

Chapter 4

“i COULDn’t help u”



They'd made it thru another cave hiding under the waterfall. They had spent most of the day searching walls, niches and anything that might hold another clue; they found nothing, other than the note in the pool from the first cavern.

This cavern was just an open mouth to the waterfall with no exit, no animal remains, and it didn't appear that it was a home of any sort to any organic being.

The sun was just starting to set. Staying inside would keep them out of the jungle and provide a hiding-place in case the wild cave men followed them. They seemed

lucky so far that they didn't follow them into their newfound passing paradise. Why didn't they, though? That was the question that had Professor Sarantos worried.

The Professor stretched and said, "I think we should stay the night. We've checked this cave thoroughly and found it safe. Tomorrow we'll search for Hibiscus. I think it's getting a little late to head out there blindly."

"Right, Doc. But what if something comes in? We have our back to the wall," said Gorilla.

"Yes, but I still have a gun, if we need it. Not thrilled about using it, but it's the icing on the cake." Everything is a struggle.

Interrupting their conversation, Charlie said, "Professor, look at the inviting sunset, it's glorious."

He went over to the edge of the yellow waterfall and looked into the psychedelic sky. Oranges, purples, greys, dark blues, and reds were blending together as one canvas. Looking at it through the waterfall caused a kaleidoscope effect. The sparkling water threw color in every direction.

"Hey Doc, that's a peach of a sunset," said Gorilla, while placing his hand on the Professor's shoulder in a show of comradery.

Sarantos adjusted his hat on his head by pushing it back slightly, tilted his lips, and shifted his eyes to the young man next to him. He was about to say something salty and sarcastic, but decided against it. Gorilla was trying to be like him, but what the kid didn't know was how many weathered years the Professor had spent refining his skills even when it was tough to do so on some lengthy days out in the field. The adventures weren't always full of fame and glory. There were times it was hard to get out of bed.

Instead, he smiled at the kid and looked back at the soothing sunset. He needed to learn how to enjoy each moment, even when he was being driven mad by his obsessive drive to discover something new, anything new.

He needed to protect these kids. They were pushed into this foreign world by his own enthusiasm. Now their lives were at stake.

He'd spent his life helping others. The love he had for history, discovery, and science were rabid. Sometimes it worked too well to push him. But there were many he couldn't help despite of trying. Sometimes he felt sad that when things got too difficult for others, he couldn't always help them, though he wanted to. Why was he stirring the fires of insanity?

“Hey, kid, you got any more of those candy bars?”

Gorilla's face lit up like a spotlight. “Yeah, Doc, I do.” He opened his backpack, handed him a bar, and then pulled out a sandwich.



Charlie grinned and said, “Well, have I told you how much I love you, Gorilla boy? A sandwich, how posh of you. Looks like it’s teatime.”

“Aww, shucks Charlie, it’s just some cucumbers, onions, soggy tomatoes, and parsley.”

“It’s a feast,” said the Professor.

Gorilla looked like he would burst from the inside out, as his cheeks flushed to a soft red.

He gave Charlie a full half and devoured the other one himself.

“I’ve got some other things, too.” Gorilla had a pack tied at his waist, undid the buckle and pulled the sack around to sit it on the floor. He opened it up and said, “How’s this?” Gorilla held up a container of raisins, a loaf of French bread, three apples, a couple cans of corn, a can opener, two tins of spam, and three potatoes. He grinned at the potatoes and said, “I was hoping we could have a baked potato at some point.”

The Professor and Charlie were laughing so hard that it echoed off the cavern walls, making it sound a little creepy.

“Not in all my journeys have I seen this. Kid, you are something,” said the Professor as he lifted him off the ground and into the air.

Charlie said, “Well, we should use it sparingly, I was okay tonight with the cucumber sandwich. By the way Gorilla, I wish we never met, coz you’re too hard to forget!”

“Yes, indeed, Charlie, but it’s good to know we have a pantry with us,” said the Professor.

They all laughed.

“I’m glad I did something right,” said Gorilla.

Professor Sarantos said, “Oh, my boy, you did. Let’s get some rest. I’ll stand first guard. When I’m tired, I’ll wake up Charlie, and then she will wake up Gorilla and we’ll start over if needed. We shouldn’t stay on guard too long, the last person should be on duty in the morning. We have a big day ahead of us. Keep your flashlights by you, just in case. We’ll have no fire, I’m not sure what’s around.”

The two kids agreed, got comfortable and were soon dozing away, flinching slightly in deep slumber.

He stared out into the night sky. The moon was so bright it lit up the ground and cast shadows all around. He could see things moving around the land, but from this distance they were only discernable as large and small shadows.

