

Apocalypse

by

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Chapter One

They moved slowly through the jungle. The Arawak and Carib scouts leading the group slashed bushes and branches out of the way quickly with razor-sharp machetes, cutting a ten-foot wide path through the tangled underbrush.

The group was four days from the river. As they moved through the darker interior jungle of Marajo Island, the thicker the clouds of insects became.

There were at least twenty native scouts, most nearly naked, painted brightly in reds and yellows, wearing feathered headdresses and armed with poisoned arrows, spears, and the occasional warclub spiked with sharpened teeth or a wicked jawbone.

Behind the group of natives there were around a hundred outsiders dressed in contemporary REI clothing but burdened down by bulging backpacks, automatic weapons, and cases of food. At the head of the procession, hiking beside the scouts was a tall, lanky officer from the *Grupamento de Megulhadores de Combate*, or GRUMEC, the Brazilian Special Forces responsible for the Amazon River Basin.

Sylvio, the GRUMEC officer, wore a thin, sweat-soaked blue serge shirt and battered khaki pants. His dark, gloss-brimmed officers cap was pulled down tightly over his shoulder-length black hair. Sylvio was an indigenous Arawak who had left his tribe and become an outsider, working for GRUMEC and living in the provincial capitol of Manaus for the last fifteen years.

Every hour or so Sylvio would pull a brown and tattered scroll from under his arm, unroll it, and squint at the nineteenth century script. He tried to identify mountains or streams noted on the ancient map, but with the thick and overgrown underbrush it was hard to see any landmarks. He looked at his compass and then pointed out the direction he wanted the natives to move the group. They had been hiking through the steaming jungle for just a few days, but to the settlers it felt like forever.

Those wearing modern clothing felt as if they were well prepared for their journey, but they were quickly beginning to fade under the weight of their equipment. The guns they were carrying weren't so bad, it was the ammunition, the electronics, the food, and the water they were carrying that really burdened them down. The native scouts would spit in disgust as the outsiders stumbled over the vegetation.

At night they made camp in the largest clear areas they could find. Once they left the first few miles near the coast they found very few open spaces. After the second day there were no more hamlets, small villages, roads, paths, or even isolated farmers. The last civilized location they'd found was an abandoned and overgrown farmhouse two days behind them. They were plowing through what they thought was an uninhabited jungle, on a quest to

find a legendary city in the middle of a brutal and unforgiving rainforest.

The insects were thicker the farther they got from the Amazon shore. Marajo Island was known to flood heavily in the rainy season which left much of the jungle they were hiking through fairly swampy. Even just the quick everyday morning showers were enough to leave moisture on the ground.

Pools of stagnant water stood in the dense underbrush and bred hymns of bugs the outsiders had never imagined. There were swarms of mosquitoes that could transmit malaria, yellow fever, elephantiasis, and a plethora of other diseases.

Tiny *berne* flies would push their ovipositor through the settler's clothing and lay eggs under their skin. In a few days they were picking at tiny maggots that had begun to crawl out from beneath their skin where the eggs had been left.

There were *pium* flies that were small enough that they could get through mosquito netting. They swarmed in clouds and would bite any exposed section of skin. The skin then erupted in lesions from the bites.

Though the natives were used to the jungle and merely brushed the bugs away while applying a pungent salve that kept the mosquitoes and biting flies off, the outsiders were forced to wear mosquito netting and use liberal amounts of insecticide. Those who did not think far enough ahead to bring a goodly supply of Deet and the protective netting were eaten alive by a thousand pinpricks.

They had already lost nearly a dozen members of the group in the first three days. Three had been bitten by coral snakes and were reduced to convulsions on the ground before a quick death. Two men had foolishly handled a colorful frog they'd found, hoping to keep it for a pet, or at the very least to eat it. Sylvio suspected it was *Phyllobates terribilis*, one of the most poisonous frogs in the Amazon, for both men were dead by supertime. Two of the outsiders had succumbed to exhaustion and dropped dead as they were hiking, while a half dozen had simply disappeared.

It was the ones who had disappeared that worried Sylvio. In the Amazon rainforest there were a thousand things that could kill a man, deadly spiders, caiman lurking in the backwaters, panthers stalking through the trees, or natives who laid in ambush for the outsiders with poisoned arrows and darts.

