

Chapter 6

“Stand UP”

After his delirious fits last evening, Professor Sarantos still felt drained, but he knew they needed to keep moving. Standing still was not an option. Rest and recovery wasn't an option either.



It was hot. They'd taken turns showering in the warm waterfall after they ate, but now, it seemed the shower hadn't done them any good. Sweat ran down his body once more, making him feel sticky and dirty.

His muscles cried. His body felt heavy. Giving up just wasn't in his blood though. It was not a choice. Sometimes people have a hard time getting started, but if you look at it the right way, being alive is fun. He forced himself to stand up and keep going. He had to.

“How much further, Gorilla?”

“Doc, I can't be sure. Last time thru here, all I cared about was following the marks. My focus was on getting back to you and Charlie.” Gorilla stopped in front of them, as his eye noticed something familiar. It was so sudden that they both almost knocked him over trying to stop. Gorilla pointed excitedly. “Well, look over here Professor.” Gorilla bent down and picked something up then held it out for them to see.

Professor Sarantos said, “Well, now you're dropping wrappers on this virgin world, Gorilla. That's not cool.”

“No, you don't get it, Doc. I had to. Something was following me, so I dropped a bar to get it off my tail, and it looks like whatever was chasing me ate it. Hey, Doc, look at the imprints, a tiny set of sharp teeth would look like this. What could it be?”

“Let me see it.”

Gorilla handed him the paper, and the Professor kept flipping it over every few seconds. He took a few minutes to examine it, the heat of the morning momentarily forgotten.

“Yes, you’re right. Very tiny teeth, and seemingly razor sharp. Save this paper so we can study it when we get back. I’d say it was lucky you left it something to munch on. Teeth like that could’ve ripped your face apart. We need to be more careful. We don’t always get second chances. This world is not ours and everything we know and understand is no longer valid while we are here. Science is only part of the story.”

Charlie giggled. “Your candy came in handy for something. It saved your life, Gorilla your big brute.”

Gorilla looked dreamy-eyed, “I suppose you’re right. The Babe saved my life.”

The Professor looked over at Charlie and they both grinned.

Professor Sarantos then slapped him on the back. “Yes, Gorilla, I suppose you could say that we are the afflicted.”

Charlie pipped in. “Yes, you could... if you were some kind of nut.”

They all laughed, and Gorilla started forward once again.



“At least we’re heading in the right direction, however, we have a lot more to go.”

The day was going by uneventfully. He was glad. He was too tired to fight again. All he could do was hope the next cave offered them another gem that would bring them closer to home. He felt like he was running out of gas. It was the sacrifices for his work that mattered, but he felt guilty for pulling these two kids into this fiery mess. Their story was now much more complicated.

These thoughts didn’t make this any easier, but it was all he could think about as they walked, least he blame himself if something else went sideways. As long as this journey connected them, he would be an anchor for them. He was living mostly inside his own head now. Guilt is a heavy burden.

Creatures flying overhead screeched, and their echoes bounced off the mountain. The clouds seemed closer. The sweating was making him weak. “How much longer, Gorilla?”

“Not sure, but we need to keep moving.” There was no other choice. They could not turn back now.

Charlie looked at Sarantos. “Are you okay, Professor? You look pale. I know you’re pushing it after last night. Maybe we should stop for a snack.”



“After you just saw that tiny bite size creature that could chew off our faces might be watching and waiting for us? No thanks,” said Gorilla.

The Professor said, “He’s right, and I’m fine, Charlie. It’s just a little warm.”

“A little warm Professor? That’s a little understated,” said Charlie.

“Possibly a tad,” said Professor Sarantos as he forced a polite smile.

“Keep moving. I will not have my face eaten by anybody. Hey, that’s a weird statement,” said Gorilla chuckling at his strange sense of humor, but not slowing down for the Professor or Charlie.

It was hard for Sarantos to keep up, but he took a deep breath and moved ahead. The road was an unforgiving beast. He focused on the cave they would find. His achy legs wanted to stop but his mind kept repeating the words, Stay up. Keep moving. Stand UP. Stand UP and keep moving!

Each small step mattered. Small things become big things, always.

Oh, it wasn’t just about the awards; it was how he needed to achieve something he’d had his eye on from the age of 9. A dream, a pipe dream that long ago led him on the road to becoming a distinguished Professor. He’d authored books on unusual artifacts few thought existed, but no one had proven they did yet. He would be the one that would prove all of this existed.

