

## *Chapter 4*

### *“Journey”*

The air was on fire as the small group made their way into the forest.



Charlie had been right; Sarantos had a tough time liberating his eyes from Catalina. She led out in front with Alvaro.

She moved like a cat and her hips swayed ever so slightly. The boots she wore were like those worn by soldiers. Her tan pants fit well and her tan loose-

fitting shirt matched perfectly. Her hair was bundled up under a large, ribbed hat with a rubber band holding it back. Still, her long dark hair peeked out from the back and hung nearly to her waist, glistening in the glow of the falling rays of the sun.

Thoughts about her constantly consumed him and they exploded from his mind into hers, as Catalina turned and grinned, her dark eyes twinkling at him. She knew what he was thinking.

It was too dang hot. The sweat rolled off his skin uncontrollably. If it wasn't for the headband under his hat, he wouldn't be able to keep his eyes clean. The air feels alive, and he feels the motion in his head.

“It is gorgeous here,” said Charlie.

Was she being sarcastic? The Professor didn't want to bring down the group, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Bushwa, it's too hot. I'm suffocating.”

Well, the kid was always blunt about sharing his feelings. He grinned.

“Quit your bellyaching, Gorilla. It’s still lovely. The forest sounds and trees are full of wonder.”

“Who cares so long as we find the dragon,” piped Gorilla.

Wrong thing to say, kid.

Charlie turned on him like a lioness lunging at her prey. “Applesauce. What is wrong with you? You’re like an annoying alarm clock and too young to be so irritating.” An ache of disappointment grew in her chest.

“Oh, I forgot you came along to enjoy the weather and not to collect the find of the century.”

“You’re a goof. Of course I came for the dragon, but I’m not so blind to not enjoy the surroundings I’m walking in.” She left Gorilla with a residue of irritability.

“Good for you, sweetheart.”

“That’s all wet, Gorilla. If we don’t find the stupid dragon, then I’m still coming out of this journey with a newfound respect for these exotic places in the world.”



His nose wrinkled. “Good for you... again. I can’t say it enough. It’s too hot, and I’m here just for the dragon. Let me have my feelings, will ya?” Gorilla was holding on by his fingernails like an insect in a trap.

The kid didn’t know women.

Charlie turned towards him with slanted eyes, and her head tilted slightly down to her chin. He was in trouble.

Gorilla took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his brow with a rag he carried in his pocket.

Charlie smirked his way then hurried to the front of the group, putting herself next to Alvaro. They chatted a moment before she laughed so loud she startled a few nearby baby birds. They flew out from a nearby bush, complaining as they fluttered away.

He forgot how young the two of them were. It was moments like this when he wondered why he ever had them tag along. But they had saved his life on numerous occasions, and that reminded him he had saved theirs as well. They made an excellent team.

He took off his hat and headband and shook out the sweat. His hair was matted to his head. He should've cut it before they left the hotel. At least he had cleanly shaven.

Gorilla inched next to him. “Doc, what’s wrong with women, anyway? I don’t get them.”

“Kid, don’t ask me! I’ve never married and never had a long-term relationship. They’re too fickle and I’m too stubborn.”

“Yeah, Doc, you’re right, too fickle.”



He thought of his housekeeper. She wasn’t fickle, but a gentle soul. She stayed by his side through the years, ever steady, and here he was thinking he was in love with someone else because of one otherworldly night of intimate fantasy. Catalina

wouldn't fit into his world. He was the one that was fickle, and not able to commit to one woman. What was he instructing the kid?

“Forget it, kid. Women aren't as fickle as men. Our eyes turn to mush when we see an attractive woman and lose our minds on the spot. Like I said, don't listen to me, I have a tough time in relationships.”

“Maybe not with Catalina?” Gorilla chuckled. “You know Doc, for someone who does not know what they're doing, you kinda know what you're doing.”

“I'm not sure what I'm thinking about her. Like I said, kid, we become mush. Any man would struggle with waking up next to that wildcat. It was pure pleasure and intoxication that led to that night, and the hormones have continued.” He could feel the panic punching up his throat, but he couldn't contain his grin.

“Oh, Doc, there's that sideways grin. I know that look - a sneaky thought of enjoyment. I'm sure she was pure thrill and indulgence.” The kid whistled. “I'm sure she was, and I can't blame you for finding pleasure where you could, after all you aren't getting any younger.”

“Thanks kid.” Facts are arguable.

Why did his age always become an issue? He needed to hang with people his own age.

The grassy trail curved and started climbing upwards, drawing them deeper into the shadier forest. He was glad for that. Maybe some relief from the sun?



Alvaro held up his hand and shouted. “Professor, we’ll stop just past the tree line for a rest and food. There’s a berry bush just past the line.”

“Sure, sounds good.”

He struggled to sound like it was a good thing. The heat was getting to him. He could taste the exhaustion.

Alvaro pushed them forward, now moving at a faster pace.

The sun was at its highest spot in the sky, signifying the blistering heat was fully upon them. He sipped lightly on his water.

“I hope there’s water soon.” The voice of Gorilla shouted through the grasslands and his smile was a little sinister. He figured it would irritate Charlie.

She turned and grimaced, grabbed Alvaro’s arm and the two of them moved faster, hurrying towards the waiting shelter of the jungle.

Gorilla’s face turned redder than it already was from the heat of the afternoon sun.

