly in that country. Both the mountains and the weather are dangerous."

"Might it not be possible for them to land on the roadway at Bontoc and then go over the mountains to Banaue by truck?" Dr. Okola asked.

"Perhaps." Lazada didn't seem too optimistic. "Exactly where do you expect to find this golden skull?" He added, "I can tell you more about the transportation you will need when I know that."

"We only know that it should be somewhere among the rice

terraces," Tony Briotti said. "I realize that they cover entire mountainsides. That is why we came prepared to stay for some time if need be. There is so much territory to cover with our equipment!"

"Many square miles," Lazada agreed. "What is the expression? A needle in a haystack? Surely you must have some kind of clue."

"Just one," Dr. Okola said. "A dragon. Isn't that so, Dr. Briotti?"

Tony nodded. "That's what the translation of the Kwangara Island artifacts said. The dragon is supposed to be guarding a cache of religious objects, including the golden skull and other gold objects."

"You mean a gilt skull, of course," Lazada said.

"No, the description was quite clear. A skull of metallic gold."

"A miniature, probably."

"No, sir. The skull is actually larger than life size."

Lazada stopped slouching in his chair. "Incredible!"

Dr. Okola spoke up. "After all, Mr. Secretary, gold is mined right here in the Philippines. In Mountain Province, in fact. And it is found in many other parts of Asia."

Rick had a strange feeling as he watched Lazada's face. The Assistant Secretary seemed to be licking his lips, although he wasn't actually doing so. It was almost as though Lazada was doing sums in his head... Gold is heavy... It would take a lot of gold to make a life-size skull, even a hollow one... Gold is worth

thirty-five dollars an ounce, legally. If smuggled into China, it would bring twice that...

"Tell me more of this dragon," Lazada invited.

Tony was glad to oblige. Next to actually working at his profession he enjoyed talking about it. "The dragon is of the greatest importance throughout the culture of the East. We followed its trail from the great temple of Ankor Vat in Cambodia all the way to the sunken temple of Alta Yuan."

Rick remembered vividly. He had been at the controls of the Submobile, a hundred fathoms under the waters of the Pacific, when the first Alta Yuan dragon came to light.

"The dragon was the incarnation of the chief god of the Alta Yuan people. When an earthquake sank the temple, the people of the island lost their gods. When we hauled the dragon back up and gave it to them, nothing was too good for us." He paused. "By 'we' I mean the Spindrift scientists. I was not among the lucky ones, since I had not yet joined the Spindrift group."

Okola shared Tony's excitement over the Alta Yuan find. "I, too, was very much interested in that expedition. And when I heard that the artifacts brought from the bottom of the sea provided a possible connection between the Philippines and that ancient culture, you can imagine my excitement."

Rick could see that Lazada could not possibly imagine so much excitement over an archaeological find, but was too courteous to say so.

"Then finding a similar dragon among the rice terraces would

show a link between our country and the ruins of Ankor Vat?" Lazada asked.

"Exactly," Tony replied.

Lazada rose. "Dinner is ready. Let us continue our discussion at the table."

They went out to a balcony which overlooked a garden at the rear of the house. A table set with the finest Chinese linen and delicate Siamese silverware was waiting for them. Houseboys waited to serve them. Over a dinner of broiled giant prawns, meat-stuffed rolls called *lumpia*, and whole barbecued suckling pig called *lechon*, they continued their talk of the expedition.

"What is the significance of the golden skull?" Lazada asked.

"I did not know until today," Tony answered. "I found out from my esteemed colleague here. He has been doing some very hard work on it. Will you answer, Dr. Okola?"

The Filipino archaeologist looked pleased, but he hastened to say, "The credit is not mine alone. I had the invaluable assistance of one of my graduate students, who is himself an Ifugao. A brilliant young man. Next week I am attending a celebration at his home, in honor of his becoming an assistant professor at the university."

"I'm sorry I didn't meet him," Tony Briotti said. "Did you mention his name?"

