

Chapter 11

“My Christmas Tree”



It felt like they'd walked forever, and he did not understand where they were going. This land seemed smaller than it looked. It felt as if they'd been wandering around in circles.

“Does it look like we've been going in circles,” the Professor questioned his students out of the blue?

Charlie's smile faded. That crease above her eyes grew more prominent, as she turned her head side to side. "Nope, I don't think so. Why do you feel that way, Professor?"

"I'm not sure, just a feeling."

Gorilla who'd been out in front of the pack turned back to face his two friends. "Baloney, Doc. I know what I'm doing, and I did not lead us in a circle."

"Don't get excited, kid. I'm just thinking out loud."

Gorilla wasn't about to let it go, his voice thick with emotion. "I think you're confused, Doc. That crazy imaginary wife of yours is causing you to lose it."

"Yeah, maybe that's it Gorilla, I'm just beating my gums. Let's keep moving." His life felt like pieces of a giant puzzle scattered in all corners of time that have to somehow magically find their way back to each other, to come together so that their journey could find an epic conclusion.

“If you look around Doc, you’ll notice there are no caves in this area. I’ve no idea where we should stay for the night. That is also a good sign that we’re not walking in circles.”

The Professor nodded, and the group started forward again.

The day felt heavy. He was feeling lost and confused. He missed his home. He missed celebrating Christmas with his friends and family. He missed his favorite Christmas tree. If he didn’t make it back home with something to cement his place beside his peers, it would mean academic humiliation. He had everything to lose. His reputation, for starters.

The night appeared to be closing in faster than normal, and the wind picked up with a distress to it that might be considered a wicked northerly touch of cold.

“The wind got chilly suddenly,” said Charlie. She tucked her head down and moved forward like she was combating an arctic blizzard.



The difference mattered to them, because it had been so hot since they'd been here. This was definitely a change of pace. What was happening?

The Professor didn't mind much, but his core temperature was not adjusted yet to this quick shift in weather.

The chilled air made them walk faster until Gorilla held up his hand and said, "Stop." He then moved forward on his own.

The two were silent and waited patiently for him to return. The Professor stood back to protect Charlie from being attacked from behind. Snow fell softly and playfully as if urging them to .

A few minutes later, Gorilla came back to his position. "Looks like there's nowhere solid to withstand this fierce wind, but I did find an exceptionally large tree with a hole through it. I think it's our best bet. We could probably sleep in it for the evening. Let's check it out."

"Lead on," said Professor Sarantos.

Before long, the tree Gorilla talked about came into view. It was massive. The hole was as large as a

cave opening. The tree invited them in. It had nothing to hide. There was a weird calmness it exuded.

The Professor moved in front of the opening with Gorilla by his side. The knife in Gorilla's hand flipped back and forth with his nervous tension. Suddenly, the gun was in his hand, as he stood next to Gorilla looking into blackness. The blackness stared politely back.

“Here, you might need this,” said Charlie, holding out the lantern breaking the monotony.

“Thanks,” said the Professor.

He took the lantern and held it into the tree opening. It was dark and the only illumination that could be seen being about two feet in; he moved inside. Gorilla followed. They pushed further inside and inspected cautiously.

He wasn't sure if Charlie had followed, but he kept wandering inside. The lantern was having a

challenging time with the darkness. He hissed. “This opening has some spell over it, I think. The spell is not allowing the light of our lantern to extend past a foot in front of us. A curse of darkness, maybe?”



“I don’t believe in curses, Doc. But if you say so.” Gorilla was standing almost on top of him. Gorilla was sweating.

“Where’s Charlie?” asked the Professor.

“Here I am Professor, breathing down the neck of Gorilla.”

“Good, don’t lose her kid.”

“You got it, Doc.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about him losing me. I’m attached to his hip, Professor.”

He couldn’t help the grin that filled his cheeks. They extended to their fullest. He nodded mischievously.
“Good.”

The Professor controlled their movement and pace. Ten steps forward, stop, listen, extend the light around them so they could see the surrounding area. No sound, and from what he could see it was nothing but an empty tree hole, but he knew better. His experience told him something was here. A darkness spell would not be used to hide nothing. He hoped they’d stumbled across the location of the last diamond.

“Looks like an empty hole in a giant tree, Doc,” said Gorilla, stating the obvious.

“You’re all wet, ya big goof. No one went to the trouble of hiding nothing. If I had to guess, I’d say the diamond might be found in here,” said Charlie in a snooty tone.

“Bushwa. If that would be true, we wouldn’t be able to find it. This might take a month,” said Gorilla, following up his comment with a deep sigh.



The Professor stopped again. He listened as his eyes moved back and forth. “Sorry, kid, but I’m afraid that Charlie might be right. If you wanted to hide something, you know, a place that only you could

find, it would make sense.” He pulled off his hat and scratched his head. “Where did they get the magic to do this?”