Where do these stories come from if they’re not somewhat true anyway? He didn’t believe that men of high standing sat around making up an imaginary story about an item that didn’t exist or could never exist. No, he knew it was more than that. And now look where they were - thrown deep into one of these fantastic stories. No, they were true.

Now, to prove it.

The sky changed. It was getting dusky.

“Okay, kid, if you’re going to find that cave, now would be a perfect time to do it,” Sarantos said.

“It’s over there, can’t you smell the flowers?”

“Yes, I can,” said Charlie.

Thank God. He’d made it by focusing on the end goal. He was proud of himself. Five years ago, he might have given up but not today. He was too close to success. Life made him old too soon, smart too late.

Within minutes, they broke through a busy outcrop of trees and in front of them was the most incredible vision of a giant hibiscus smiling at them. Colors that were vivid and dancing with life made Charlie gasp. The air tickled the hair on his arms that was standing up. His nose breathed in the scent and it drew a peaceful smile across his face.

“Shazam. I didn’t notice this beauty yesterday. I was kind of in a hurry,” said Gorilla.

Sarantos laughed and said, “Yeah, what he said.”

Charlie grinned. “You’re right Professor, what he said. I’ve seen nothing this magnificent. If you can’t live in the present, you can’t live anywhere.”

“Doc, no one will believe this. I’m not sure. Would this flower last long enough to even take one back with us?”

“Well, I don’t care. I’m taking one. This substance should be tested and I’m sure it’s not just any ordinary flower,” said Charlie as she cut one gently from its stem.

“Should we take more? After all, it saved my life. What if it cures all matters of poison on this world? Better to be safe” the Professor said.

“I agree with the Doc, it could mean life or death,” said Gorilla, as he cut one plant of each color before pointing to the higher ground perched above the flowers. “There’s the cave. It reminds me of a dragon head, and that makes me a little nervous.”



“Right.” Charlie hesitated. “Does it mean there’s a dragon inside?”

“I don’t know Charlie, but we should get our weapons out and be careful. The Doc is still a little compromised.”

“What? I’ll have you know. I carry a gun kid and I’m always ready to use it. I’d say you’re the one who’s compromised.” As he said this, he knew his posturing was a lie. His body felt restless and his mind distracted.

Gorilla grimaced. “I guess you’re right then, Doc.”

The kid got out his slingshot, and Charlie pulled a dagger while he checked his pistol to make sure it was ready to go.

“Let’s go,” said the Professor.

Both kids nodded, proceeding towards the mouth of the cave.

“You know Doc, whoever created this adventure to protect the sword from being used sure had a sick sense of humor,” said Gorilla.

“That he did kid, that he did.”

The closer they got, the quieter it seemed. They noticed the only access to the cave was via a weathered, wooden suspension bridge off the cliff side from an open part of the plush forest.

“Now what?” asked Charlie.

“We need to find a path to that part of the bridge,” said Gorilla as he pointed.

Sarantos stood with his head tilted up and said, “How high up do you guess that suspension bridge is?”

