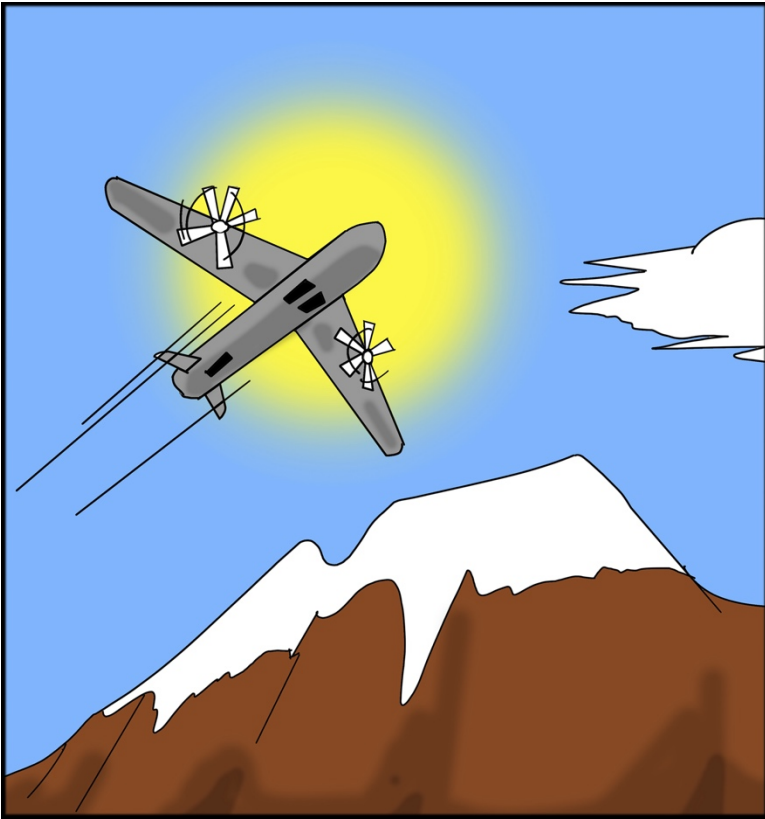


Chapter 10

“BELIEVE in Yourself”

Plane rides always scared him. This one was especially turbulent and made him nauseous.



As he glanced out the clean window and over the looming white-capped mountains, he thought coming to this icy and remote location was more than a little crazy.

The shimmer of the smile he was wearing almost turned into a full-blown grin because of the two reasons he was making Alaska his next destination: the Genghis Khan box, and the Lady Helen.

He'd believed in himself enough to formally ask the Lady out to dinner, which led to him staying in England for a fortnight. They got to know each other well that night as he became trapped under the waterfall of her charm.

Now, seated next to him, she leaned her head on his shoulder, smelling intoxicating like a freshly blooming flower on the first day of spring and full of excitement for their upcoming adventure. Charlie was ecstatic her friend had joined them, but not so happy when Helen sat next to the Professor, causing Charlie to sit next to her long-time friend Gorilla. They were still on the outs.

It was a crazy path he was on, thinking she would marry him. He wouldn't always know if he was going in the right direction, but he knew the answer was Lady Helen, no matter how crazy the idea seemed.

The buzzing of the engine brought him back to the plane. Lady Helen was sleeping soundly with her head on his shoulder.

Sarantos looked back out the window and wondered what his life looked like to the walls of his home. It was a ludicrous thought, but if the newly minted couple shared a life story, he could die happy. Otherwise, what would the

message be on his tombstone? Womanizer, terrible son, chaser of illusive dreams, creep, or maybe just a plain old professor.

Life had been a complex series of events. He didn't always like being swallowed alive by the idea of his own myth. Sometimes when he sat in the dark, he heard the ghosts of those he'd wronged scream at him to fix his own life. Maybe they're right? Maybe the only way to become the man you want to be is to take a step in that direction, because no one else will do it for you.

The ghosts that haunted him from time to time deserved some credit, because they had it right. Their ability to drive a nail into his coffin of insecurity on the blackest nights kept him breathing, spurring him towards his usual goal of success.

But, suddenly, on this bumpy plane ride, he realized that success didn't really matter. While he loved his life and what he accomplished, he wrestled with questions on the best road to follow from here on out. Where he was and where he wanted to be, those two things couldn't coexist in the same space.