The discovery was not worth the life of these two kids that had their whole futures in front of them. What if he couldn't help them? When they made it back, he'd never allow students to accompany him on these types of adventures again.



Sizable shadows were looming at the river. He could hear them lapping up the water. Quietly he watched their monstrous shapes dipping in and looking around the land, almost relaxed, not expecting anything out of the ordinary.

A peacefulness seeped into his soul, as the quiet of the night drifted slowly into a deeper darkness, taking his thoughts on a reflective journey.

There was never any mystery about what he wanted to do in his life. From an early age, he would dig holes in his parent's farmland searching for unusual objects that he could study. It was magnificent. It was the best time of his life. The earth and all the secrets it harbored within its crusty soil were all at his fingertips. Once he found a bone that their old hound, Freddie, had buried.

He brushed the sweat from his forehead and smiled.

His collection between the ages of five through ten had been extensive: the bone, an old penny, a piece of broken glass, seven rocks (two had imprints similar to a fossil, and one was black rippled with gold flecks), a piece of fabric, a broken plate (it had a partial name on it), an old metal trap, a bullet, a child's bonnet, and one cool horseshoe. He kept them all and still had them stored in the same wooden box in his bedroom closet.

From that moment on, he would develop into what he was today always searching for the big find and always wanting to do the best he could to make that happen-he didn't become this by accident. Now, here he was inside the biggest discovery ever known to man, but he had nothing to show for it.

He could remedy that. Tomorrow they would include in their search, dino bones, eggs, plant life, anything that would bring him that moment in history when all eyes would see that he belonged as a key figure of great discovery.

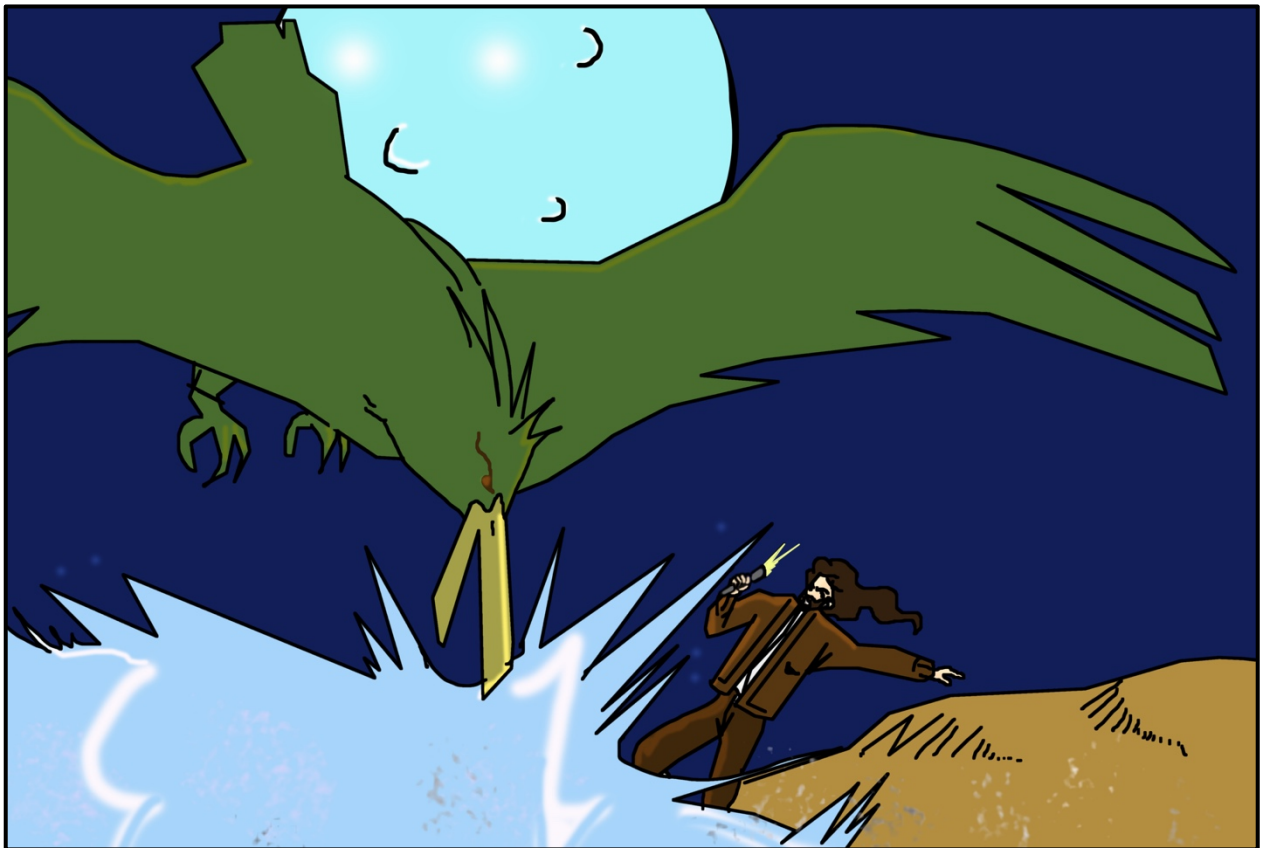
His mother had died when he was only two in childbirth with his only sibling, a sister named Martha. He couldn't help his mom. Martha had survived and grew up going on adventures with him, until she fell in love and married Donald Jenkins, a scholar, a Dean, and a man with the vision to tame Martha and pull her into the game of love.