"Nangolat. However, Mr. Lazada asked about the significance of the golden skull. We were able to uncover a story about it among the many Ifugao myths, a story of which I had not been

aware until Dr. Briotti's letters put me on the track. You realize that the Ifugao religion is rich in myths. It is a very complicated religion with over a thousand gods."

Scotty whistled. "They must have a god for nearly everything they say or do."

"Just about," Dr. Okola agreed. "Even their universe is divided into five regions. There is the known earth, *pugao*; the sky world, *kabunian*; the region downriver, *lagod*; the region upriver, *daiya*; and the underworld, *dalun*."

"What river?" Rick asked.

"Any river on which they happen to live," Okola answered. "No one knows exactly what the original river of the Ifugaos might have been. You see, they are immigrants. They came from the Chinese mainland, but we don't know exactly when, or whether their original home was China. Perhaps we will find out that it was Cambodia. We do know that their miraculous rice terraces were started at least two thousand years ago."

"That makes them almost as old as the pyramids!" Scotty exclaimed.

"Quite right. The whole culture is quite astonishing. We think of them as primitive people, but their history is more complex than our own. However, we are speaking of heads. Heads have always been of the greatest religious importance to the Ifugaos. They have been head-hunters for religious and economic reasons for centuries. First America, and then the Republic of the Philippines tried to stamp out the custom. In general, we have

succeeded. There is little or no head-hunting now – so far as we know."

Lazada grunted. "The mountains are difficult to police. I doubt that we know all that goes on. I wouldn't be surprised if a head wasn't taken now and then. After all, the Ifugaos got the heads of two American professors only a few years ago."

"The murders were for religious reasons," Okola explained. "Sacrifices were needed for the rice crop. The unfortunate professors were on a hiking trip, and they happened along at just the wrong moment."

Rick remembered newspaper reports of the incident. It had attracted world-wide attention. The Ifugao natives responsible had been captured by the Philippine constabulary, tried, and punished.

Okola continued, "We have traced back a thread through the complicated maze of Ifugao myths. The thread leads to a legendary hero – the leader-god who led the Ifugaos to the Philippines. The golden skull was originally his own, turned to gold by the very power of the hero's magic. After his death, of course. At first it was an ordinary skull, then it turned to gold."

"Then the skull has something to do with head-hunting?" Rick asked.

"Indeed it does. It is apparently the chief object to which heads are sacrificed – or was, before it was lost. The golden skull is *almaduan*, the very soul stuff of the Ifugaos."

"How was it lost?" Scotty inquired.

"In a war," Okola said, quite seriously, "between the *kabunian*, the gods of the sky world, and the *dalun*, the gods of the underworld. The *dalun* won. They took the head and disappeared into the ground somewhere in Banaue. Behind them, they left a great taboo. If an Ifugao tries to follow them into the underworld to reclaim the skull, great misfortune will come. An earthquake will destroy the terraces. The people will starve. They will be haunted by the *dodingerot*— ghouls who dwell in tombs and bite the faces of intruders."

"Then the Ifugaos will take a dim view of our hunting their golden skull," Rick guessed.

"They might if they knew about it," Dr. Okola said. "Actually, what I have just told you is almost forgotten lore. I doubt that the Ifugao man in the street – or, properly, man in the rice terraces – has ever heard of it. A few old priests may remember."

Irineo Lazada clapped his hands and rose. "Coffee in the living room, gentlemen. You know, I begin to have some hope for this golden skull. I had not really taken your expedition seriously until Dr. Okola's recital."

Tony Briotti picked him up quickly. "Then that is why you have failed to issue our permit?"

Rick stopped in his tracks. Was there trouble about their permit? He had wondered about the reason for this dinner with the Assistant Secretary of the Interior. Perhaps it was to persuade him.

Lazada smiled. "The government doesn't want to stir up

trouble among the mountain tribes. We do not have enough constabulary for police duty in the mountains. A small detachment at Baguio is the best we can do."

"I assure you that we will not stir up trouble," Tony Briotti said.

"Of course not. And so I will issue your permit."

