

## *Chapter 8*

### *“We Were Happy Enough”*



The day had been lengthy. The sun set behind the never-ending forest and left dappled light shimmering and teasing them before it dared to disappear altogether. Then the darkness smothered them.

“We need to find a place to rest, Professor. The last of the light will blind us quick enough,” said Alvaro.

The kid lifted his head as though he’d just awakened from a long dull dream. “And how. This bores me out of my mind.”

Monotony confirmed.

The Professor moved next to the kid and patted him on the shoulder. “I agree. I suggest we look for shelter, something other than the trees. I want to recheck the map as well. This is taking too long. And the kid’s right, there’s no celebration to trudging through the jungle days on end.”

Alvaro ignored them and shifted around the area, his head moving back and forth and his eyes scanning the terrain. There was a peculiar smell from the local flowers.

“Over there. It is still under the tree coverage, but we can adjust it to be a burrow of sort.”

He and the kid joined Alvaro in making a makeshift tent out of dry tree branches and bark. It wasn’t half bad.

The night overtook them quickly. The air smelled sweet with the perfume from the flowers, and of course, instantly made him think of Catalina.

His heart raced; it wasn’t controllable. It felt like they were standing on the cliff’s edge as the wind waved past their

laughs. Her skin was soft, her smile gentle. Difficult things take a long time to forget.

Their life and love had been enough for him. He felt happy, and he had faith in them when they held hands and devoured the day together. It was enough for him, but apparently not for Catalina. To think that she can be penned up and told to stay put like an obedient pet is ridiculous.

“Well, Doc, it looks like we made ourselves a homemade tent. I find it homey.”

Alvaro pulled out a long-sleeved shirt and put it on over his bare skin. The bugs would be merciless tonight, and they had to do everything they could to keep them out of the tent. The less skin exposed, the better.

The nights in the jungle were chilly. The blistering sun and sweat made their body temperatures cool down quick. It was only a matter of time before they were shivering.

He looked over the tent and had to admit it was decent, but it wouldn't work well against wild animals. It looked like it belonged in a different forest. His stomach growled.

“Are we going to eat soon? What do we have left?”



“Doc, the usual.” The kid grinned and pulled out a Ruth bar.

“Baloney, kid. Now that’s an idea. You got any baloney somewhere in there?”

Alvaro frowned. “What’s this baloney you speak of?”

His eyes searched the heavens but found no sensible explanation for the strange deli meat.

“Alvaro, I’m not really sure what it is, but it beats living on candy bars.”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you try it, Doc. There are nuts for protein and sugar for energy, not to mention tasty chocolate to keep you healthy. All the basic Gorilla food groups.” This was like a fight between two bald men for a comb.

“I suppose you’re right, kid. Not sure what’s in baloney that would sustain us out here on the road less traveled. Hand me one from your never-ending supply of Babe Ruth bars!” The kid had a PhD in positive energy.

The Professor devoured it quickly and enjoyed it, pretending things were not as stressful as they were.

“We have fruit and nuts.” Alvaro threw them both a soft fruit and handed them both a handful of Brazilian nuts.

It wasn’t a bad dinner, but it wasn’t a good one either. It would sustain them, though. He’d heard people indulged in monkey brains. That wasn’t for him, he’d die first.

It rained. The Professor found comfort in the soft sound of the raindrops. He hoped to see a rainbow. Everyone has a chapter they don’t read out loud.

At Alvaro’s request, they all opened their water containers and placed them against three jagged rocks to the right. Alvaro then put a bowl under a giant leaf that dripped water

down it and into the bowl. Gorilla patted their newfound friend on his back.



“Good thinking Alvaro,” said Sarantos. “I need to use this time to wash the grime and sweat from my body. I brought 2 bars of soap if anyone wants to use when I’m done. Just going over behind that tree to have some me time.” He pointed to a large palm tree and then casually moved behind it. He kept smiling to himself. All the trees were large, and

most were a type of palm tree. These are the things you notice when you're bored.

The rain did not last long. Sarantos stripped down and allowed the water to gingerly caress his sweaty body. The fresh scent of the soap perked him up. The peaceful experience cooled him down and refreshed his spirit. He could stand there for an hour, except it was getting darker and darker. Insects always loved to bite him, and this could get ugly. He washed his clothes out and rung them tight, putting on dry ones from his pack.

As he came around the tree, the kid was standing there with his hand out. He placed a bar of soap into it and smiled as he kept walking towards the tent.

“Enjoy, kid.”

“Thanks, Doc. I think I might.”

“I already cleaned myself and started a fire,” said Alvaro.