If the ones who disappeared were killed by natural causes, Sylvio was glad they had simply gone missing. If they were killed by natives, he worried that their group might come upon them staked out on the ground or hanging in pieces from a tree as a warning. He wasn't sure how much more his motley entourage could endure.

His native guides were divided between nine indigenous Caribs and eleven Arawak tribesmen he'd brought downriver from the Rio Negro area. Usually outsiders being led through the jungle would wonder whether native guides were in league with parties waiting to ambush an expedition, but Sylvio trusted these guides. He knew these were dishonorable tribesmen who'd agreed to guide the group for a mix of weapons and solar lanterns.

Even more telling was the fact that most of the native's scouts were tobacco smokers, who'd picked up the habit from the incessant parties of tourists that used to struggle through the Amazon to the most accessible villages for a traditional dance show. The miners and loggers who destroyed the native's traditional tribal lands also regularly bribed the locals with cigarettes.

Sylvio smirked at the irony of these guides leading them to the dark interior of Marajo Island to find the Lost City of Z, El Dorado, Shrangi-la, or whatever the doomed explorers searching for it cared to call the advanced pre-Columbian civilization in the heart of the island. Many men and women had died searching for the lost city, fueled by talk of gold and temples of splendor. They would end up finding a quick death in the jungle from the elements, the deadly bugs, or at the hands of the very natives they meant to rob and enslave.

In spite of the misfortune that had befallen all the other expeditions that set out for the fabled city, the GRUMEC officer was confident. The tattered scroll he carried under his arm was an exact copy of a rough sixteenth century map made by one of the few men who ever claimed to have reached the city, Francisco Orellana. Around Christmas of 1545 Orellana claimed to have found a huge civilization with large temples, a thriving population, and an immense amount of gold. In less than a year, by November of 1546, Orellana and seventeen of his men had died from a poison arrow attack.

At dusk the outsiders would begin looking for a clearing for their tents. The natives shook their heads when they saw the group breaking out the high tech camping equipment.

The Arawaks would hack at a few branches, gather some leaves, and create a temporary lean-to a few feet off the ground, while the Caribs would simply string their hammocks between a couple of trees. By the time they'd finished their native shelters the settlers were still struggling with ropes and poles and were flooding the forest with light from solar lanterns and flashlights.

Though the group hiking through the jungle was heavily armed it was not a war party. This was obvious due to the forty-some women who had come with the outsiders. These were tough women, native-born, who'd gone through the ritual when young and then left the jungle and turned to lives of drugs or prostitution in the big cities. Rio alone was rumored to have close to 50,000 natives, mostly working low wage, menial jobs or marginalized into lives of crime in the numerous *favelas* bordering the larger cities.

The majority of natives who'd abandoned their tribes hadn't left the jungle until adulthood, years after their tribal initiations. The initiation or puberty rites consisted of days of isolation, the drinking of herbal tea from the *Orchidaceae deciduosis* flower, and the breathing of the fragrant tukano wood smoke. Those who had undergone the initiation were the only human beings left alive on the planet earth.

With nearly all of humanity decimated by the deadly *Cordyceps unilateralis* fungus, the few survivors ended up targeting each other in the day to day fight to survive. Now the native-born gathered together for defense from the natives left alive.

The *cordyceps* fungus was an ultra-airborne contaminant with the ability to be spread rapidly around the globe through high altitude trade winds. For thousands of years the fungus had existed in the Amazon basin, content to ravage the ant colonies it patronized, able to thrive in the darkened canopy amongst a myriad of unknown species. But until recently, it had never spread beyond the canopy, or the four species of ants who regularly developed it.

It was known to western science as the whimsically-named zombie ant fungus. It was a colorful name, but accurate in its description of the few days of zombie-like behavior exhibited by those infected until they were made immobile by the fungus and mushrooms sprouted from their helpless and dying bodies.

The scientists who studied it believed the *cordyceps* fungus incapable of spreading beyond the few species of ants it affected. When the fungus began infecting larger insects such as grasshoppers, and then lizards; scientists continued to believe it was a fungus that only infected cold-blooded creatures.

That all changed two years ago. When a UCLA Professor, Dr. Horatio Pritchard, came to the Orinoco Basin, near the headwaters of the Rio Negro and Orinoco rivers to find his lost colleague. With his arrival an unintended chain of events was set in motion. His friend, a popular National Geographic Society photographer named James Fennimore, had become the first “known” human victim and host for the *cordyceps* fungus.