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary," Dr. Okola said. "This will mean a great deal to the Philippines. Dr. Briotti assures me that Spindrift will not ask for anything to be removed from the islands. The golden skull, if it is found, will remain right here, perhaps at the university's museum."

"Such a treasure would need to be well guarded," Lazada chuckled. "We do have thieves in the Philippines, as does every other country." Again he seemed to be licking his lips without actually doing so.

Over a second cup of coffee they laid their plans. Lazada would instruct the district road commissioner at Bontoc to cooperate with them in every way, since that official came under his jurisdiction. Through the district commissioner they could hire any laborers they might need. The commissioner also would arrange for Rick's plane to land on the highway at Bontoc when necessary. Since there was little traffic, landing would present no real problems. They could use the district office at Bontoc, and make it their headquarters.

Dr. Okola sighed, "I can't tell you how sorry I am that you come in the midst of a school seminar. If you are still searching

at the end of next week, I will join you. But until then, it will be impossible."

"But you will send us a good guide who knows the area," Tony reminded him.

"Yes. He will be at your hotel in the morning. His name is Angel Manotok, and you can trust him with no hesitation. He speaks Igorot and Ifugao, as well as the Filipino dialects of this region. He can drive a truck, and he can cook reasonably well." Okola pronounced the man's name in the Spanish way, "Ahng-hel."

"Sounds like a handy guy to have around," Scotty remarked.

"Yes," Rick agreed. "Besides, it's nice to have an angel in the party."

The hour was late. The boys and Tony Briotti bade good night to Lazada and Okola, refused the offer of another coke but accepted a ride back to the hotel in Lazada's car. As they left the house the boys looked for Chahda. There was a Sikh at the gate, but he was a big man. Chahda was not in sight.

Lazada's car turned out to be a brand-new Cadillac with a special maroon paint job and a monogram about four inches square on every door. Evidently the Assistant Secretary believed in personal advertising.

They were tired. The ride back to the Manila Hotel was made in silence, except for a brief report to Tony that all was in readiness for the trip to Baguio on the first leg of their journey.

At the hotel desk they picked up their room keys. The boys had

one room, Tony another. The rooms were on the second floor, so they walked upstairs instead of bothering with the slow elevators.

"Good night, boys," Tony said wearily. He inserted his key and swung the door open, then stiffened as a crash sounded in the room. Rick and Scotty snapped out of their weary haziness and leaped into the room behind Tony in time to see a figure dive headlong from the window.

Rick yelled in horror. They rushed to the window, expecting to see the man dead on the ground below. Instead, they saw him swing lightly from the branch of a flame tree and drop to the ground. He ran across Dewey Boulevard and was lost in the darkness under the walls of Intramuros.

CHAPTER IV

Inside the Walls

"The fire escape!" Scotty yelled.

Rick was with him on the instant. They ran to the end of the corridor, threw open the door, and dashed down the fire escape. No word passed between them as they crossed Dewey Boulevard. At a time like this their teamwork was automatic.

They reached the walls of Intramuros, and Scotty went left, Rick right. Somewhere along the walls, or within the city, was the intruder. The question was, Had the intruder kept right on going across the walled city, or was he in hiding, waiting to see whether or not he was being pursued? If the former, their chances of catching up with him were almost zero.

Rick rounded the corner of the wall and had a clear view all the way down to the Department of Commerce building nearly a half mile away. There were sufficient street lights to show him that the quarry was not in sight.

He saw a breach in the wall a few yards away and hurried toward it. There was almost no light within the walled city, he suspected, but he would have to look. The breach turned out to be a pile of rubble. He would have to go over the wall unless he wanted to search for an entrance. There wasn't time for that. He climbed up the pile of rubble, careful about his footholds, and

gained the top of the wall. For a moment he was silhouetted at his full height.

And in that instant a rifle cracked. He saw the muzzle flame, and in the next instant he heard the soft smacking sound of the slug as it went past his ear. There was only one thing to do. He jumped.

