

The Interrogation

by Gryph

Chapter 1

"How about...a weekend in...the Bahamas?" Peter Burke asked between breaths as he and his two companions jogged down a grassy hill. He wiped the sweat dripping into his eyes from his curly brown hair with the back of one hand. "Tall cool drinks...tall hot women...now that's my idea...of a good time."

The chimpanzee Galen peered at his tall, lean friend with a look of utter confusion. The other man, Alan Virdon, just shook his blond head in amusement. He was used to Burke's endless patter during their long hikes, and today, for some reason, the topic seemed to be vacation spots. "Tropical drinks with...little umbrellas, Galen," Burke elaborated for his simian friend, holding up his thumb and forefinger spread slightly apart. "You'd like 'em."

Galen's look of puzzlement only deepened, as he looked to Virdon and back to Burke again. He opened and closed his mouth several times before finally inquiring, "Why would I want an umbrella in my drink?" But looking at the broad grin on the dark-haired man's face, Galen already knew that the answer would probably not be terribly enlightening.

"The umbrella is just ...a decoration, Galen. ...But the drinks...now they'll..." Burke stopped abruptly as he jerked his head around to the sound of hoof beats. Several mounted gorillas were silhouetted against the afternoon sun on the hilltop they had just left. Galen and Virdon also turned at the noise. As if an unheard starter's gun had gone off, the three began sprinting the rest of the way down the hill. The grass would offer them no cover, but a stand of trees waited at the bottom of the hill. If they could reach the trees first, their pursuers would not be able to follow on horseback.

"Break!" Virdon yelled as the hoof beats grew louder, and swerved quickly to the left. Galen peeled off to the right. Burke, a running back in college, but on his best burst of speed, head down, as if he were trying to reach the goal line for the winning touchdown. Of the six apes, four continued following Burke.

When the large dark shape flew past him, Burke looked up and skidded to a halt. One of the gorillas was blocking his path to the trees. Glancing to the left and right, Burke saw the soldiers pursuing Virdon and Galen pull up at the edge of the trees, unable to coax their horses into the tangled underbrush. Looking back, he saw two others were coming up behind him, a net stretched between them. As if avoiding being tackled by burly linebackers, he turned and began to run parallel to the trees, hoping to be able to cross into the tree line in time. He heard another set of hoof beats and looked up to see the fourth rider riding angling toward him, cutting off his only remaining escape route.

Burke cursed and changed direction again. He was now heading away from the trees, and knew he would not be able to continue this cat-and-mouse game for long. He sensed the gorillas bearing down on him. A heavy net was thrown over his head. As his feet tangled in the edges, he crashed to the ground with a jarring thud.

Pumping with adrenaline, Burke scrambled to his feet and tried to pull off the net. The four gorillas dismounted and converged on him. He knew he was only going to get one more chance at escape. As the net fell to the ground, Burke charged the nearest soldier, hoping to knock him down and keep going. On foot, the gorillas would never be able to keep up with a quick human.

Burke felt the hairy bulk go down, but a large hand reached out from behind and grabbed a handful of the back of his shirt. Before he could break free, another gorilla descended on him and delivered a double-handed blow to the side of his head. As the world lurched crazily and began to go black, he knew he was their prisoner.

Virdon watched anxiously from his hiding place under a fallen tree. Only one rider had continued after him as he ran for cover in the trees, and the horse had balked at plunging into the tangle of vines and branches. While the rider fought to get his mount under control, the blond astronaut had wriggled himself under a partially rotten log, which he hoped would shield him from view. The gorilla circled his mount just outside the tree line, but seemed unwilling to dismount to continue pursuit.

The other four pursuers were closing in on the dark-haired man who was desperately trying to outrun them. "Come on, Pete," Virdon whispered under his breath, then grimaced as Burke went down under a pile of apes. He wanted to call out to his friend, but his own capture would not help the situation.

"Tie him up!" the lieutenant barked at one of the others. "You two," he gestured with a sweep of his massive hand, "ride to the village and tell them that Virdon and Galen got away. Tell them to have the local police look for them. Move!" As the two gorillas rode away, the lieutenant grabbed a handful of the prone astronaut's brown hair. "This one we take to Central City."

He hefted Burke's limp form over the front of his horse's saddle, then swung up onto the mount behind his prisoner. "Let's go!"

Alan's heart sank as he watched the soldiers ride away. After a few minutes, he slowly climbed out from under the tree. He peered around, both to make sure the gorillas were really gone, and to try to discern Galen's hiding place.

"Galen!" he called in hushed tones. "It's all clear, you can come out now." He turned as Galen hopped out of a hollow tree stump and hurried over to Alan, his face a mask of worry.

"Oh, Alan, what are we going to do? They are taking Pete straight to Urko."