He noticed the handsome man had built a makeshift drying rack from wood and his clothes hung loosely on them.

Sarantos looked around and found some dry wood to make his own. He set it up and hung his clothes to dry, too. There were a few more wood pieces that would work about 10 feet away, so he gathered those and put another one together for the kid.

Alvaro was under the canopy they created, weaving something from vines he found off to the left. The Professor watched in amazement as the vines were quickly being converted into a rope. Every day, he learned something he didn't know.



Alvaro looked up. “This is one of the strongest ropes I know of. I was glad to find these vines.”



Alvaro's firm jawline twitched as he worked.

Sarantos mind bounced across the branches like a squirrel looking for a home. He must be nuts. He had left his guitar with Charlie to take back with her to the hotel. It would have been nice to play it under their little canopy.

“I wish I had my guitar.”

Alvaro grinned and said, “No worries, my friend. We may have attracted the wrong attention with your wonderful music that we wouldn't want. Who needs an instrument anyhow? Our voices are the oldest musical instrument alive, a finely tuned musical pleasure!”

“Hum... I suppose you're correct, my friend.”

He said friend back, because it seemed appropriate that he referred to him using the same tone Alvaro had used, just to be friendly.

Alvaro continued to weave as he raised his voice in a harsh sounding native voice Sarantos didn't understand. But he leaned back under the leaves and casually listened to his rugged voice.

It had a pleasant tone, but almost sounded like a painful love story. As if on cue, the passion of his pitch rose and fell with each drop of the rain that had restarted.

He could've fallen to sleep easily but the song was riveting.

When Alvaro's voice concluded, rising and stopping in mid-air, his stomach bottomed out. What the hell?



He looked at the native and said, “That was a powerful acappella song. You have a magnificent singing voice. The mood made me want to weep. There was a sadness to it, a loss. Hell, even the rain came back in to support your story.”

“Thank you, my friend. I’ve sung that song the past 2 years in local bars. It is about an epic love that ends in the death of his lover. He cries to the heavens forever, as the wind that blows across the northern mountains haunts all who hear his cries of anguish.”

“I get it, music is a universal language.” In music, Sarantos could always hide.

The soft voice of Alvaro exhaled a heavy sigh.

Sarantos spoke, “Well, I’m glad I didn’t bring my instrument, otherwise I might’ve missed the opportunity to enjoy your voice. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Where’s Babe Ruth?”

His brow creased. “The what? The candy bar?”

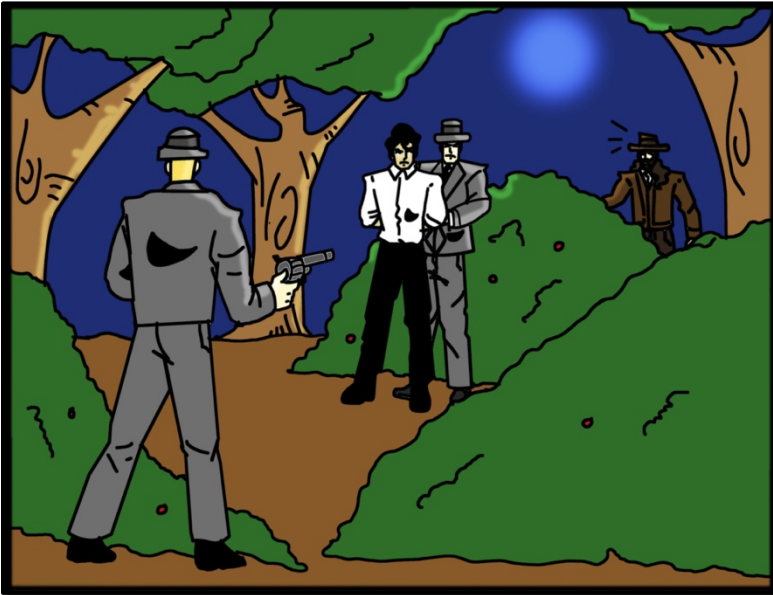
“No, the boy you call kid. Where is he?”

“Bushwa!”

They both slid on socks and their boots and moved out into the rainy night.

They moved in sync to where the kid was showering. He was gone. He had dropped the soap on top of a giant leaf. Sarantos mouth fell open. His heart pounded. The worst kind of victim is the one who creates another victim. The presence of Alvaro didn't help, but it was better than nothing.

“Kid?” His voice was quiet and held an edge to it like a dagger that was too nervous to take the next plunge into the soft stomach of its intended victim.



Alvaro was on the move. He'd never keep up with the young man's pace. He moaned when the native was tackled. As he twisted around to face the intruders, he looked back at the Professor in shock.