In the process of bringing his friend’s body out of the jungle the fungus had become airborne and utilized the prevalent trade winds to spread itself around the planet. At first the researchers thought the fungus was limited to a few people who’d been to the Amazon. They joked that the only reason humans were affected,

and no other warm-blooded mammals, was because man was the most cold-blooded.

Quickly though, everything changed. Within months the fungus began popping up all around the globe. No matter what the researchers tried, nothing seemed to stop it. The only humans who seemed immune were those who had gone through puberty rituals in the Amazon basin.

There were a few, probably less than a dozen, researchers and botanists who had lived with the native tribes and experimented with the ritual. Some thought the combination of herbal tea from the *Orchidaceae deciduosis* flower and the smoke of the tukano wood might be a type of hallucinogenic. They were disappointed at the time. Now they were the only non-natives left alive.

The settlers passed several “graveyards”, places where corpses were, but not necessarily graves. There were usually a half a dozen feathery bodies laying in the trees, just over head height. The bodies had decomposed to nearly bone, but the wisps of white gauze between the mushrooms remained. There were small, torn suggestions of clothing, but most often, only fungus. The settlers tried not to look at the bodies in the trees, as the native guides distracted them and tried to steer them away from such indignities.

Sylvio, the GRUMEC officer, was born an Arawak. He had gone through the puberty ritual at twelve and had left the tribe for the big city of Manaus when he was sixteen. He’d worked his way from being a gopher on mining sites, to poaching, to dealing heroin in the seedy *favelas*, and then to becoming one of the Brazilian government’s top GRUMEC officers.

Now that there was no more government, Sylvio was it. He’d taken control through the native-born left alive in the GRUMEC squads. More than half their number were indigenous and had received the puberty ritual in their youth.

The group hiking through the dense jungle of Marajo Island that day had all undergone the ritual. Besides the twenty natives there were a hundred settlers dressed in contemporary clothing.

These native-born had deserted their tribes for the big cities well after their puberty rites.

Sylvio had done the most to get them together. When rival gangs of native-born faced off in the *favelas* of Rio or Manaus, they often wiped each other out. He alone had taken the initiative to raid the GRUMEC equipment yards, band together with those officers and men who had undergone the ritual, and begin to forge a small army.

He had used the GRUMEC emergency radio system to send out a message to those in the cities who might have access to a radio. He'd offered protection, food, and a future to those who would join him. Somehow, maybe through his reputation as a poacher, drug dealer, and old school gangster; he was able to get a large percentage of the survivors together and present a unified goal.

The goal was El Dorado. It was the city of gold, the dream of conquistadors, the deadly legend of a rich and forgotten empire. Thousands of explorers had lost their lives searching for the lost city and the history books were filled with their sad tales and harrowing adventures.

Though it seems foolish today for these explorers to sink their fortunes and lives into the search for a golden city, there were several contemporary precedents. In 1519 Hernan Cortes conquered the wealthy Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, while Francisco Pizarro took possession of Cuzco, the gold-rich capital of the huge Incan empire. Pizarro's younger brother, Gonzalo, launched one of the first Amazon expeditions searching for El Dorado in 1541.

His expedition party consisted of two hundred mounted soldiers, four thousand native slaves, thousands of pigs and hunting dogs, and baggage carts pulled by llamas. He cut a swath through the jungle slaughtering and torturing any natives he found in his search for the city of gold.

Seventeen months after entering the jungle, Pizarro and eighty men stumbled out of the jungle, naked and sick, and

returned to civilization broken men. Pizarro's second in command, Francisco Orellano, had taken some of the men and left the expedition by boat months earlier. He and his survivors were the first men to travel the full length of the Amazon River, and the tattered map Sylvio carried was a copy of one drawn by Orellano himself.

His men described Marajo as containing a huge native population, wide streets paved with stone, large, well-developed cities, and an abundance of precious metals. They had obtained food and supplies from a friendly indigenous population that seemed to have an abundance of farmed crops. This was the kingdom Sylvio was seeking.

