

Excerpt One from Chapter 10

“I’m heading up to El Pilar to see the morning stars. Would you like to come with me?” Kevin replied.

“Might as well, I’m already awake,” Santos responded.

As the two of them walked around the south side of the clearing, Kevin took care to avoid waking any one else. Crossing the clearing, he directed them to the spot where he and Julie had cut a path through the brush a few days before. It took Kevin a few minutes to find the path in the dim light but soon he and Santos were walking along it back to El Pilar.

The ground was muddy and made a squishing sound as they walked, and at each squishy footfall the sky lightened a little bit more. Finally they reached El Pilar and Kevin turned east. He stood there motionless looking out to the horizon as the sky continued to turn from black to blue. Then, only moments before the sun broke the horizon, he thought he saw it, a point of light barely visible in the brightening blue sky. Kevin squinted his eyes trying to focus on it, assuming his new Belizean friend was doing the same, but he wasn’t.

Until that moment, Santos had been standing next to him watching the sky. Maybe it was some noise he heard, or maybe it was simply intuition, but for some reason he had turned his head away from the sky for a moment. It was then, in the brightening light of the dawn, that he saw something in the mud he had not previously noticed as they made their way up to the lookout. It was something which frightened him very much.

“Señor, look. All around us!” he said to Kevin, the alarm clearly evident in his voice.

Hearing the sound of fear in Santos’ voice, Kevin looked down. All along the path he could see the large paw prints in the fresh mud. He turned to Santos and said, “Maybe we’d better be going.”

They turned and headed back down the path to the southern edge of the cliff. They couldn’t have gone more than a few dozen yards when something suddenly appeared in front of them out of the underbrush. Startled by it, Kevin fell backwards. It was an enormous jet black jaguar and it now stood in the path blocking their way. Santos reached down to Kevin and helped him quickly scramble to his feet.

“Señor, do not turn your back to run. It will sense the fear and charge you. Just back up slowly towards El Pilar,” Santos said to him quietly.

The two of them began to back up along the path. The jaguar took one or two strides towards them as they did, then stopped. Kevin and Santos continued slowly backing up the path until they reached the base

of the stone pillar, right at the spot where the second trail Kevin and Julie had cleared the other day connected to the one he and Santos were on.

As they did this, they saw the brush rustle between where they were and where the jaguar stood. The jaguar held motionless for a second then it lunged forward. Forgetting what Santos had told him Kevin broke and ran down the path heading west, away from El Pilar and up the sloping forest terrain. Frightened by the sudden movement, a dozen or more large wild turkeys shot up into the air from the undergrowth. As they rose into awkward flight their iridescent feathers shimmered in the dawn sunlight which broke over the cliff's edge. The cloud of birds rising from the forest floor startled Santos as well, and a split second later he too bolted down the path not far behind Kevin.

Up the macheted path Kevin ran, out of the deep undergrowth, past the point where the trail started, and in a straight line away from El Pilar. He ran until he was out of breath and couldn't run anymore. A moment or two later Santos caught up with him.

"Señor. Señor. It is okay. The jaguar was not after us. It was after the turkeys!" Santos said to Kevin. Kevin huffed and puffed, looking at him with a blank gaze as he tried to catch his breath. "There were wild turkeys hiding beneath the undergrowth. They are native here. The jaguar must have been stalking them when we came upon it. When it jumped it must have been going after one of them."

Kevin stood there trying to catch his breath and calm down. Then he cast his gaze upward slightly, noticing something off in the forest behind Santos. It was at least twenty or possibly even thirty feet tall. At first he thought it was the moss covered trunk of a decayed tree whose top had fallen, but when he scanned the forest around it he saw no sign of any of the rest of it. Invisible gears turned in his mind.

"Hey Santos," he said, "what do you make of that?"

"I think it is just a tree Señor," Santos replied, more worried about the jaguar than what Kevin was pointing at.

"I'm not so sure," Kevin said. "Given the width of that thing, if it were a tree trunk it would have come from a tree over a hundred feet tall but there isn't any sign of any other debris from a tree close to that size on the forest floor here."

Then Kevin noticed it didn't have quite the right shape for a tree. He walked past Santos and towards the large object. On reaching it, he started pulling the moss from the thing. It was only then he truly recognized what it was he was looking at.