The gangsters!

Sarantos pulled his whip out and reared back, but something caught it. Not a fun time to get it snagged. He dropped the whip to the ground and removed his gun, but then felt a searing pain in his head. Everything went black.

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His consciousness slowly returned.

He heard voices, so he kept his eyes shut and listened.

“Uncle, I think you killed him.” The voice was that of a lad, soft, but urgent.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Oh, Uncle, you did. Father won’t like it. We were just supposed to use them to find the treasure. How can we use them when they’re dead?”

The sarcasm in the lad's voice was interesting. Clearly the Uncle shouldn't kill him, but all things were possible. His life's journey was about to take him somewhere.



The Professor interrupted, “Don't worry boy. I'm not dead.” He opened his eyes and heard an intake of breath.

“He's alive,” said the boy in his British accent.

His head hurt like hell.

“Yes, I'm alive and that's good for all of us.”

He was inside their makeshift hut with hands bound in front of him and feet hogtied together at the ankles. There was a moan next to him. Gorilla was squinting at him. Thank God the kid was alive. Alvaro was slouched down beside the kid. They were both bound. Alvaro was still unconscious.

“Doc, what’s going on? Who are these people?”

Like he knew.

It wasn’t the Italian mob, that was a sure bet.

“Okay, we’ll play. What the hell is going on?”

He examined their situation. They didn’t want to kill them, and that was a good thing. There were five of them. One was a young lad, maybe 20. But how did they know they were out in this area? And how much information did they have? He was in the mood to cry.



A tall man with sandy hair and a large rifle that looked like a hammerless repeater stepped close to him. People rarely say exactly what they want.



The tall man spoke with authority. “They paid us to locate you and retrieve the map that the kid stole from the Professors. We’ve done that so now we can leave. I suggest you go back to the States and forget this place.” He sounded like an educated American.

“Bushwa! Like hell we will. Those big-mouthed fat cats bragged and bragged while drinking themselves into a coma. That map is rightfully ours. You know, finder’s keepers.” The kid’s face was bright red. He was trying to stand up.

Alvaro was still unconscious. He nodded towards the young man. “Is he going to be okay?”

The man with the hammerless kicked Alvaro twice. “He moved, so he’s still alive.”

“Nice,” said the Professor.

“Leave them alone Tank,” said a slender, well-dressed man who carried a Blue Steel shotgun.

“Are you going to let us go,” asked Gorilla?

“Yes, we’ll untie your hands and leave. We’re going after the Dragon, and I agree with Tank, go home. Don’t follow us. There are far more of us than you, and we have weapons. We won’t be so nice next time we meet.”

The British man could be the father of the young man.

Sometimes it’s electrifying being afraid. It means you’re out of your comfort zone. The Professor had to speak up. “You’ve put us all in an awkward situation, haven’t you?”

“How so, Professor Sarantos? Yes, I know who you are. Does that surprise you?”



Sarantos had to think quick. This was their find, and he didn't come all this way to lose it to these sharks.

“There're others after the artifact too, and you wouldn't want to run into them without us as your back-up.”

The men looked at each other. Blue Steel spoke. “Who? We saw no one else on the trail.”

What happened to the girls? He didn't ask, but the kid did blurting out, “What? Did you not see two gorgeous women with one ginormous native on that trail? They were with us but were heading back.” The kid's voice was stressed.

“No.”

“What? How could you not...”

Sarantos cut him off. “Kid, relax, it's possible they hid, or they had already made it back. They were in excellent hands.” He looked straight at Blue Steel. “There are gangsters wanting a piece of the action, and I'm not sure how many there are, but they have machine guns which far surpass your neanderthal weaponry.”

“What? Gangsters? I don't believe you.”

“They’re lying,” screamed another man with an American accent who was carrying a Lefever shotgun.

The Professor kept going. “Look at that weapon you’re holding? Nice, but it’s not a machine gun, is it?”

The kid jumped in. “You’re nothing but a big six with a little gun. They’ll make mincemeat pie out of you all. It’ll be fun to watch.”

The kid in their little group looked scared. His eyes widened, and he moved closer to his dad.

“Dad, I’m too young to be riddled with bullets from a bunch of gangster bimbos.”

His father looked concerned, but blew it off.

“We’re done here. Untie their hands and let’s go.” He turned as an arrow shot through the air, taking the man’s hat clean off his head and jamming it into a tree.

Sarantos could die here. He’d always wanted more, and to say yes to more, but now it could all be over. Oh, he was

happy once. They were happy enough... why couldn't he go back in time?