Helen gently moaned.



How could that turn him on?? He didn't know how, but it did.

The scientist part of him interjected, since it could not understand how someone could sleep on these small planes. The rocking back and forth might be comforting to an infant, but the dull roar of the engine was annoying to any adult, but he supposed it could have a lulling effect on some.

She stirred, snuggling into his shoulder.

As he gently looked down at her, he wanted to be the honorable husband who knew where she was every second of every day. He wanted to be the lover who could anticipate what she needed and offer it to her every second of every day.

“We are almost in Fairbanks. We should have a driver meeting us there if the weather is fair.”

She smiled up at him, and not being able to control how she felt, her eyes lit up with the excitement of the grand adventure waiting for them. He was excited to have her along.

“So how far away is the cabin from Fairbanks?”



The Professor noticed the small airstrip below as he answered. “About an hour south, by the Nenana River.”

She clapped her hands with joy. She felt no need to sparkle or be anybody but herself.

Laughing at her innocence, he checked to make sure both their seatbelts were on. “The man picking us up is a chap named Darren and has lived here for about two years now. I knew him in Boston.” He caressed her left cheek. “He left for the gold rush and has discovered some here as well.”

“Splendid!”

“Professor, you can see the river from here,” yelled Charlie over the engine.

Sensing he was still nervous about the plane, Helen leaned over and whispered in his ear. “Relax, my love, and let gravity do its thing.”

“Doc, is it his cabin we’ll be staying in?”

“No, kid. The main dredge for gold is a little further north of Fairbanks, but he has taken some time off to drive us to the cabin. We’ll stay in a cabin next to that one for several days.”

“That’s top dollar, Doc.”

“Yes, I guess it is.”

They all pulled their coats completely around them as they stepped off the plane. It was early October, but the wind had already picked up, driving the temps to a chilly 32 degrees Fahrenheit.

The sun was still high in the sky, and he was glad they came early in the day. They still had a long drive, though.

Darren was waiting in jeans and a T-shirt, waving at them from a dirty old black Ford.

The wind bit hard as they all raced for the warmth of the car. Darren shook the Professor’s hand before jumping back in the Ford.

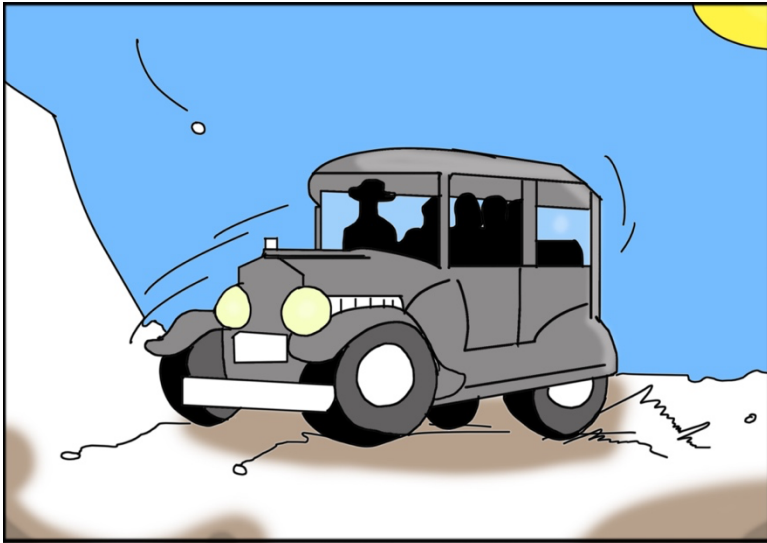
Darren opened the conversation. “Good to see you, old chap. I missed our days together at University, but here I am a crazy old gold digger.” It’s surprising how quickly the years have passed.

“Well, I appreciate you coming to get us and helping us out.” Sarantos tried to look less uncomfortable.

“What have you gotten your hands into now, you blooming donut?”

Darren wasn't a Brit, but he loved speaking like them, so much so that he was almost believable.

Sarantos chuckled at his old colleague and friend. “You won't believe it. Under your nose here lies the Genghis Khan chest with the actual knife used to kill his stepbrother.”