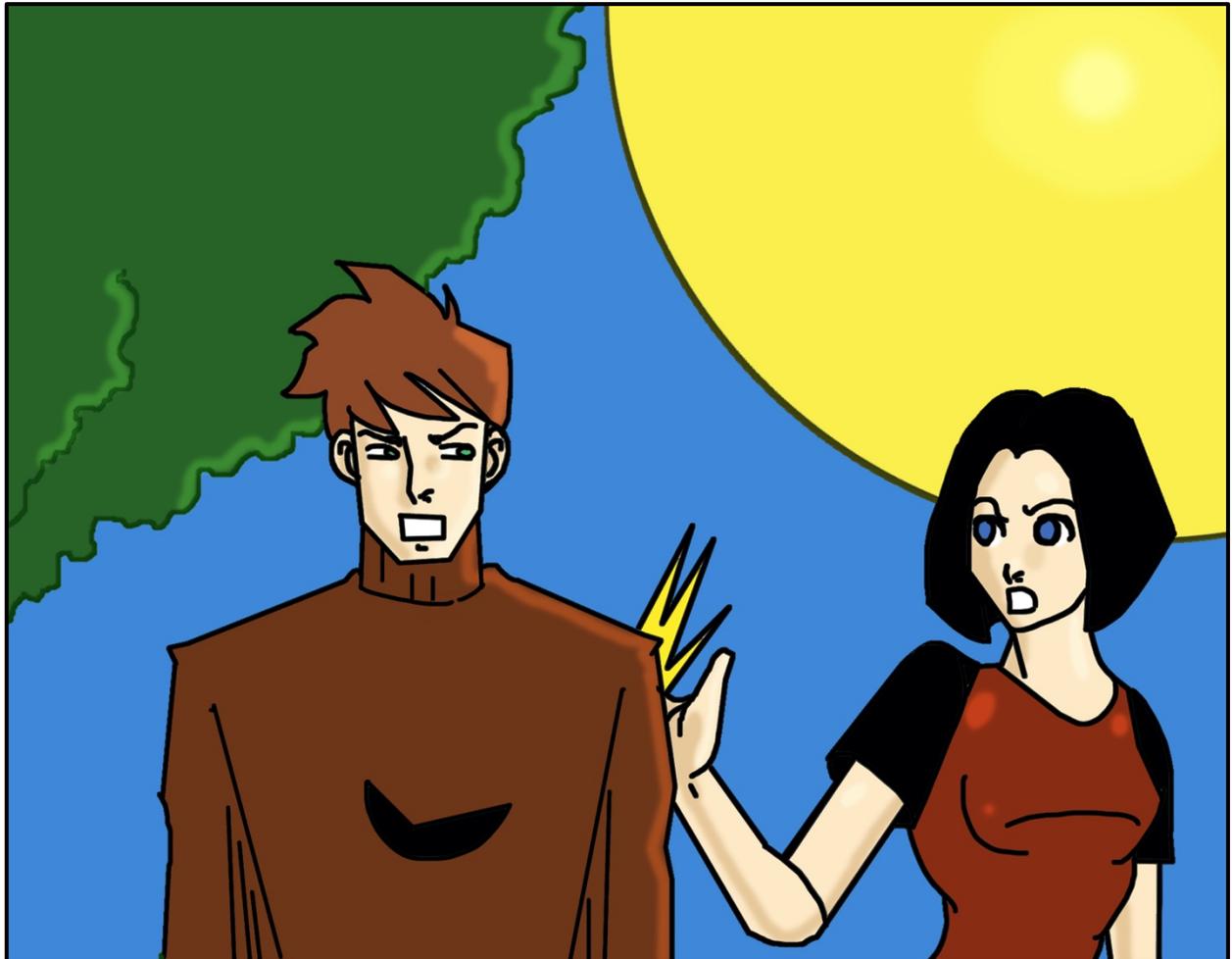
Gorilla laughed.

Charlie backed up and said, “Oh, no you don’t Professor. If you think we can make it up there from here, you must be mad.”

He grinned, and his nostrils flared. “I might be mad, but we have no other choice. You know I’m chasing sleep and I’m not sure how much longer I can keep this up.”

“I’m game,” said Gorilla.

Charlie smacked him on the arm. “Of course, you’re game. You’re as mad as the Professor. There must be a saner way to get up there?”



He focused on Charlie and challenged her. “Okay, if you see one, let me know Princess.”

He didn't mean to sound forceful, but exhaustion oozed out of his every pore and he didn't want to spend the night out here exposed without shelter. That would be far more dangerous than what he had planned.

Gorilla was already pulling out his grappling hook.

“Not sure if I can throw it that far, Doc.”

“You won't have to, kid. See that tree over there?”

“Yes. The one that's about 100' tall?”

“Yeah, that's the one. Can you climb it?”

Charlie jumped into the conversation. “You're kidding, right? You can't go up there and hook a rope to the bridge. It's even more dangerous.”

The two men ignored Charlie's frantic plea.

“Yes, I believe I can, but do you think you're healthy enough to climb once I do it?”

“I am, kid,” said the Professor. You don't get what you wish for, you get what you work for.

Before Charlie could protest any further, Gorilla was flying up the tree almost jumping from branch to branch with the agility of a monkey.

“Don’t be so worried, Charlie, him and I did much worse on our last trip. He’ll be fine.”

She threw him daggers with those penetrating eyes. “Everybody loses eventually.”

At least he hoped the kid would be okay. They had no other choice. They had to stand up and fight.

Soon they lost sight of him amongst the leaves. All they could do was wait.



He felt like a sitting duck. The vulnerability made his neck itch as his neck hairs twitched in alarm. Something was now moving towards them. He pushed his hat up and pulled Charlie closer to him, placing his finger on his lips, silencing her. He lifted his head in the noise's direction. It's about the heartbeat.

Charlie stiffened. Her eyes shifted. She raised her dagger. Sarantos readied his pistol.

Whatever it was they were about to face appeared to be medium in size. He was counting his lucky stars for that when the movement stopped. The Professor felt Charlie relax next to him as well. He wanted to take a breath but held it in instead while listening. Now it was off in a new direction, then another direction. It was moving faster. What was it planning? What was it??