The wall was high, and he had no way of knowing what was below, but it was better to risk unknown rubble than another shot from the sniper's gun.

He landed with knees flexed, struck level ground, but fell forward with the momentum of the fall. Thorns dug into his hands and he smothered a grunt of pain. He lay where he was, not moving, waiting for some move from the sniper and for his eyes to adjust themselves to the dense blackness within the walls.

He wondered whether the sniper and intruder were the same man. The intruder had carried no rifle when he went out the hotel window. But it was possible that he had cached one somewhere under the wall.

What could the man have been after? Rick rejected the idea that this was common thievery. It was possible, but not probable. Especially after the attack on Tony Briotti aboard the boat. And after finding that Chahda had gone underground and was posing as a Sikh.

He was sure something was cooking that boded ill for the expedition. Nor did he have to rack his brains to find the cause. A golden skull was reason enough. Mass murder had been

committed for less gold many times before this.

His eyes searched the darkness, and his ears strained for the slightest sound, but no movement or noise followed. Yet, unless the sniper were the world's most silent walker, he could not have slipped away.

And where was Scotty?

Again he pondered the mystery of Chahda. The Hindu boy had been registered at the Manila Hotel, waiting for the Spindrifft party. Then, three days before their arrival, he had checked out and gotten a job as a guard at Lazada's. The disguise didn't cause Rick much wonderment. Sikhs, after all, are Indians, and Chahda had once worked for a Sikh officer in the Bengal Lancers. Rick remembered that from an incident during the Tibet expedition. It was probable that Chahda had simply gone to the chief Sikh in Manila – there was always such a leader – and enlisted his aid.

But why?

Rick tensed, sensing a presence near him. He raised on one elbow and thought he discerned a figure nearby. The figure was close to the wall. He had a hunch that it was Scotty, but he couldn't be sure. He made no further movement, waiting to see.

The figure became clearer, passed close in front of him, and from his low vantage point the man was silhouetted against the sky, which had a pink glow from the myriad neon lights of downtown Manila. No doubt of it, the figure was Scotty's. Rick got to his feet, and staying close to the wall, moved in the same direction Scotty had taken.

The inner ground of the walled city was fairly clear, but close to the walls there was considerable debris. Rick proceeded carefully, trying not to make a noise. He picked his way through tangles of weeds and wire, loose stone, and piles of junk that had been accumulating since the days of the Spanish conquistadors.

He was tense, and his face was wet with sweat. There was a possibility that the sniper was gone, but if not, a noise could bring a lethal slug. Rick thought grimly that the ancient walled city probably had seen many a murder in the more than three hundred years since the wall had been built. He had no desire to be the most recent victim.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, his foot struck the edge of a twisted sheet of steel. The sheet, all that remained of a Japanese armored car, rang dully.

Instantly the rifle flamed. The slug smacked into the stone wall a foot from Rick's shoulder. He didn't wait for the next shot. He hit the ground, scuttled a few feet, and stopped in a thorny patch. He grimaced and risked wiping the sweat off his brow. At least one question was answered. The sniper had not left.

Rick knew that the mysterious rifleman could have gotten away before this. The fact that he was still lying in wait could mean only one thing. He had known he was being pursued by the Spindrifters, and he had waited in the hope of picking off one or two of them.

Fingers of ice laid themselves across Rick's spine. It was no fun being the object of deadly intentions. He lay very still.

His hand brushed something soft among the thorns, and he thought he knew what it was. He was lying in a patch of the tiny pink flowers known as *cadena de amor*— chain of love. He had seen them everywhere during the day. They grew like weeds anywhere they were allowed to flourish.

The humor of it touched him. How romantic his sister Barbara would think it – to be trailing a desperado through an ancient Spanish city, and to be flat on one's stomach in a patch of chain of love. If he got out of this with a whole skin, he would write her about it, omitting such unpleasant facts as rifle bullets striking too close and thorns among the flowers.

But unless he did something about it, he probably would still be lying there at dawn. He rose to his knees, then to his feet, holding his breath until lack of response from the rifleman told him he had not been observed. Then he resumed his slow march in the direction Scotty had taken.