He missed her. They'd moved to Maine and were busy raising two boys. Martha taught them how to dig up treasures at an early age, much to his amusement. When he would visit, the four of them would head to the beach, the woods, or any interesting-looking areas where collapsed buildings existed. The search for the

perfect place and the perfect adventure took precedence. Then it was nonstop digging until the sun would set. It was such fun, to be soaked in sweat and sun.

If only he could share this new adventure with Martha. She would've loved it. Her heart still flirted with adventure. Most of the time she loved being a tomboy, but when Donald had dinner parties for the faculty, she would dress up looking like a princess; there was no better host.

The caw of a strange sounding bird found him searching the trees, seeking the unusual sound and the creature that made it. He thought he saw it, but then the sound came from somewhere else. It kept travelling around faster than he could turn his head, or maybe there were at least ten of them taunting him, as he sat at the waterfall edge peering out.



Suddenly, the waterfall exploded inward. He fell backward as a head, the size of his body, forced its way past the water. The eyes were narrow, its beak as long as his forearm. It knocked his gun from his hand. All he had was a flashlight.

The creature screamed loudly, forcing him to forgo the flashlight for a moment and cover his ears.

“Bushwa.” Gorilla was on his feet and his loud curse drew the attention of the giant bird.

“Professor,” said Charlie in a soft whisper. The shock of what she saw didn’t bring out another sound.

The moment the bird’s attention went to Gorilla, Sarantos grabbed the flashlight and flashed it at the creature’s face, while sliding back further into the cave. “Charlie grab my gun.”

He heard shuffling behind him as she moved to locate the weapon. Little pellets from Gorilla’s slingshot were bouncing off of the bird’s head until one caught it in the eye. The bellow was bloodcurdling.

Its mouth flew open at the same time the Professor found one of his sticks. He jumped up and rammed it into the throat of the beast, causing it to pull out of the water and retreat quickly into the evening sky.

Sarantos put his hands on his knees and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good shot, Gorilla,” said the Professor.

“Thanks, Doc. You weren’t so bad yourself.”

“Hey, boys, what about me? I got the gun.”

The Professor turned and saw her standing behind him with the gun in her hand. He smiled. “Yes, you did, Charlie. Yes, you did. Well, I’m glad we’re collecting friends and memories...”

“We’re the bomb. What a team we make. I think we might survive this adventure and make it back home,” said Gorilla.

This small victory brought them a sliver of hope.

“You’re right, Gorilla,” said Charlie.

The Professor said, “Yes, I believe he is.”

They made it through the night with no other scary situations.

In the morning light that sparkled inside the cave, Gorilla gathered up the pebbles he’d shot at the bird. “Doc, that wasn’t a pterodactyl. What do you think it was?”

“Well, I’m not sure, but it looked like it might be a genus of pterosaurs, whose members are a pterodactyl.”

“That makes sense Doc. It was interesting. When you flashed the light, the colors of his head were primarily a florescent blue-green.”

“As pretty as it was, I can do without the visual connection, call it too close for comfort,” said Charlie.



Both men nodded in agreement. True happiness is rarely shared.

“Well, time to find the next cave,” said the Professor.

“Professor, do you think the hibiscus will be in front of the cave?”

“I’m not sure, Charlie, but I was thinking the caves would offer the solitude to transport, if the gems were located and fit into the holes, after finding the last one.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Charlie.

The three of them were sweating as they headed down the slippery rock edges that doubled as stairs, a fine means of getting into and out of the cave.

A minute later, Charlie slipped but the Professor quickly grabbed her arm, pulling her back from the edge. A fall into the rocky bottom could prove fatal. He might not have helped everyone he tried to help during his life, but at least he could help Charlie now.

“Thanks Professor.”

He nodded politely, and they continued down until they arrived at the bottom.

