



THE EMERALD HEAD CAPER

by
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CHAPTER 1

The shadows played on Penn's face as he raced along the trail. The twisted jungle vines and branches scraped his new trekking clothes, tearing at them, ripping them. At one time the trail was clear and easily passable, but it had long since been forgotten, unused, clogged by decades old growth. It was nearly hidden by the brush, the weeds, the fallen trees, and the broken, rotting logs.

Mosquitoes, wasps, gnats, flies and dragonflies, every kind of flying insect common to humid climates flew at him. They hit him in the face. They flooded his mouth when he was careless enough to open it to take a deep gasp of air, winded as he was from running. He spit them vehemently. He hated creeping, crawling, flying, pests.

"What am I doing here?" he shouted, angry with himself for getting into the situation. He ducked as yet another branch grabbed his sleeve, entwining itself as if its sole purpose was to frustrate his escape.

He couldn't use a machete to cut away the brush that tore at him. He didn't have time for cutting and slashing. Or, he wouldn't have had the time for cutting and slashing had he been able to wield his machete, if he had his machete, if he hadn't dropped it in his headlong race to get away.

The humidity has to be at least 120 percent, he moaned, as sweat poured from his body, soaking his clothes. It was the rainy season in Central America, and everything was wet. He wiped his arm across his forehead, and nearly tripped over a fallen log. Not watching where you're running, even for a second, is dangerous in the jungle.

Without warning the trail ended, and facing him was a river. He came upon it so quickly he nearly lost his balance while stopping. The riverbank sloped gently up from the slow moving, swampy water, and flattened out. It was muddy and sandy.

Might be quicksand, he mused, quickly stepping back to solid ground. In his haste he barely noticed the ancient Mayan ruins perched over the water less than ten yards away, almost hidden in the growth. Quicksand wasn't the only problem, though. There was something strange about that river. The floating logs moved upstream.

"Crocodiles!" he shouted in sudden realization. Some of the log-like shapes stopped moving and stared at him with their calculating, unblinking eyes barely above water.

Penn had seen crocodiles before in his years as a relic hunter. He had even seen them in his

earlier days as a private investigator. He had seen the crocodiles of the Nile. He had even been in the oceans off Northern Australia where he was nearly eaten by an Estuarine Crocodile, the largest in the world. He knew how dangerous crocodiles were, but none of them stirred the fear he felt as the largest of these Belizean monsters eyed him.

He turned back to the trail. He hoped to find another hiding place, or maybe another trail. But there was no escape, and his pursuers were near, coming quickly along the same trail.

He felt the weight of the Mayan ritual dagger stuffed in his pants pocket. It was made of gold and heavily encrusted with Emeralds. He wondered if it was worth everything he went through to find it, if it was worth all that he was going through to keep it. Right now, he concluded, it wasn't.

He had considered dropping the dagger on the trail when he discovered his pursuers. He was certain that was what they were after. If he had just left it in the middle of the trail, he was certain, they would have stopped for it and not come after him.

But he couldn't do that. He couldn't force himself to leave the object of all his efforts. Nor could he turn his back on the obscenely rich collector who had hired him to find it, the man who paid him a retainer that was only a quarter of what he would get when he delivered it.

It really wasn't the money, though, he reasoned. Or was he just rationalizing his greed? No, he argued. The truth was he couldn't let his client down. Or, more to the point, he couldn't let himself down. He had to keep his end of the bargain, no matter how hard it was. He had let himself down more than a few times in the past, when he wasn't so worried about self-respect. That was when Lara left him, or rather, that was why she left him. He didn't want to be that person again, so he stuck the dagger back in his pocket and looked around. There had to be another way.

Angry shouts in some strange and unintelligible language erupted from the trail behind him. "Wambe! Negale!... Negale!"

Penn had no idea what those words meant, but he was certain the Indians were talking about him.

"Aregeele! Aregeele!" the shouts continued. They were nasty sounding words, and they urged Penn into a frantic search for an escape.

"Oh, come on!" he nearly shouted in exasperation, looking about him at the thick brush lining the trail. "There's got to be a way through this stuff, somewhere." He tried to push aside the branches, but he soon gave up that idea. They were branches with thorns. They tore at his hands.