The car was bouncing hard. There was no road where they were going. Mud was flying everywhere. It hardened beneath the tires like a bat out of hell, making driving more difficult. But good old Darren barely noticed.

“Bloody hell, that's a find. If it's really here, you would think I'd have heard some gossip at the bars or the dance halls.”

That perked up the kid. “Dance halls?”

Darren grinned. “Yes, you go there to dance and chat up the babes. Nothing much to do around here except flirt. Truth be told, the dance halls are more of a chat room to relax and enjoy the evening. Not much dancing involved. This is the wild country out here, my friend.”

“He’ll fit right in! What part of England are you from? I don’t recognize the dialect.” said Charlie.

“All over the country.”

Darren glanced at Sarantos and they both broke out in laughter.

“You know, Darren, having money and being rich doesn’t solve all your problems.”

Darren’s grin went past his ears. “My friend, Sarantos, I can do this because I have no problems at all, nothing to solve, no wife to yell at me, so from now until eternity, every day I wake up breathing is pure bliss. Money fine, and no money fine. Doesn’t matter to me.”

It’s good to be silly at the right moment.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking that, too.”

“Half the world lies awake at night. And while every turn doesn’t stop them, I’ve learned to move about my day without the influence and effect of indifference.”

“Well, why in the world do you live way out here south of Fairbanks?”

“Because it’s fun. I admit, I won’t always know the answers and where to find them, but the kid back there’s got some intel and so we should run with it when both our guts are on the same page. Sounds like we might want to work with the natives of the area around the Nenana River?”

“And you think I’m the crazy one? At least my way has a much better chance of a return.”

The car almost flipped into the air, but Darren still didn’t seem to notice.

Charlie barked. “Can you slow it down a little up there? I almost knocked myself out back here. The roof of the car came a little too close to my pretty skull.”

“Sorry,” said Darren.

“Darren, it doesn’t matter what you’re doing. You’re doing it because you love it and your life drove you in that direction. Well, pal, I love this adventure and my path is driving me in this direction right now. As crazy as we may seem to you, it’s all perfectly sane and reasonable to us. Besides, I’m never done with trouble! Don’t you remember all the trouble we used to get into at the University?”

Darren hit his knee with his hand and let out a yelp. “That’s what I love about you. You’re so far gone; you think we’re both sane. But we aren’t, we’re both quite mad.”

The whole car now shook with laughter.

Lady Helen laughed the hardest. “I love being in the middle of you creative types. This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time.”

“That’s sad,” said the kid.

“Oh, come on, we had fun just last week at the Prudence twin’s bash,” said Charlie.

“That doesn’t count. Too sophisticated of a bash for my blue blood.” Helen giggled until she cried.

“Oh posh,” said Charlie with a slight tilt of her sophisticated head.

Gorilla couldn't resist. "Doc, I think Lady Helen will fit in nicely into our group."

His mind exploded with emotion. "Me too."



Outside the car window, the land was forlorn and bleak, but not as cold as the look that Charlie flashed at Gorilla.

The road evened out and the land almost seemed to sprout more color. Maybe he imagined it? You have to be careful

not to fool yourself too much because you're the easiest person to fool.

A small tree burst out of the desolate land to the right. The Professor admired its diligence, and it reminded him of the young lad he was many years ago.

He was once that tree, very different but thrust into a world of greed and a circle of fame. Striving to succeed and have the world notice him, he learned a long time ago he had to believe in himself... no one else would.

Like that tree that stood alone and fought against every force of nature in a cold, hard world, a world frozen in time, he shared the same journey. It played with a stick of dynamite as the vultures circled.

Snow started to fall like a message from above. In an instant, the car was surrounded by snowflakes.

Great. That worried him, because Alaska was anything but friendly in the warmest of weather, much less when a blizzard of death and oblivion attacked.

It wasn't enough yet to block their view. In the distance, he could see some buildings and the icy mountains used as a backdrop to silhouette their existence, giving them more substance as a place of refuge.

“There it is. I think I see the cabins,” said Gorilla.

Darren chuckled. “Chap, you got it spot on.”

Charlie piped in with a hint of annoyance in her voice. “Right. Where are you from again?”

The Professor felt exhausted with too much banter about nothing important. “Charlie, leave it alone.”

“What?”