Even Walter Raleigh led an expedition searching for El Dorado in the Orinoco Basin in 1617. His son was killed by natives on the Orinoco River and Raleigh escaped the jungle a humbled and humiliated man. He returned to England and was beheaded by King James II for wasting his men and the King's investment.

The legendary place the settlers were looking for in the Amazon was known as the Lost City of Z. This was the city that the greatest explorers in modern history, the Percy Fawcetts and the Teddy Roosevelts had searched for. The only real difference between the mythical El Dorado and Z, was that Z existed. It may have flourished and died out hundreds of years ago, but it was once a kingdom that ruled a large portion of the lower Amazon River. It was a common local belief that there was once a great civilization on Marajo Island, the Switzerland-sized piece of land in the mouth of the Amazon.

Thousands of men and women had searched fruitlessly for the legendary city. There were hundreds of ill-fated attempts to document the city that everyone had heard of but nobody could seem to find. The Amazon jungle is an unforgiving host that can quickly bury the dead, cover the lost, and erase the memories of failures.

For the last hundred years there had been a multitude of costly expeditions deep into the Matto Grosso in southern Brazil searching for the city. Some explorers had searched fruitlessly in the Orinoco Basin adjacent to the Amazon, while many had searched in the archipelago around Marajo Island, the largest freshwater island in the world.

Marajo Island sat in the mouth of the Amazon with its swampy North Eastern shore facing the Atlantic Ocean. The flow of freshwater from the upriver length of the Amazon is so strong around the island that the current takes freshwater hundreds of miles out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Yet the inland areas of the island, especially in the North East, swamped regularly. Most of the village huts were built on stilts in those areas, and the land had been mounded into small islands for protection from the frequently rising waters.

It was there, on the mounds, where archeologists found the first remnants of the ancient civilization. Curious pre-Columbian artifacts had been turning up on the world collector's market since the late nineteenth century. There were clay fertility goddesses, lamps, funerary vessels, and other exquisite pottery to be had. The museums in Rio de Janeiro and Belem were full of artifacts from the mounds.

Eventually the grave robbers and looters realized that Marajo Island was riddled with man-made mounds of earth. The island was basically flat until man had altered the course of the river as it flowed by the island. There were man-made canals, bypass rivers, holding ponds, lakes, and what looked like dams. Some of the native built mounds were sixty-feet-high, with no gravesites, while others appeared to be used solely for burials.

The trade in illegal artifacts from Marajo Island was a lucrative business for over a hundred years. Unfortunately for the looters, the government of Brazil eventually realized what a treasure trove they had buried on the island and set about shutting down the illicit trade.

The sheer size of the island prevented the government from finding many of the damaged archeological sites, while the looters seemed to have a second sense of where the government agents would strike next. This might have been due to Sylvio, the de facto leader of the settlers that were marching through the brush toward the center of the island.

Sylvio, though he was a native Arawak, had left his tribe when he was in his late teens and moved to Manaus, the nearest provincial capitol to his village. With his tribal language skills and jungle knowledge he was hired before he was twenty by GRUMEC, the Brazilian Special Forces in charge of the Amazon basin.

Though he went through their academy and worked daily with the GRUMEC office in Manaus, he still maintained many of his native connections. He was a poacher in his spare time and often set up many of the less savory archeological transactions in the area.

His long black hair and dark skin singled him out as a native wherever he went. The tribes along the river trusted him, and often gave Sylvio leads on smuggling, poaching, and illegal mining. He would usually contact the offending party and offer to either help, or shut down the operation, depending on how much the offender was willing to pay.

This was how Sylvio facilitated the sale and transfer of one of the largest caches of pre-Columbian artifacts from Marajo Island to a private German collector. The transaction had made him temporarily wealthy, but his experience with the artifacts gave Sylvio an even better idea after the catastrophe.

He had always heard legends of a huge and prosperous civilization deep within the jungle. In every story the civilization had died out hundreds or even thousands of years ago and the jungle had reclaimed the city.

While helping with the transportation of the smuggled artifacts he'd chatted up the smugglers who had found the cache. It was these looters who told him about Z, the huge city in the middle

of the jungle on Marajo Island. Some had seen the city, while others merely spoke about the arrangement of the mounds, ancient bridges over inaccessible rivers, apparent stone roads and plazas far from any settlements. This was the El Dorado he was searching for.