“Well, Doc, you’ve taught me a lot. And since I’ve been out on quite a few adventures with you, I’ve learned to expect the unexpected. We’ve come across some strange things. Look where we are now!”

The Professor turned and patted Gorilla on the shoulder.

“Yep, kid, you’re right.”

“I’ve got another light, said Charlie.

She took out the new flashlight and turned it on; it barely made a difference. She smiled.

The Professor saw her happiness. He sensed the light was a source of security for her. At least if something jumped out, she’d get a good look at its

face. He hoped it wouldn't come to that, though. Even creatures that lived in the dark might not see much in this protected tree.

After ten minutes of constant stopping and walking, he pushed his hat back and played with his thick beard.

“This is crazy, we’ve gone too far. The tree wasn’t that big. I’m not sure what’s happening. Either we’re in a loop, or it’s an entrance to somewhere else, and the darkness is preventing us from seeing it. At least until we arrive right up on top of it.”

“Blimey,” said Charlie. She grabbed the arm of Gorilla. “That’s just blueberries, Professor.”

“Horse feathers! It’s madness!”

“Oh, Gorilla, you scaredy cat!”

“You bet I am. We could get tangled up in this tomb of darkness with no one to help us out. It’s okay, I

have two friends with me, but personally, I'd rather be someplace else," said Gorilla.

"Where's your sense of adventure, kid?"



"I lost it when we kept trekking aimlessly in a place we hear or see nothing. This is a black void. We might be trapped in here forever?"

"This is the bee's knees, Gorilla. A once in a lifetime experience. Enjoy it." Charlie laughed.

“Bushwa, this could be our last experience,” said Gorilla.

The Professor wouldn't stop. He kept them moving forward. He couldn't help but pick up the pace.

“This is a true adventure, kid. We've only got time for great.”

“Well, I'm leaving Babe Ruth wrappers where we were just in case we need to hurry back out. Also to check for the fact we could be circling around repeatedly and be lost.”

Professor Sarantos was encouraging. “Now you're thinking, kid. That's why I brought you along. I'm surprised you still have some Babe Ruth bars left.”

Charlie elbowed Gorilla. “Great? If his mind of mixed up thoughts is what we're counting on, we might run out of gas!”

“Funny Charlie,” said Gorilla. “But you’ll thank me later.”

“Maybe,” she said in a soft tone.

“Did you hear that?”

They all froze.

They all became immediately silent after hearing the Professor’s words. He sensed the kids breathing next to him. It was like a beating of a drum. Suddenly, he just realized his wife’s presence was no longer there. Maybe she couldn’t come into the opening, or she knew something they didn’t and didn’t want to be destroyed. He decided not tell the kids; it would make them worry. This situation was all wet.



Then, he ran into something that knocked him back a foot, causing him to step on Gorilla. Gorilla held his own position and luckily for Charlie he did.

“Doc, what’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure.”

He placed his hands in front of him and felt a cold smooth surface, just as black as the space they stood in.

“What happened?” Charlie’s question quivered with anxiety.

“Don’t know. Doc’s checking it out. Just hold on to me.”

“Yep.”

The Professor knew they couldn’t see what happened or what he was doing, but he kept moving his hands up and down the back of a tree of some sort. They might have reached the end, but physically that wasn’t possible.

“Kids, I’m feeling along a tree. It’s a dead end... wait...”

Both kids groaned.

“Wait for what, Doc? Doc?”

Suddenly light burst into the tree opening, blinding them momentarily.

He turned and grinned. “It’s a door.”

The Professor walked thru the door, not thinking about the consequences. His eyes adjusted. There it was. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen!

“Jackpot. The diamond, and she’s a beaut.”



Charlie pushed past Gorilla. “Geez Professor, that’s the bomb!”

“I have to agree.”

“That’s the bum’s rush, it is. Now to get home as quick as we can.”

“Professor it’s lucky you were persistent and pushed on. Some trick that was, but you uncovered it.”

He looked at both and smiled an exhausted grin. “Let’s go home.” Part of the journey is the end.

Before he knew it, the diamond was in his hand and the kids were linked up with him, holding on for dear life. No one wanted to be left behind.

“Doc, what about that woman?”

“She didn’t come in. I’m free. I guess it was a clean divorce.”

The diamond went in and then they were falling into a massive waterfall. Crystals flew past them. Colors matching the glorious rainbow spectrum spun all around them. It was incredible, but made the Professor dizzy.

He heard someone scream and opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of his study and Professor Sands was looking down at him.

“My God, man, you just left. It didn’t work then?”