“I said leave it alone. It doesn’t matter, does it?”

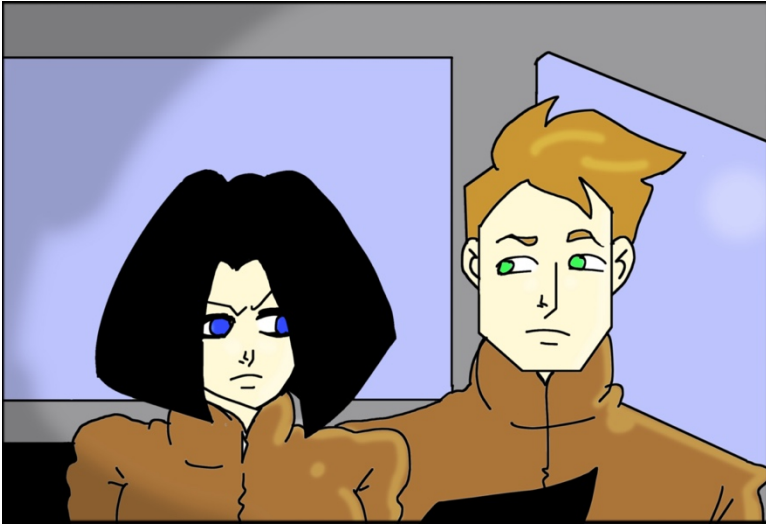
She frowned. “I dare say it does.”

He changed the subject because patience is also a form of action.

“Darren, I see the main cabin ahead. Decent food?”

“You will find only the best food there, my friend. A cute little dark-haired filly by the name of Tapeesa owns the place with her husband Kallik. They are a pleasant couple, but their English is a bit bonkers.”

Charlie wouldn't let that go. "Right oh, their English is a bit bonkers?"



Darren had nothing better to do than play her game. "You're a little cheeky lassie then, aren't you?"

She stared back.

"I just met you and already I'm wishing you'd sod off."

Gorilla shook his head, and Helen was laughing so hard tears were once again streaming down her delicate cheeks. "Do you always have so much fun on your adventures, Professor?"

Sarantos nodded.

Gorilla just wanted to be at the main cabin eating a pleasant lunch. He hadn't had breakfast and was famished.

Darren nodded his head in amusement at the chitchat and, from what he knew about his old friend, this kind of floor play was right up his alley.

“Right, then who would you waffle on to? You'd miss me before you left.”

Charlie's face turned red. “Are you taking the mick out of the British?”



The kid wasn't about to let this opportunity slip away, but his enormous intake of breath was a warning sign he might bite off more than he could chew.

Before the kid said a word, Sarantos tried to save him.
“Don’t do it kid.”