The sun was already scorching hot, Professor Sarantos took a shirt from his pack and wet it in the river before wrapping it around his neck.

“Good idea, Doc.”

The two kids did the same.

He’d brought a large sack that had a long flap on it. He carefully placed a leaf from one of the unusual plants inside it, being careful not to damage it as much as possible.

Everyone filled up their water containers after they drank their fill.

“Doc, before we leave, we should make sure we fill up our flasks with some souvenirs too - water, you know, weird things grown from this era.”

He patted the kid on the back. “Great idea, kid.”

They looked around while they'd been on top of the waterfall in search of hibiscus, but the land was so plush in tropical forestry that it was hard to tell. Colors were everywhere, but he didn't see the right flower, yet.

They headed towards the last waterfall on the first level. It took them longer than before. The distance was a half day walk.

“What's that noise, Professor?”

He stopped and listened. “It sounds like monkeys.”

“What the hell?”

It was Gorilla, screaming frantically. Monkeys were on them, and soon they were running off with their hats.

“You blasted apes, bring my hat back,” said the Professor, as he raced across the jungle grabbing vines and swinging when he could to keep up.

“Professor, come back,” said Charlie at the top of her lungs, while in pursuit of her own hat.

Gorilla had already caught his monkey and fought valiantly to retrieve his cap.

“Doc, I'm coming,” said Gorilla in hot chase of the monkey with the Professor's hat.

Charlie's monkey dropped her hat, allowing her to put it back on her head to prevent the sun from penetrating her hair and frying out her scalp.

The Professor was moving so quickly and grabbed what he thought was a vine and moved to the next one before the snake could react.

“Wow, look at the Doc go. And they call me Gorilla.”

Another monkey attacked the one with the Professor’s hat, trying to take it from him, allowing the Professor to catch up and catch it as it fell from the original monkey and directly into his open hands.



He cursed as he headed back to his group, but the trail was nowhere to be found. They were deep inside the overshadowing growth of the jungle.

“Great, now what?”

“It’s okay, Professor. When I started chasing you, I broke branches so we could get back into the somewhat open area.”

“Good thinking Charlie.”

“Yep, good thinking Charlie,” said Gorilla chiming in.

“You know what kids, I think it was smart to bring you along. We make a great team. Let’s go make something out of our day.”

“We’re glad to be here, Doc,” said Gorilla.

They made their way back and picked up the trail to the cave. Dusk was already arriving, and they hadn’t stopped to eat, so they were famished.

Drinking water while they walked was the only thing that kept them going, and Gorilla handing them both a Babe bar when they needed a sugary pick me up. The nuts in it gave them some protein too.

“There it is Professor.”

They were close now, and maybe only ten minutes out. They were lucky they only ran into monkeys today. Sarantos was thinking the creatures were nocturnal, at least in this area. They didn’t want to be out when the sun went down.

“Hey Doc, you grabbed a snake back there, you know.”

“What?”

The kids started laughing as the confused expression on the Professor's face made them realize he didn't know.

"Yeah, Professor. A snake."

Gorilla was laughing out loud now. "It was large. In fact, I'd say it was monstrous. I don't think it liked you flirting with it like that!"

"A snake, you say. And you kids thought I was just another old man. Hopefully, some kid will learn from this."

"Oh, I didn't, not for a minute Professor. You're a special old man," said Charlie.

Gorilla slapped him on the back. "Yeah, I did. But you surprised even me."

"Let that be a lesson to you both," he said and turned around facing them both. He pointed a finger. "Don't mess with my hat."

"I won't Doc, no way."

"Me either, Professor. Me either."

"Good. Here we are, and I don't see the flowers. We will have to spend the night here, anyway. Don't forget to fill up your bottles. Tomorrow, I will get us a snake for dinner and cook it before the sun sets. I need more protein than what I'm getting in those candy bars."



“Crap, more steps,” said Gorilla.

“I’ll climb the tree and swing from that vine and lower you down a rope.”

Before they could argue, the Professor was already up the tree and swinging to the cave.

He made it on one swing.

“Good job, Doc,” said Gorilla shouting from below.

The cave opening was about 30 feet high, and soon he lowered a rope.

“Thanks, Professor,” Charlie said as she began climbing up the rope.

Next came Gorilla. He did it in no time at all.

“I checked it out already, it’s almost dark. How about spam on bread for dinner?”

They sat by the edge of the opening so they could see without a light.

One slice of bread with spam filled them up quickly, and they went through the same ritual as the night before so they could all get fast asleep.