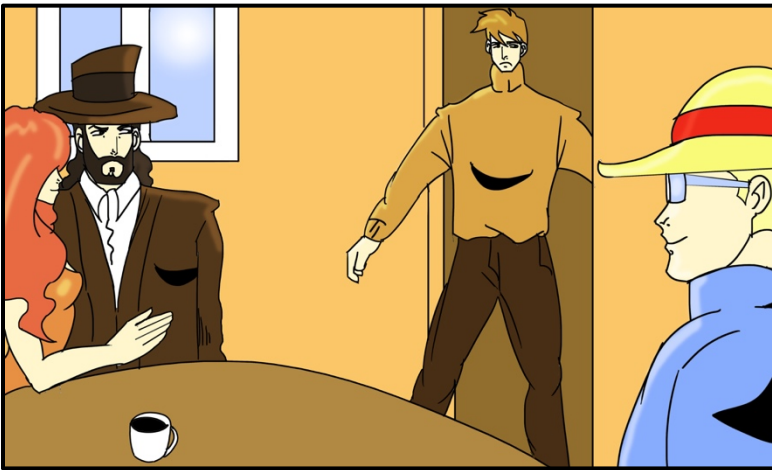
A beautiful woman ran to his side. “Stella.”

“Oh, you crazy fool. You could’ve gotten yourself killed, but here you are, and I had no time to miss or morn you.”

He felt confused. “No time to miss me?? Didn’t they think they were gone for weeks, maybe a month.”

He looked around. “Where are the kids?”

Sands said, “I don’t know.”



“Doc, over here.” Gorilla was walking into the room looking dazed. “I ended up in the tub. I know I need a shower, but geez.”

“You sure do, you baby vamp. I ended up sitting in a chair at the table. Tea, anyone?”

They all laughed.

Gorilla said, “Did I hear you right, we just left?”

“You did,” said Sand.

“How can that be?”

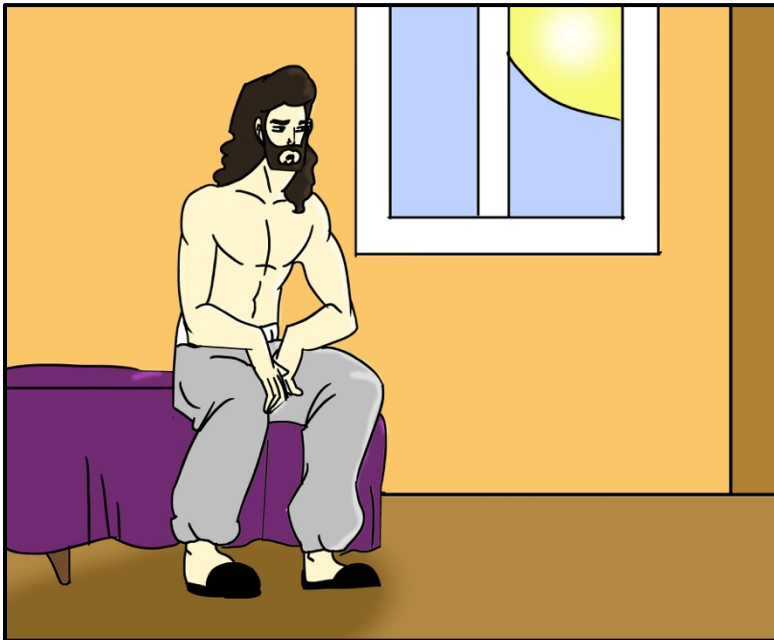
Professor Sarantos stood up. “It doesn’t matter, time travel works that way. I’m glad you two are here. We brought treasures to share.”

He took out the flowers from his pockets. The kids placed bones, rocks, and a load of artifacts on the table.

Sands looked at the items and then looked at him. “You’ve got to be kidding me? Dinosaur bones?”

“Yep. I’m setting up a meeting for the morning with our high and mighty Board of Professors. This is worth a Nobel Prize for sure!”

They all stayed the night and chatted about their trip way into the wee hours of morning. The thrill was palpable. Finally when they were exhausted, they hit the sack. Sarantos had a tough time falling asleep, but finally did.



He was up early. He didn't want to be late. Everyone was going to be there, including his father. They were all interested in his discovery. The buzz was unmistakable.

The five of them quickly ate then carefully placed every item in a properly sealed case and left for the meeting. Butterflies were moving through Sarantos stomach. His heart was fluttering.

When he was young and free, he smiled until it hurt and danced like a fool, but no more.

He stood at the podium today, grinning like a lunatic. He welcomed his colleagues and opened the case.

Empty.

He could hear mumbling around the room. He looked at Sands who stood by his side. The confusion in his expression gave no clues as to what happened. The case never left his side. Either all the items went back to their place of origin or disintegrated after a certain amount of time by being exposed to a wrong time period.

Wonderful. Now he stood as the center of attention, but with nothing to show for it. He might as well be

standing here alone. No one cared, except the five of them.

Gorilla and Charlie were on their feet at once racing toward the podium.

The Professor tried to grin politely as the room filled with chatter. His face turned red. Then Gorilla and Charlie started to share the tale of their epic adventure. He eventually joined in. Professor Sands confirmed their story.



After a few hours, the dust settled. His father left. The Professor was melancholy but not saddened

any longer. He knew there were more adventures waiting...