Before he managed a guess, he grabbed Charlie's arm and backed them up to the cliff wall where the dragon opening taunted them from high above their heads, he could almost hear it laughing at their current predicament, 'up here you fool, this is your only sanctuary.'

The air was crisp. The woods were still. He steadied his gun with one hand and pulled out his whip with the other, a quick movement that startled Charlie. She almost lost her dagger but hung onto it.

The small trees and brush parted from three different angles, a stealth attack.

What the hell? His mind floated into a sci-fi novel, and he felt fear creep up his back and move back down into his legs, weakening them now that he needed them most.

The three two-foot-tall creatures stood on two legs. They were shaggy like apes, but human in facial features and structure, except for their arms, which hung down to their knees making them resemble a human sloth, of sorts.

Charlie inhaled calmly and bent her knees slightly.

The creatures seemed to judge their opponents, looking from their weapons to their faces. Little beady eyes focused more on Charlie than him. They thought she was the easier prey.

One creature reached out its long arm to touch Charlie's hair with its long hairy fingers and long nails. The Professor hoped Charlie would stay composed and not flinch away. That might cause the creature to tear at her face and ruin this pretty picture.

Charlie kept her expression relaxed. She surprised him.

The creature then lifted his arm and raised it high into the air then bringing it down in one swift motion to rip her open from top to bottom, but the Professor was quicker snapping his whip high into the air grabbing the creature's deadly arm with one fluid motion, lifting it into the air then throwing it against the wall.

Charlie blinked then snapped out of her trance as she realized what had happened. She pulled out a long stick she'd made when they first arrived that she'd sharpened the edge into a spear-like weapon. It was on!

Sarantos had cracked the creature into the cliff wall so hard he snapped its neck. He glanced at the other two. His expression warned them that their fate would be the same.

They were more cautious, backing up, but crouching down low to the ground to ready themselves for an attack. The noise that came out of their mouths was a high-pitched scream. He worried they were calling for reinforcements. It would be the end of them. All they could do was stand up and fight!

Charlie understood it too because her body shivered. This was real life, where everyone ages.

As the sun began its fade out birthing the night, he could see the brush moving towards them. Fate doomed them to die here.



He handed Charlie the gun and pulled his whip back as one leapt towards him, stopping in mid air and then being slung against the wall like his twin. The third one leaped into the air after him before he could bring his whip back around.

Teeth the size of razor blades, and just as deadly, were front and center, its mouth open and ready. Fear overtook him as this beast surely wanted to rip his guts out. Then, a gunshot and the flurry of terror fell to the ground.

He breathed a sigh of relief, as a rope dropped out of the sky and hung in front of his face. Charlie smiled.

“Go, Charlie, we have little time. Look.”

Her smiling face turned white with fear as she saw what was heading towards them. She nodded and began climbing up the rope.

The Professor peered up and saw Gorilla give him a wave, but instead of letting go of the rope he helped by pulling Charlie up. She climbed faster than an Olympic champion, not because she was better, but out of fevered fear. Adrenaline raced thru her veins. Her heart pumped wildly.

Crap! She still had his gun. The whip would have to do. He studied his surroundings and saw a branch protruding from the cliff wall. Worst case scenario, he could lasso it and pull himself to safety.

His one eye watched Charlie ascend as the other scanned the trees.

They were getting closer. He wouldn't want to go into a tree. They could follow him up and they also had an enormous advantage with numbers.

He could die here, but at least he'd know that the kids would continue on until they got home. They would make sure everyone knew what they'd achieved. He'd been left behind by his father, his family, and his friends during his short life. He'd retreated somewhere into himself, but never gave up the pursuit of this dream, of

what he believed existed. Sarantos smiled as the enemy closed in. That was good enough for him. He knew no one could ever take away his moment in the light and the entire world would know his story.

He had faith in these two kids to finish the job. If this was the end, he was OK with it. He would stand up and fight, until the end.

Charlie was almost to the top. The movement in the lush forest warned him against the small army fast approaching to finish him. He wondered if they'd just kill him or eat him. Probably the later.



The bushes parted and twenty small hairy creatures stepped into the clearing. There was more movement behind them. The gun wouldn't have been enough. It was best Charlie kept it; they may need it for whatever was waiting in the cave.

Their squeals made him cringe. They were too close, too loud, and there were too many of them.

He lifted his whip as if telling them to bring it on. Sarantos would go out fighting.