Other explorers, outsiders all, were more famous or wealthier than Sylvio, but few had the native connections that he had built up over the years. Even fewer had grown up with natives and had his jungle experience.

Percy Fawcett, the most famous Amazon explorer of the twentieth century died in the jungle with his son while searching for the lost city of Z. Teddy Roosevelt, who had led a huge expedition into the Matto Grosso area of southern Brazil in a search for the lost city, was on the verge of taking a cyanide pill when his son stopped him. So many men had died in his expedition that Roosevelt did not want to slow down the few left, as he had developed several ailments.

Since the nineteenth century, many well-funded expeditions had been mounted into the interior of Brazil's dark forests searching for the lost city. Nearly all who had strayed from the main river and gone overland into the jungle died on their search.

To move through the jungle for any length of time one must be able to live with the jungle. The interminable moisture soaking through everything, the infestations of bugs too numerous to describe, the sureness that one would contract malaria at one point of the trek, hostile tribes, and poisonous creatures were just a few of the obstacles to overcome on a deep forest Amazon trek.

Sylvio knew the fate of many of the expeditions into the interior of Marajo Island. The native Arawaks and Caribs kept the looting business to themselves. If outsiders ventured too close to the ruins of the ancient city or just spent too much time exploring the interior of the island; they would meet an untimely end.

There had been some well-funded professional surveys of the earthwork mound features scattered throughout the island. Many of the mounds were agricultural mounds, with a deep strata of

vegetable roots and seeds permeating the mounds. The ancient farmers had raised corn, beans, peppers, and squash. Other mounds bore evidence of settlements; postholes of decomposed logs which once had been the corners of the buildings. There weren't many vertical remains on the mounds as it appeared the entire civilization was built with wood, vines, and leaves.

Many of the waterways that crisscrossed the huge island were found to be canals, dug by what must have been thousands of people over hundreds of years. There were foundations for old sluice gates to control the flow of water through the canals, and a multitude of locks and overflow basins to either catch or discard excess water.

For the last two days the settlers had hiked up and down the sides of these canals as the native scouts hacked bushes out of their way. It was obvious that the path they were following had once been a game trail or a pathway as the vegetation was thinner along a ten foot wide line through the forest. At many of the canals they found a ramp on one bank and a corresponding ramp on the other side where a bridge would connect. Now all that remained were the earthen ramps.

The first canals they had hiked through were not very big, merely ten yards or so across, and had probably been used as agricultural conduits. As they neared the center of the island though, the canals grew immensely until they were the size of small rivers, some thirty yards across. Most were dry, but as they got closer to the center of the island the canals began to contain water.

Eventually the native guides were forced to swim across with ropes and help the settlers build a temporary bridge over the waterways. This slowed the group down but became necessary as the larger waterways still had water flowing swiftly through them.

The outsiders balked, even though they'd been native-born, as they noticed large fish and big black shapes, like crocodiles, in the swirling water. These settlers had grown comfortable in their filthy *favelas* and the crowded streets of Rio. While they were used

to the random violence in their adopted world, they weren't prepared for their ancestral rivers that could contain *caiman*, *pirahana*, electric eels, and worst of all, the fearsome *candiru* fish; a fish that swims up a person's urethra and anchors itself to a kidney until the victim dies.

Only recently have we developed a procedure to extricate the fish once it has entered a man's penis. In past years, and in the deep jungle, the only way to cure a man with the *candiru* fish inside him was to amputate the penis, sooner if possible, so that most of it could be saved. Many tribes had several members with a damaged penis from the primitive procedure.

The natives that swam across with the ropes to help start the bridge rubbed a very pungent oil on themselves before they swam across. All of the swimmers wore woven penis sheaths as well, to ward off the harmful fish. The bridges were a slow pain, but in order to get all the weapons and electronics over the water they were a necessary delay.

They'd brought enough emergency cables and ropes that they were able to leave a rough span over each of the wide canals. There would be many more settlers coming behind them, as well as bobcats, tractors, jeeps, and trucks. The crews that would be following the initial group had been gathering the equipment in Belem and readying it to ferry across to the island.

Sylvio had told them they would be building a new world, a better world, in order to survive. He pulled together the people he knew he could trust most, his fellow GRUMEC officers who were native-born, several of his female friends who were call girls in Manaus, the poachers and gun runners that he worked with daily, and any members he could find from the Brazilian armed forces. They were encouraged to bring as many weapons, vehicles, and food caches that they could find to the staging point at the mouth of the Amazon, Belem.