All guidebooks to the Philippines mentioned the walled city as a "must-see" item for tourists, and Rick had intended to take a daytime tour. This was not a suitable substitute. He would still have to return by day. He moved on, with extreme caution. He could see nothing but the upper edge of the wall and the silhouette of the ancient cathedral a few hundred yards away. But movement of air, a slight thinning of the darkness, told him when he passed openings in the thick wall.

Suddenly he stopped, all senses alert. He had heard something. As he waited, muscles rigid with the strain of listening, he heard

a whisper no louder than the rustle of a moth's wing.

"Rick?"

"Yes," he breathed.

Even though he was expecting it, he gave an involuntary jump when Scotty's hand touched his sleeve. Scotty's lips touched his ear and the husky ex-marine whispered almost inaudibly:

"Gate to the street. Ten paces ahead. I have an empty gasoline drum. Going to throw it. If he fires and is close enough, rush him. If not, make for the gate. Can't stay here all night."

Rick found Scotty's shoulder and squeezed it to indicate agreement, then he crouched low, ready to move like a plunging fullback in any direction.

Scotty moved away. In a moment Rick heard the faint scrape of metal on stone. He filled his lungs with air, then held his breath, waiting.

He sensed rather than saw Scotty lift the gas drum over his head. Even when empty, gas drums weigh quite a bit, but Scotty launched it like a medicine ball. Rick saw it briefly, a cylindrical shadow against the sky, then it landed with an appalling clatter, struck sparks from a stone, and rolled noisily away.

The rifle flamed one, twice. It was perhaps twenty paces away, and the shooting was toward the drum. Rick rushed forward, arms outstretched. He heard a slap like a baseball hitting a glove, then a cry of pain. The rifle blasted again, muzzle skyward.

Rick thought he heard a siren wail, but there wasn't time to wonder. He sprang headlong toward the rifleman. His shoulder

struck flesh which yielded. Then warm metal touched his hand and he grabbed for it. The rifle barrel! He leaned on it, keeping it vertical, and put his weight into the job of driving its owner back off balance.

A blow caught him under the eye and he saw stars. For a moment he relaxed his grip, then he released the rifle and reached until he found cloth. He pulled, letting himself go backward as the wearer of the cloth was pulled off balance. He landed on his back, and a knee in the chest drove the air out of him. He rolled sideways, fists driving out. One connected and the shock of hitting bone ran through his knuckles and up his arm.

A heavy weight landed on his stomach and he grunted, trying to roll out from under. Again his fist lashed out and connected. He drew it back for another punch.

Brilliant light illuminated the scene. Rick blinked in the glare and saw Scotty's grim face above him. Scotty had his fist cocked back for a punch that would have knocked him colder than a raspberry popsickle.

"Hold it," Rick grunted. Scotty was forcing the air out of him by sheer weight.

Running feet pounded the earth and hands jerked both of them to their feet. Scotty held the sniper's rifle, but the sniper was gone.

A Filipino policeman looked at them over the sights of a .45 caliber Colt automatic. Even in the reflected lights of the prowler's head lamps, the muzzle looked only slightly smaller than

the entrance to Mammoth Cave.

Rick's hair lifted. "Put that thing down!" he gulped.

"Officer," Tony said crisply, "these are the two boys from my party. They were chasing the burglar." He added, "Apparently they succeeded only in catching each other. What in the name of an Igorot icebox were you two trying to do?"

The boys looked embarrassed. "We had the sniper," Rick explained. "But we must have got tangled up. I thought the man with the rifle was the burglar, but it was Scotty."

"He threw the rifle at me," Scotty said. "I reached for him, swung on him and connected, then the rifle knocked me down."

The policeman's running mate came back from a search of the darkness. He spoke to his companion in Tagalog.

"No use," the first policeman said. "He is gone. We would need help to find him, since the walled city is big and has many hiding places. Can you give a description? By the time help came he could be miles from here. Perhaps we can get him later."