He ran a few yards farther back into the jungle, then stopped. His pursuers were in that direction, and they were getting close, too perilously close. He turned around. He thought of running back to the river, of building up enough momentum to leap across it. With any luck he could clear the water and the crocodiles. He didn't like that idea, but he'd rather face the crocodiles than his pursuers. At least crocodiles were things he knew, things that were predictable.

Wait a minute! He spotted something hopeful. Is that an opening? He raced back another five yards to where the brush parted, slightly. He shoved aside the brush. A tunnel! He peered into the darkness of the tunnel entrance. It wasn't large, but it was big enough to creep into, if he kept his head down, and it had to be a better choice than that river.

He glanced back down the trail in the direction of his pursuers, and was reassured that if he didn't do something soon, they would soon be on top of him. He had to make a decision. "I hate tunnels," he moaned in desperation as he gritted his teeth and forced himself into the dark,

foreboding opening.

Enough light penetrated the growth overhanging the tunnel entrance to allow some vision, once his eyes became adjusted to the change. He was less than a foot's distance inside when his head hit something. A root? He appraised it with a quick upward glance, crouching in nervous reaction. Only a root, he concluded.

He stood up as best he could in the low roofed tunnel, and tried to calm his nerves. He took a deep breath. Immediately he wished he hadn't. The air inside the tunnel was acrid. It smelled of rot and mildew, of the effects of constant humidity, of air without the benefit of the sun's rays, of dead things - rats, snakes, rotting roots.

He choked off a cough as he heard his pursuers again. They were close now, continuing their shouting as they ran. He wondered how their long white flower sack clothing resisted being torn by the same branches that tore the special-made jungle trekking clothes he purchased for this expedition. So much for modern textile science, he bemoaned.

He forced the inane thought from his mind and slowly peered around him. The roots growing through the tunnel walls and down from the top were covered with bugs, with insects, worms, and with centipedes, everything imaginable in someone's worst nightmare.

"I hate creepie crawlies," he whispered aloud. He shuddered. He forced himself to stifle his desire to shout, to scream. His pursuers were closer. Where were they? Were they in front of the cave entrance? He took a chance and peered out between the brush covering the entrance.

He was right. His pursuers were less than five feet away from him. There were six of them, stopped directly in front of the tunnel entrance. He easily identified them as members of the Lancandon Indian tribe of the dense Guatemalan and Belizean jungles. They were native to the area. They weren't known for being overly friendly to outsiders, and these six were so fierce in appearance they couldn't have been friendly, even if they wanted to be. Their brown faces were painted in vivid white designs, and their long, straight, black hair streamed back when they ran. Their appearance struck fear in their enemies.

Penn cautiously watched them. Then something dropped on his left shoulder. He froze. It took several seconds for him to amass enough courage to slowly turn his head and peer at whatever that something was.

It was black and orange. It was as large as his hand, and it had hairy long legs. Tarantula! It was crawling up his shoulder towards his face. He hated spiders. He had a phobia for spiders, especially tarantulas. He frantically brushed at the monster.

The spider plopped onto the ground with a thud, and scurried off into the bottom growth.

Penn was fearful the natives heard the tarantulas fall. He held his breath, listening, staring at the spiders departure, hoping it wouldn't return. It didn't, and at length he pulled his panic-stricken stare away from the spiders path. He let out his breath, wondering if people really did turn blue in such times. He again peered through the growth covering the tunnels entrance. The original problem was still there. Lancandons!

And they were a problem that wasn't going to be solved as easily as the tarantula. The natives seemed to be in a violent mood. Some of them carried rifles, some carried atl-atls with sling-arrows, and all them were yelling, brandishing their weapons.

Penn held his breath, fearing the slightest whisper would reveal his hiding place. Then, as if the fates were against him, he heard a long hissing sound. It came from somewhere back in the

tunnel. He knew what made such a sound, and he hoped what he knew wasn't going to be what he saw.

He slowly turned around. His eyes went wide. Neither spiders, crocodiles, nor Lancandons were anything to worry about any more, not when compared to what faced him. It was a Fer De Lance, and it was twining itself around some roots less than three feet away from his head. It hissed at him, with its tongue lashing the air, sensing danger. One bite from the venomous snake and the Lancandons would cease to be a problem.