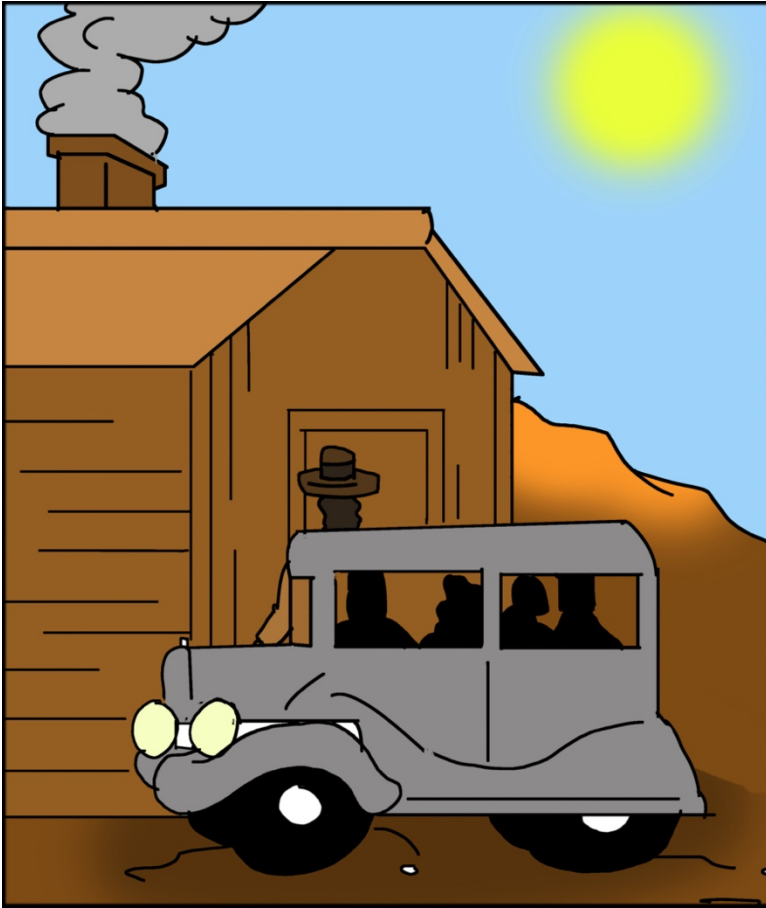


Gorilla ignored him.

“Oh, why not Charlie? Didn’t you start the mick taking by demanding this poor chap explain to you his birth of destination?”

“What if I did? That’s my business and between the chap I choose to take the mick out of, not anything to do with you.”

As they continued their delicious argument, the car pulled into the frozen mud parking in the only spot. Thank God they had arrived. Sarantos jumped out of the car, hurrying inside to the warmth of the wooden lodge, with an enchanting smoky fragrance pouring from the chimney.



Sarantos wasn't great at human relationships. He turned before going inside, thinking Helen would be right behind him, but she still sat in the car laughing. She saw happiness in everything. He found annoyance in everything. Life had turned him into a prowling lion. They were a match made in heaven. He grinned and went inside.

It was homey, and the two people inside fit the description Darren had offered to a tee. They were both sitting by the fire, sipping what looked like coffee.

“Coffee?”

It was Kallik who asked the question, but before he answered, the cup was already in his hands warming them.

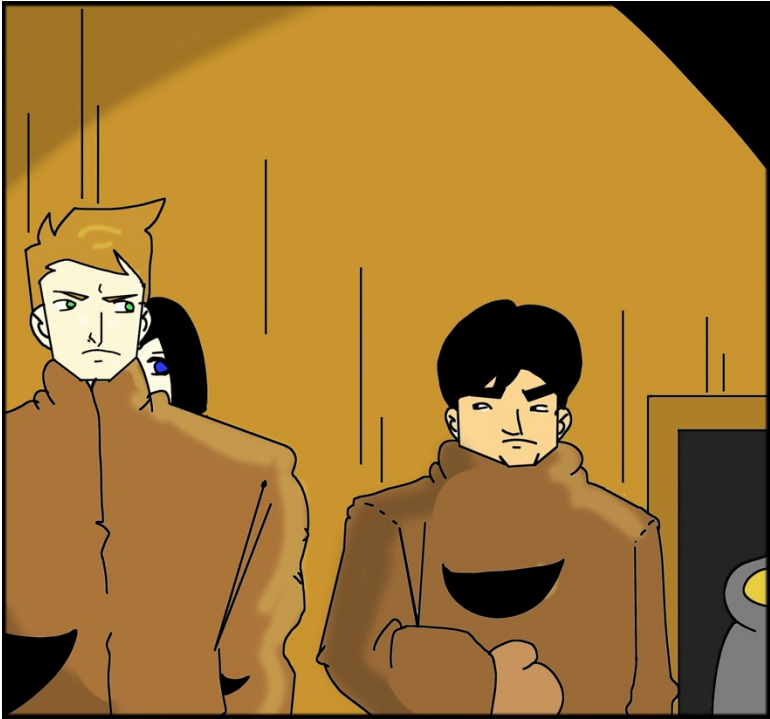
The door opened and the rest of the crew joined him inside.

The cabin was weathered but the fire was warm. The hearth was a large wooden tree. A brown pot hung inside the fiery flames and whatever was inside of it smelled superb.

Tapeesa stood up and said, “Welcome. My name means arctic flower and Kallik’s means lightning. We live up to our names and we believe in ourselves, even in this vast wilderness. It is about the sun inside your soul. I know you will all find your peace out here in our humble abode where the shadows speak in silent riddles.”

Kallik frowned. “Tapeesa has a way with words. I hope she hasn’t frightened you off.”

Gorilla said, “Even if she did, we have nowhere else to go.”



Everybody has a story...