Rick knew how hopeless that was.

"Unless the boys got a better look," Tony Briotti said, "the only thing I can say is that he was either an Igorot or an Ifugao. Short and muscular. I saw his haircut – couldn't very well miss it. But not his face."

Rick and Scotty hadn't even seen that much. An Igorot or Ifugao? Probably the latter, since their expedition was connected with the Ifugaos and not the Igorots. Rick remembered the incident on the freighter. There was a pattern to this...

"I will be the one to take the rifle," the policeman said.

Rick wondered at the strange flavor of the phrase. But he was to hear it many times while in the Philippines. "I will be the one..." It was a literal translation from the Spanish.

"I will be the one to take the names," the second policeman said, opening his notebook. "You will have to make charges."

"No use," Tony replied. "Let's forget the whole thing. We'll never catch up with the man, whoever he was."

Nevertheless, the police insisted on names and histories, and it was ten minutes before the Spindrifters made their way back to the hotel. In the main dining room they talked over cups of hot chocolate, ignoring the curious stares of late supper guests who obviously wondered about Rick and Scotty's disheveled condition.

Since the boys had not wanted to discuss their personal business in front of Lazada's chauffeur there had been no chance to tell Tony about Chahda. Now they did so, and Rick ticked off points on his fingers.

"Item One: The man on the boat who tried to chop you. Either an Igorot or Ifugao. Item Two: Chahda checks out of the hotel and appears as a Sikh guard at Lazada's."

"You forgot Item Three," Scotty added. "Colonel Felix Rojas. Asked us what good is hay to a dead horse, and knew we were having dinner at Lazada's." He described the incident to Tony.

"Item Four," Rick continued. "We find a prowler in your room. He had a rifle cached in the walled city and waited around

to use it on us. He was either an Igorot or Ifugao." He spread his hands. "Do we need anything more? Something is in the wind. But what?"

"A golden skull," Scotty said.

"Yes. But we don't have it. Does it make sense for anyone to try to knock us off before we have it? Shucks, we don't even know where it is, except that it's somewhere among the rice terraces."

"Which is like saying that somewhere in the Mohave Desert is a buried treasure," Scotty added.

Tony Briotti sighed. "I had heard a great deal about the penchant you two have for mysteries and excitement. Now I believe everything I've heard and more. I can't imagine any reason for all these happenings. They simply don't make sense."

"They do to someone," Rick said, and Scotty nodded agreement.

Their waiter approached, an envelope in his hand. "Meester Brant? This come while you outside. You take?"

Rick took. "Must have arrived while Scotty and I were battling for the boxing championship of the walled city." He tore it open.

"Item Five," he said. "From Chahda. 'Can't come now. Meet you in Baguio. Watch yourselves. Big danger from Ifugao no palate.'"

Scotty held his head with both hands. "Great! How do we know whether or not an Ifugao has no palate?"

"Look down the throats of every one we see," Rick said wearily. "Or maybe if an Ifugao has no palate he wears a sign

to say so."

Tony Briotti rose. "That message makes no sense, either. And I make no sense to myself. It's late. Come on to bed. Maybe everything will clear up in the morning."

"Go to bed or go nuts," Rick added. "The choice is easy. But let's bar the windows. Just to keep the night air out."

"Amen," Scotty said. "I think I'll break out my rifle and keep it by the bed. Just in case some of that dangerous night air gets in."

CHAPTER V

Manotok the Mighty

At breakfast the next morning Rick and Scotty were subjected to an amused scrutiny by Tony. He ticked off the items on his fingers.

"Rick has a slight mouse under one eye, and his left arm seems a little stiff. I noticed that he sat down gingerly, and that there is a very pronounced bruise on the side of his jaw. Hands would indicate that he has been playing with a rather rough cat, except that I happen to know he was scrambling around in some *cadena de amor*.

"Scotty is also wearing a mouse under one eye, perhaps a little more prominent than Rick's. And he has a long scratch behind the left ear, obviously caused by some sharp instrument."