“Don’t worry about it, kid. That’s her way of saying I love you.”

“Balderdash.”

He wasn’t used to the kid at a loss for words. This feat may be more than he bargained for, and if those two didn’t settle their differences, he might lose his mind... or leave them to the whims of the jungle.



His laughter brought an angry look from the kid.

“Nothing personal, sorry, kid.”

“I’m done with women.”

“Don’t exaggerate, kid. You’re not over women, you’re too young.”

“You’re right, maybe just over one woman.”

“I don’t think you mean that kid.”

“Yes, I think I do, doc. We’ve never gotten along. The only thing we have in common is this.” He held out his hands and turned his body. “The adventure.”

“That’s something significant. Some couples don’t have that much in common, and for both of you that’s a big part of your life.”

The conversation ended abruptly when they stood next to a large rock where the other three were waiting for them.

The cool breeze of the trees was a great relief, and he took off his hat to air out his wet head.

Alvaro was sitting on a large rock eating what looked like a sandwich. Catalina was chewing on some figs, and Charlie was enjoying an apple.

He pulled out the sandwich he'd brought with him. They may not eat later. It was still hot, but better here. The kid sat on a rock away from Charlie and ate a candy bar first, then a sandwich, then what looked like a small fruit.



Alvaro said, “Just past here we’ll see a berry bush, eat some now and take some with you. The berries are full of water and will help quench your thirst. You do not want to get dehydrated. It will be nightfall before we can fill up again at the river.”

Gorilla nodded but didn’t stop eating.

“That sounds good.” The Professor felt he should say something.

Catalina was eating the figs slowly, seductively... he couldn't watch her anymore. She was barely sweating; perspiring was more like it. Tiny speckles of moisture on her neck made her look even more enticing. He looked away.

The sky peeked through the trees and the sun cast a golden shadow on the path that worked its way deeper into the jungle. It was a memorable sight.

“Hey, kid, look at the gold path, leading to our future.”

Gorilla chomped on his sandwich and only nodded.

“We need to go,” Alvaro said, helping Charlie to her feet.

If looks could kill, he would've laid Alvaro to rest. The kid was giving out his death stare, like a lion to a gazelle.

“Hey, kid, I thought you were over girls.”

“Yeah, I am,” he said and jumping to his feet and shoving the remnants of his sandwich down his throat.

The kid couldn’t move and eat quick enough and started choking.



Sarantos pounded him on the back. “You okay?”

“Thanks, Doc. Yeah, I’m good now.”

Charlie screamed and jumped back.

Gorilla was quickly at her side. “What happened?”

She was pointing at something by her foot.

“Charlie, it’s okay, that’s just a lizard. You’ll find many of them out here.”

“Yes, he’s right,” said Alvaro.

“Let’s go before it gets dark and we’re caught in the jungle without water for tomorrow.”

“Sure, Doc.” He grinned at Charlie and caught up to Alvaro, who was already moving ahead with Catalina.

Charlie slid in next to him and he knew he was in trouble. So far, this was not an exciting adventure.

“So, Professor, what’s wrong with men, anyway?”

“Damn if I know. I don’t have any good relationships in my past, I barely get by myself, so don’t ask me.”

It didn't stop her.

“What do you mean by that? It was a simple question. I guess being a man you wouldn't know that, or you know, and you just don't care to answer it. Not interested?”

Oh boy. “Yes, Charlie, I'm interested, but I have little to offer.”



The conversation took a whole new turn.

“Why did you bring your guitar to the jungle, by the way? You hardly ever play it. What’s going on?”

He wondered if anyone would notice it strapped to his back.

“I might have a gig when I get back. I need the practice and thought I might get a chance when we were out here with nothing to do.”

“Out here? Are you mad? Look around you, Professor. We are going to be sliding down cliffs, maybe running for our lives. Do you really think that guitar will survive?”

“Probably not, but still looking for some practice time. This is an old one, and if it doesn’t make it out of this journey, I’m okay with that.”

“You are something, Professor. So what’s with Gorilla?”



“I don’t know. He’s crazy about you, though. I thought you knew that.”

She bit her bottom lip. “Yeah, I do, but why does he act so crazy sometimes?”

He chose not to answer that question. “I thought you liked him too.”

“Of course, I do. He’s the cat’s meow.”

“Then why are you chasing after Alvaro?”

“Professor, you really don’t know girls, do you? To make him jealous, of course. Blimey, are you blind? Alvaro is intelligent and handsome on top of it.”

Alvaro stopped. “The bushes with the berries. Eat some now and stock up on them. You’ll be glad you did.”

The small group gathered around the dark green bushes that held the tastiest berries he’d ever eaten. He stuffed loads in his backpack inside a small container that had held his lunch earlier. The others followed suit.

Charlie cheered, “These are delicious.”

They filled up as much as they could and started hiking again. Within minutes, they heard wild cries off in the distance. Catalina looked scared. Her eyes widened. That wasn’t a good thing.

Alvaro moved them along, but the noise didn't stay off in the distance. It moved closer until it surrounded them. The loud cries hurt their ears. The group moved closer together nervously.

Alvaro pulled out his long blade. The Professor steadied his gun, and the kids whipped out knives. They couldn't move any further. It was clear something trapped them. They prepared to go somewhere they hadn't been to before.



The brush whispered and shifted. Then, something was coming through it on all sides.