Outside the tunnel the Lancandons were inspecting the trail. They were discussing what they found. They spoke and yelled with animated gestures. The leader of the group gestured back along the trail. "Le! Chambela. Non deekee resina!" He took several steps in that direction. Several others gestured toward the river. "Oodeekee. Oo-oodeekee!" They shouted at the leader. Penn had no time to listen to any more of their arguing. The viper was drawing back, hissing. Suddenly, it lunged forward.

"Yeeaaaahhhhh!" Penn yelled as he jumped back in fear. He stumbled backwards through the growth hiding the tunnel entrance. He had to face the natives now, even if he had to do it hind side most. But the snake had missed him, and that was what mattered at the moment.

It took most of that moment for the natives to focus on Penn's sudden appearance from out of nowhere. He was covered with cobwebs, dirt, and dead roots. He looked fearsome to them, especially when he seemed to have no face, at first. Some jumped back in surprise. Some turned and ran, while others clutched their weapons for protection. All of them were confused. How could the great Tapir, the animal they were hunting, have suddenly turned into this thing? How could it become this thing that could have been human had it not been so white and pale that it must have been hiding under a log for years? They stared at the ghostly image in wonder as it slowly turned around. They gasped when they saw its face.

Penn regained his footing as he faced the natives. He had to think. He gulped. He caught his breath, then had a moment of inspiration. He grabbed the dagger from his pocket, and quickly threw his arms out in front of him in a defensive manner, waving the dagger, wielding it as a weapon.

The natives jumped in surprise. Penn cautiously backed up. The natives regrouped. They studied this white monster, again; this oddly reincarnated

Tapir. Their curiosity emboldened them to come together and edge closer. They raised their rifles and atl-atls, ready to pounce on this thing should it suddenly return to its true shape.

The leader of the natives was curious about the weapon the monster used to threaten them. "Rambuleeg," he said to his group. "Rambuleega awalyah moluli." He tried to explain that this white monster-thing had to be from the dark side, or it wouldn't be carrying such an odd and old weapon.

"Oombari. Oombari watsh rambuleega shnigue ula!" the others answered in agreement, still awed. They peered at the weapon, edging even closer, even though the monster-thing was backing away, nearing the river.

Penn slowly continued backing, until his feet felt the edge of the mud. He glanced over his shoulder at the river. Several crocodiles floated in the slow moving water. Now what? he asked himself.

The natives leaned their heads forward. Was this monster speaking to them?

Penn continued threatening them with the dagger. He was sure that as long as he threatened them with it, they wouldn't dare pounce on him. He was certain they wouldn't want to risk destroying it. He was sure of that, because of the way they were eyeing it. He straightened up to the full of his 5' 9" height, and faced them.

They drew back in confusion by this sudden turn of events.

Penn flailed his arms wildly. He shouted. He screamed the most threatening scream he could muster. "Yowoowuuuu!" He hoped it sounded threatening. "Wahba! Wahba!... Wahba!" He hadn't the slightest idea what he was saying, but it sounded good to him.

The natives were taken back by this sudden vocal onslaught. They regrouped for common defense.

To Penn their regrouping was a sure sign of their impending attack. He waved the dagger around again, turned, hesitated long enough to jab the dagger into his waistband, ignoring the wound he gave himself, and then leaped onto the back of the nearest crocodile.

He leaped off the crocodile just as it twisted its snout around to snap at him, and was heading for the second one, thinking he was making good on his Hollywood-ian escape.

But the second crocodile had other intentions. It suddenly submerged.

Penn tried to change direction in mid-jump, but his effort was wasted. He landed in the water with a near-award winning belly flop.

The natives rushed to the river's edge. They waited to see if this monster-thing would come out of the water, either as the Tapir they were hunting, or maybe in a natural brown color, like all humans should be, if, indeed, it was human.

Penn did come out of the water, after nearly a minute. He surfaced six feet from the opposite riverbank, swimming as hard as he could, spitting out water like a breaching whale. He scrambled out on the riverbank, with a crocodile close on his heels. He sprang to his feet and began running. The crocodile slithered up the bank in pursuit.

The natives witnessed the entire episode. By that time, they decided this grossly pale monster-thing must be evil, or the crocodile Gods wouldn't be chasing it. So they raised their weapons and began shooting at it.

The bullets and arrows shattered the leaves around Penn as he dodged to the right, to the left, and into the jungle to safety.

The crocodile gave up in the flurry of flying leaves, and quickly slithered back into the water.