The archaeologist grinned. "If you do that to each other, what would you do to an enemy?"

The boys grinned back. "Can't tell you until we catch an enemy," Rick replied. "Actually, most of my terrible wounds came from falling down."

"Same here," Scotty agreed. "And that sharp instrument you mentioned was the edge of a tin can."

Tony spooned succulent orange-colored papaya melon with appreciation. "Have either of you figured out what our Ifugao

friend – let's assume that he was an Ifugao – wanted in my room last night?"

"The only answer I can think of is the obvious one," Rick answered. "He probably thought we have a map or something showing the location of the golden skull. He wanted it."

"I accept the hypothesis only because I haven't a better one," Tony said. "How about you, Scotty?"

Scotty shrugged. "Can't buy it. But on the other hand, I don't have any theory. Wish Sherlock Holmes were here."

"We could use him," Briotti admitted. "Well, what's the program for today?"

"Off to Baguio," Rick replied. "But first, we'll have to rent or buy a truck. The plane can't carry us plus our gear, and we'll need the truck to take our stuff into the mountains. Scotty and I can do that. What are your plans?"

"There's an American anthropologist here I'd like to see. He's internationally known. Name of J. Walter McGowan. I made a tentative appointment yesterday. I'm sure he will have some information on the Ifugaos that will be of interest. Probably Okola has included in his papers on the subject everything McGowan knows, but I'd like to talk with him just to get the feel of things, so to speak."

"Then why don't you do that this morning?" Rick suggested. "We'll get the truck, load the gear, and get ready to take off."

"Wonder where that Filipino Angel is?" Scotty asked. "Wasn't he supposed to be here this morning?"

"I don't think Okola specified a time," Tony replied. "And the morning is still pretty young."

That was true enough, Rick thought. Besides, he had the impression that the Filipinos, although they followed Western customs, had the Far Easterners' disregard of time.

"If the Angel doesn't arrive, one of us will have to drive the truck to Baguio," he said. "I had hoped he would take the truck, then we three could fly."

Scotty asked, with deceptive casualness, "Tony, what do you think of Dr. Okola?"

Tony answered promptly. "A first-rate scientist and a distinguished gentleman besides. Why?"

"Do you trust him?"

"Implicitly. We're not dealing with a stranger here, Scotty. Okola's name has been known to me since I first became interested in archaeology. We have many mutual friends, and he has been very helpful and courteous since this project was first proposed. Yes, I trust him."

"That's good," Scotty said, "since we're buying the services of this Angel purely on his say-so. We'll have to trust Angel. We have no choice."

"True. I'm prepared to trust him, simply because Okola said we could."

Rick nodded agreement. "I'll take him on faith, too." He had learned not to be overtrustful in far places among strangers, but he agreed with Tony's estimate of Okola. The man, he

believed, was just what he seemed to be – a Filipino scientist and gentleman. He had liked Okola.

"All right," Scotty said. "I'll go along. Okola seemed like a real *compadre*. But how about Lazada? Do you trust him?"

Tony considered. He finished his papaya, then tackled a mango salad, an unusual but delicious breakfast dish. "I don't distrust him," he said finally. "That's negative, but the best I can do. He's not the type of individual who appeals to me very much, but without further evidence I'd hesitate to mark him untrustworthy."

"I have a hunch," Rick said. "My hunch says that Mr. Lazada is crooked as a helical coil. I wouldn't trust him anywhere, any time."

Scotty agreed. "I would have said he's no straighter than the cutting edge of a saw. And he's just about that sharp, too. Trouble with you is, Tony, you're too civilized. You always see the best in everything, including people."

"Don't you?" Tony asked mildly.

The boys chuckled. Of course they did, and Tony knew it. But on an expedition like this, their suspicions came to the fore and they automatically distrusted everyone. Lack of distrust had caused them much trouble on other expeditions, and had come close to costing them their lives.

The headwaiter approached. "There is a man to see Dr. Briotti. Shall I have him wait?"