That night when he was on duty, he wondered what kept him going. Was it the fear of failure? The drive to succeed? To be recognized? He never got burned out from this job and never wondered if it was worth it. It was within him; it was the magic of being in the right place and where his soul needed to be. It was as simple as that.

He felt the length of the day when he sat there in contemplation, glad they made it through another eventful day. For a moment he thought of Stella. She’d gotten so

mad at him and left before he could say goodbye. She didn't know they teleported. He wished she was there with them and he hadn't told her she couldn't come.

The next morning, when the sun finally poured into the cave opening, it rested on the deepest corner of the cave, exposing a painting.

Professor Sarantos sat up. "You've got to be kidding me? Who was this guy?"

Charlie yawned and stretched.

"What's that you say, Doc?"

"Look at the wall, Gorilla."

Illuminated on the wall was a colorfully painted display of hibiscus. Red, yellows, and white and as tall as six feet.

"Tell it to Sweeny, Doc."

"That's goofy, just plain goofy," said Charlie.

"Well, kids, this could be it."

He moved to the wall and slowly began checking it for openings. He found none.

"What the hell does it mean?"

"Not sure, Doc. Let me look."

“Good luck, Gorilla.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it, Doc. Skill, pure skill.”

“Okay, sure kid.”



After about ten minutes, he stood back and sucked in his bottom lip.

“Nothing, Doc.”

“Well, that takes the cake. What’re we supposed to do now?”

“Truthfully, Charlie, I don’t know,” said the Professor.

He took off his hat and scratched his head.

“Doc, I could use a cup of java. Boy, that would help me think better.”

“Me too, kid.”

“Let’s have another slice of bread with spam, before it’s ruined. Let’s think about what we’re seeing here,” said Charlie.

“That’s the thing, Charlie darling, I’m not sure what we’re seeing,” said Gorilla.

They sat down to eat, sipped on their water and stared at the painting some more.

“We’re not breaking this world just by being in it, so I wonder how they got the paints here,” said Charlie.

The Professor said, “It could’ve been made here using the local plants for color. There are some vibrant flowers I’ve seen around that could’ve been used for that purpose.”

“I think the whole thing is chaotic, messy, and annoying,” said Gorilla.

“Oh, you’re just mad because you couldn’t figure out the flower thing,” said Charlie, as she munched on her sandwich and blew him a kiss.

“Oh, that’s nice, Charlie,” said Gorilla.

Professor Sarantos furrowed his brow, his eyes almost slits. “I’m thinking there must be a message in there.”

“Like what Doc? Numbers? Words?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

The three of them continued staring at the flowers up and down until they were seeing spots and the flowers were running together.

“Maybe, it has nothing to do with the flowers, except that we are in the right cave,” said Charlie.



The Professor stood up and kissed the top of her head. “You’re brilliant. Let’s search the rest of the cave. It’s not huge, and the floor.”

The kids jumped up and started checking out the slippery walls, some plant life was real, and they even moved it aside not sure when the last time someone had been in this cave.

“Here Doc, I think it might be a different stone placed to hide something.”

The kid was standing at the left wall and directly in front of it at the bottom, and on the floor itself, was a darker looking stone.

“Great job, kid.”

He pushed his hat back, pulled out his knife and maneuvered it between the floor and loose stone. Gorilla got out his knife and together they shimmed it up until Charlie could grab the stone.

“Please don’t say it’s another note,” said Charlie.

Professor Sarantos stood up, grinning from ear to ear. “Yes, it is, another note, but also a gem.”

“That gem’s the cat’s meow, Doc.”

“I have to agree. I was always partial to rubies.”

“Yes, most women are,” said the Professor.

“Doc, be careful, you never know about these things. It could be hexed or trapped.”

“Why would it? No one in their right mind would find this place.”

He grabbed the gem and pulled it from the hole, but as quick as lightening a small needle shot into the hole before he could remove his hand.

“Ow, seems you were right, Gorilla.”

“What happened Doc?”

“I got a needle.”

He pulled his hand out of the hole and held it up with the needle still sticking out of his finger.

He looked at Gorilla. “Oh God, that can’t be good.”

His hand was going numb. He would die out here with the kids not getting back home. He would fail them. He couldn’t help them anymore!

“Oh, Professor,” said Charlie, her voice teary.

“I’ll be okay kids, at least we found the ruby.” Sarantos always found more beauty in the ugliest of truths than in the prettiest of lies. That was all he could say, as his feet gave out and he collapsed violently at their feet.

Was he going to die here? Coming in close contact with his mortality changed nothing and changed everything.

“Doc, what can we do?”



He smiled up at the kids. His voice was faint, as he said, “I couldn’t help you, but maybe you kids can help me??”