He was never a quitter, but this was never how he imagined his end. Well, at least it was doing something he loved and going out this way added spice to his story. He'd be a hero. That thought made him chuckle again. He had a tender goofiness.

The first ten lowered themselves while inching forward for their attack. He might grab two in the whip at a time. He'd never tried that before.

Without warning, a rope hit him on the right cheek and stood dangling in front of him - a piece of meat, a life raft, an escape that might save his life. He reached up and grabbed it, but if he climbed now, they'd be all over him like a cheap trick. What a dilemma. How could he use the whip to keep them away while also using both hands to climb?

Instinctively, he grabbed the rope with his left hand preparing to use the whip with his right hand. Then he felt the rope being pulled up. Genius. The kids would save him. He loved those kids.

It was a slow pull, but it distracted the creatures for a brief moment. Once they realized he was being pulled up, they attacked. They figured there was no time to lose before he disappeared up into the sky. He whipped as violently as he could. Despite the whipping, three long arms reached his legs and they took a beating. They gashed at his legs like savages. Blood squirted through his pants. He held on to the

rope with one hand as the other continued flaying the whip in every direction and as fast as he could. He kicked them in the face knocking them backwards. His heart beat outside his chest. He kept kicking and whipping, and that gave the kids the time they needed to continue pulling him up out of their reach. They were fighting gravity. As he was getting away, one even managed to hang onto his legs for a few extra seconds before he booted it in the head, knocking it off into the angry mob below. They were furious. They started racing up the trees trying in vain to get to the rope. It was too late though. He was getting away but bleeding briskly.

“Doc, you okay?”

“Yes,” he said through clenched teeth. The pain was severe, and he worried of infection.

He was feeling weaker than ever as the kids pulled him over the top of the rope bridge. His body was shaking, his hands trembling.

“God, Gorilla. No wonder he couldn’t help us by climbing, he’s lost a lot of blood. How did he hold on?” There’s nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.

“I don’t know, Charlie. Let’s get him into the cave.”

He heard them talking about him, but only every other word. The Professor nodded and allowed them to drag his failing body into the cave. He was falling in and out of consciousness. He thought Gorilla used his shirt as a tourniquet but wasn’t sure if it was a hallucination.

“Sorry, Professor, we didn’t have time to check the cave out. We hope it’s clear,” said Charlie.

Gorilla asked, “I wonder who would make a bridge to this cave in this jungle, anyway?”

There was still enough light to see into the mouth of the cave and twenty feet in. It seemed clean. They had no choice.



The kids helped him sit up against the wall, but he crashed to the floor. He could no longer stand up.

Charlie pulled up his shredded pant legs and checked out the wounds under where she had been holding pressure. She took two flowers and placed them on the open gouges. Somehow, the Professor instantly felt better. The bleeding stopped. He opened his eyes and grinned at her in thanks. He took off Gorilla’s tourniquet and gave him back his shirt.

“Nasty little insignificant creatures,” the Professor whispered.

Charlie bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

“Professor you’re the bomb, the cat’s meow... oh, you’re my hero!”

“Yes, Charlie. That’s the only way to describe the Doc. What bravery,” said Gorilla.

“What about Gorilla? He was smashing, as you’d say, right Charlie?”

“Hey, I’m smashing too, Professor. Plant one right here on this cheek babe,” said Gorilla grinning from ear to ear.

Charlie said, “Oh, alright. You were pretty smashing too.”

Gorilla put out his right cheek, but when she went to kiss it, he moved his head and she planted one right onto his mouth.

Professor Sarantos laughed. He was feeling normal already, though he could not explain it.

Her eyes grew wide, and she jumped back in shock. Her mouth fell to her chin. Gorilla looked pleased and satisfied with himself. She looked red.

She spat and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Why, you little toad...”

She stopped midstream when she saw Gorilla's bulging eyes. The Professor watched in confusion as her knees weakened. She shook. Charlie wasn't moving. She stood motionless.

He looked behind her where Gorilla had his attention focused. She was in the way. He couldn't see what was there.

“For God's sake man, what are you looking at?”

The kid snapped out of it. “We hit the jackpot without having to search the cave. Doc, we found gold. We found the gold!”

That comment allowed Charlie to move to the side, and they all stood looking at their reward. It was the gold.

Amidst a pile of gold coins was a golden nugget resting on a hand statue of one of those small hairy creatures they'd just fought. The nugget would fit the sword.

The Professor's mind raced. Why hadn't someone taken it all this time?

Charlie found her legs, moved towards it, and reached out to grab it from its perch.

Then Sarantos knew why. “Charlie. Noooooo.....”