"That must be Okola's man," Tony said. "No, please bring him

here."

The three watched with interest as the headwaiter went to the door and returned leading a short, dark man.

Rick examined him with interest. At first glance the Filipino seemed quite short, as so many of his race are. Then Rick's discerning eyes saw the breadth of his shoulders. And he saw that the man wasn't really very short; he only seemed to be because of his extraordinary shoulder width.

The man was dressed simply but neatly in typical Filipino style with white trousers and a white shirt. The shirt had no tail, but was cut square at the bottom like a sport shirt. The collar was sport-shirt style, too, worn open, and disclosed a muscular throat.

The man bowed slightly. "Dr. Briotti?"

"I am Briotti." He indicated the boys. "Mr. Brant and Mr. Scott. And you?"

"I am Angel Manotok, at your service. Dr. Okola said that you needed a driver, guide, and general handyman. He said that he had recommended me."

"Yes. Please sit down. Will you have breakfast?"

"Some coffee, perhaps. I have already had breakfast."

Angel Manotok had a strong, square face. Rick thought that he looked very much like an American Indian. His hair was thick and very black, and freshly cut into a sort of crew cut.

"You will want to see my papers," Angel said.

He produced a wallet and extracted several documents. The Spindrifters examined them. There was a Philippine driver's

license, a United States Army driver's license indicating that the bearer was qualified to drive military vehicles, an honorable discharge from the Philippine Scouts, which had been a part of the United States Army, and a certificate from the Philippine Public Health Service certifying that Angel Manotok, as of three weeks ago, had been X-rayed and found free of tuberculosis.

"So you were in the Philippine Scouts," Scotty remarked.

Angel grinned, showing strong white teeth. "I have been many things, including a scout. I have also been a lumberjack in Zambales Province, a gold miner in Baguio, and a farmer in Mindanao."

"You speak remarkably good English," Tony commented.

"Thank you, sir. You will notice from my discharge that I was a sergeant in the Philippine Scouts. I had the advantage of American military schools. I also attended college – the Ateneo de Manila, which has American Jesuit priests as teachers. I did not graduate, unfortunately, but I did learn your language rather better than most Filipinos."

Rick liked Angel at once. He nodded at Tony and Scotty, and they nodded back. Tony at once began discussing salary and general arrangements with Angel.

When they had reached an agreement, Angel grinned. "Now I can tell you. Since Dr. Okola was very anxious for me to go, I was prepared to work for you just for food. But a salary is much better."

"Much," Tony agreed. "We prefer it that way, too, although I

appreciate your loyalty to Dr. Okola."

"Where is your baggage?" Rick asked.

"I left it outside at the desk. I haven't much to carry along. Just work clothes and a few tools."

"Where can we get a truck?" Scotty inquired.

"What kind would you like?"

Rick answered. "An Army six-by-six, if possible."

"That can be done. Rent or buy?"

"Which do you suggest?"

"Rent. Let me do it for you. I can bargain much better than you can."

"Fine," Rick agreed. "We'll go with you and watch."

Angel shook his head. "Better not. If the dealer knows the truck is for Americans, the price will go up. If he thinks it is for a Filipino, the price will be low. Let me get a truck – I'll be sure it's a good one – and meet you here."

Rick considered. "No, let's make another plan. I want to spend a little more time checking my plane. Suppose you get the truck, then meet us at Hangar 18 at the airport. We can come back here and load after lunch. Then we can fly to Baguio while you follow with the truck."

"Have you ever driven to Baguio?" Scotty asked.

"Many times. It takes between six and seven hours, depending on the traffic. Some parts of the road aren't very good, and traffic piles up."

"Then if you leave at noon, you should be in Baguio at

dinnertime."

"Yes. Shall I go now? I will need a hundred pesos. That is for a deposit on the truck."

Tony opened his billfold. "Let's see. That's fifty dollars. Is American money all right?"

Angel smiled. "American money is always all right, everywhere. I will get a truck and then come to the airport. Yes?"

"Yes. And glad to have you with us," Rick said.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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