His immediate sub-commanders were Carlos "the Jackal" Mendoza, who had worked with Sylvio at the GRUMEC regional headquarters in Manaus and was known as a wicked hand in close

quarters with a knife; Stefano Ruiz, an aged, but experienced GRUMEC officer who had once won a silver marksmanship medal at the Montreal Summer Olympics; and Bianca Ramirez, a prostitute that used to work out of the *favelas* in Rio and was clever beyond anyone's estimation.

Sylvio had seen a bit of himself in Bianca as he'd watched her rob his new recruits when her caravan first arrived at Belem, the staging point. She'd befriend the new settlers and offer to show them the ropes. Then she'd proceed to help them set up their tents and stow their equipment, which she'd go through later that night with her gang of girls; who had all come from the infamous Rio favela, the Gaza Strip.

Bianca knew how powerful Sylvio could become in this new world and never thought to rip him off. When they first met she quickly assessed the situation and knew she had to get on his good side. Sylvio smiled and nodded quickly when she'd asked him if he wanted to see the world; and then he smirked in irritated humor as she pulled a small plastic globe out of her backpack.

Sylvio thought she was simple, but a few days later he realized his mistake of underestimating this woman. By the time a few of the settlers complained about being robbed by a female who had welcomed them into the camp, he was already in love with the duplicitous whore.

Bianca knew how to play to people's deepest fears. She worked with several of her girlfriends from the Gaza Strip and set up an underground business selling fake insect repellent in the camp. Sylvio watched her with fascination as she fleeced those who'd travelled hundreds or thousands of miles to make it to the gathering point.

As he watched her and her own small army of petty thieves, whores, and drug runners, Sylvio fell in love. He needed a woman like Bianca to help him subjugate and enlist the hordes of new settlers who showed up every day at the gathering point in Belem.

The trek through the jungle was grueling, but when they reached El Dorado, instead of a city of gold, it was a shambles.

The bridges passing over the last two moats, the largest ones at nearly a hundred feet wide, were in tatters. They had to be completely rebuilt, which cost the group four more days in the jungle within view of the legendary city, and a few more dead settlers.

The large stone causeways leading into the city were still smooth, after what could have been hundreds of years, but the jungle had spread its seed into every crack and crevasse, creating an ivy-covered ruin of what once must have been a great city. There were glyph-covered building walls that seemed to rise up out of the jungle floor and tower thirty feet over their heads.

“Damn, Sylvio. Come look at this...” yelled the Jackal as he hacked ivy away from one particularly well-preserved stone carving. It depicted a pre-Columbian king in front of a long line of petitioners carrying tribute gifts. They were dressed in unfamiliar, gaudy outfits. Nearly all the men in the glyph wore shell necklaces, short skirts, and high, ankle-strapped sandals. The king was dressed in gold, from his elaborate golden headdress to his high-heeled golden boots.

After hundreds of years covered with ivy and vines, the gold leafing on the king’s clothing and headdress was still shining brilliantly. Carlos took the point of his machete and pried at the gold.

“Damn, this shit is thick...” He nodded at Sylvio and pointed toward the large group of stragglers gathering behind them. He whispered. “We better keep them moving or we won’t get anywhere.”

The crowd of settlers edged forward, mesmerized by the shining golden king, and continued moving closer to their leaders as they stood in front of the glyph. Sylvio slapped the Jackal hard in the back of the head.

“Damn!”

Surprised, Carlos spun on his old friend and rival with the machete in hand. He waved the wicked blade at the part-time

poacher as the crowd ignored the glyph and circled the two in anticipation of a bloody fight. Sylvio winked quickly.

“You think you can just slap people?” he yelled, spitting a drop of blood at Sylvio.

“Idiot! It’s not even gold. That’s mica. It’s pretty, but worthless.”

Carlos turned back to the glyph and leaned in close to the golden figure of the king and scratched the image again. It was solid gold.

“Damn. You’re right. This shit is worthless. Let’s keep moving.”

Sylvio pulled his officer’s cap down over his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. The crowd that had encircled them was clearly disappointed at not getting the fight they’d hoped for. Sylvio and the Jackal pushed through the crowd after the scouts who were still hacking toward the center of town.

The city was bigger than they’d hoped, as they passed dozens of obvious streets with vine-covered walls stretching away for as far as the eye could see. After an hour of slow going behind the busy native scouts they saw it.

Rising in the distance before them was a tower. It was a tower unlike any of them had ever seen, stretching nearly seventy feet toward the sky and built out of solid stone. The blocks used to build the tower were impossibly smooth, and cut at nearly perfect angles.

The tower had vines wrapped around its lower extremities, but these disappeared after about twenty feet and they could see windows and what looked like observation ports on the sides of the tower. It was round, and nearly forty feet across. The tower was a miracle of bygone technology, especially since the settlers didn’t know of any nearby quarries for the stone. A huge city built of stone in the middle of the Amazon jungle was something you just didn’t see every day.

This was the megalopolis that Father Francisco Orellana had found in 1545. It was the city he described, rich in gold and larger

than any European cities he'd visited. Though there were no signs of recent habitation, the group did come across signs that looters had been in the area and hacked paths to several of the larger buildings.

The vegetation they sliced through was of an incredible variety. There were flowers, vegetables, and fruits that were familiar, but many that were not. It looked like a botanical experiment gone wrong, but the settlers were ecstatic that so much wild food appeared ready for the taking.

Sylvio and the Jackal approached the group of native scouts that had led them to the city. A few were still hacking away branches in front of the entrance to the tower. The others were exhausted and sat down at the base of the tower. Sylvio grabbed the sinewy forearm of the Carib leader in friendship. He reached out to the Arawak leader and gave him the same friendly embrace.

"Thank you for your help. We could never have found this without you. Carlos will be happy to pay you."

The leader of the Caribs, Camutin, a fierce young warrior that stood taller than any of his companions, scoffed.

"You lied to us about how many were coming," he spat on the ground. "You lied to us about how long this would take. We would like our payment now."

The Arawak leader, Koltaka, a portly young chieftain, looked nervously at the outsiders and nodded in agreement.

"We agreed on rifles, pistols, ammunition, and solar lanterns for everyone in the group," said Koltaka. "Don't try to short us."

The rest of the scouts gathered behind their leaders and nodded along with them. Sylvio smiled at the brightly colored and feathered natives. He turned to the Jackal.

"Carlos, did you already arrange for their weapons to be set out?"

"Yes, I've got their gear all boxed up for them and stacked at that last temple on the main road in."

"Did you hear that?" asked Sylvio. "He's got your weapons all ready for you back at that temple we just passed. We're even

going to throw in a couple of cases of cigarettes. He'll take you to them now."

The Jackal pointed back toward the way they'd just come. The natives smiled and laughed among themselves, glad to be done with the grueling week-long trek through the jungle with the naïve outsiders.

As they walked back toward the immense temple they passed through small crowds of settlers who were scrambling to claim various buildings and load them with gear. The women that had joined forces with Bianca took the square temple building adjacent to the central tower.

The pale-green temple had two floors of habitable space that had plainly been some sort of priestly apartments. It was divided into several small rooms, each with a stone platform that must have once served as a bed and a window cut through the green stone.

The Jackal pointed toward the side of the temple where the native's guns had been laid out. The building was a low pyramid, rising fifty feet out of the jungle and terminating in a small, square building at its apex. A half dozen of Carlos' most trusted men were standing guard over the guns and ammunition with automatic weapons.

Camutin and Koltaka laughed and smiled like children on a holiday. Their men rushed over to the crates and began pulling out rifles and pistols. They gushed over the new weapons and tore open the crates looking for ammo. After opening all the boxes and finding none, Camutin turned to the Jackal.

"Where's the ammo? Our deal was for the ammo and the guns..."

Carlos smiled and waved his hand dismissively at the young leader as his men opened up with the automatic weapons.

The Carib and Arawak hunters had dropped their spears and machetes and were all holding the new, useless weapons. A few dove to the ground as the automatic fire ripped through those standing and threw splattering fountains of warm blood across the temple wall.

They didn't have time to scream or yell as fifteen of the natives standing were eviscerated by the fusillade while the five who had gotten to the ground were pummeled relentlessly with hollow-point bullets until they were unrecognizable lumps of red flesh.