Burke awoke slowly from a dream of being in a G-force simulator at Elgin Air Force Base. In the dream, he was being spun around at about 2 or 3 G's, but for some reason, he was having difficulty breathing, as if the centrifugal force was much stronger. He felt a stitch of pain in his side from his labored gasping. 'Jesus, Pete! It's only a couple of G's. Some astronaut you'll be,' he berated himself. He tried to manipulate the controls, but his numb hands wouldn't obey, and he couldn't seem to focus on the instrument panel. They were going to wash him out of the program for sure if he couldn't stand the gravitational forces that would accompany blast off of a space rocket. Just as the simulation ended, and he was going to stagger out of the cockpit to explain himself, he woke up.

The pain in his side remained; something was digging into it. His hands were numb, because they were tightly bound with rope, behind his back. His feet were likewise bound, and his head hurt like the hangover from a three-day tequila binge. And something smelled really bad—he hoped it wasn't him.

He cautiously opened his eyes and found himself staring at a large booted foot in a stirrup. The smell came from the sweating horse he was bound to, and a furtive glance above his head revealed the packed dirt and sparse grass of a road.

"...On our way to Central City," he tuned in as a voice said from somewhere close by. He turned his head carefully to discover that the voice and the booted foot both belonged to the gorilla riding the horse he was tied to. "We have an important prisoner to deliver to General Urko. Ride ahead and deliver this message to the High Counsel."

As Burke's captor spurred his horse into motion, the astronaut's mind raced madly to think of a plan to get out of this situation. General Urko, the leader of the gorilla military force, had been pursuing Burke, Virdon, and Galen for the last five months with a single-minded determination to wipe the two astronauts and the renegade chimpanzee off the face of the planet. Burke's stay in Central City was likely to be short and bloody, ending with a bullet in his head.

As the horse accelerated into a full gallop, the jostling caused by the animal's large muscles, combined with the pounding in Burke's skull and the feeling of vertigo from watching the ground rush by above his head, made his stomach churn. He closed his eyes wearily and concentrated on not throwing up. Once he was off this horse, he would be able to think clearly again about escape.

"See how explicit it is, how detailed?" Wanda waved over the book she was holding up for Zaius's inspection. She turned a page for him to observe.

"Yes, yes," the orangutan nodded his graying head. A knock at the door interrupted him. "Come in."

"Zaius!" Urko cried as he burst into the room. "Have you heard the news?"

"Burke has been captured," Zaius answered.

"Yes, just as I told you they would be." He put his helmet down on Zaius's desk.

"And what about the other two?"

"They are going to come here and try to rescue Burke, and will fall right into our trap," he replied confidently. "We're waiting for them."

"Let us hope so. This capture of Burke could not have come at a more opportune time. We have an experiment." He glanced at Wanda.

"Experiments?" Urko asked, shaking his head as disbelief flashed in his eyes. "Why must we always make a simple problem so complicated? It is not necessary to experiment. Zaius, all our troubles stem from the two astronauts and Galen. Once they are destroyed, our problems are over. The planet can return to normal."

Zaius tapped his fingers together, trying to be patient with Urko. The gorilla commander often suffered from a lack of foresight. "Can you guarantee that there will be no more Burkes or Virdons in the future? Can you guarantee that next time there will not be five, or ten, instead of two humans landing here? Perhaps in different parts of our land?"

Frustrated, Urko sat down to argue. "No more than you can guarantee that there will ever be any others."

"The prudent ape is prepared for the worst," Zaius replied forcefully. "Therefore, it is extremely important for us to determine once and for all why these two humans are different from the ones who lived here now." He turned to Wanda, who had retreated from the argument with her precious book in her hands, for support.

"I can almost promise I'll get the answers," she spoke up, moving forward.

Urko waved a massive hand in her direction, his brow furrowing in annoyance that Zaius seemed to have an ally in his plans. "Who is that?" he asked the orangutan.

"That is Wanda." Zaius moved to the female chimpanzee's side. "Wanda." He motioned for her to move forward and join the conversation.

"Wanda?" Urko snorted. Now he knew that Zaius was hatching a plan to keep the astronaut alive, allowing the possibility that the dangerous ideas that infested the renegade Galen could spread to others.

"One of our most brilliant young scientists. She's come up with a remarkable find. Most valuable."

"This book," the female tapped at a worn and battered tome in her hand. "This book was written in 1986 and it was recently found in one of those time capsules, so popular around that period."

"What has that got to do with Burke?" Urko asked, exasperated.

"I'm coming to that. This book is a book on brainwashing."

"Brain...washing?" Urko squinted in confusion.

"The psychologic method of washing out of the human brain old ideas and replacing them with new ones," she explained slowly, as if to a child. "And that's what we are going to do with Burke!"

"Ah, yes. I seem to remember hearing something vaguely about that.

Brainwashing," the gorilla rolled the word around in his mouth. "Isn't that where you take the brain out of the skull and wash it with cool water?"

Wanda's brow furrowed. "No, no, no. You don't take the brain out of the skull."

"You don't take the br—?" Urko began, his hands curling into fists. "How can you wash the brain if you don't take it out of the skull?" he demanded.

"Yes, yes," Zaius held up his hands in a placating gesture. "I have looked over the book, and Wanda has explained the rest. She has the backing of the council, and will interrogate Burke according to this new procedure."

"No!" Urko protested, rising dangerously from his seat. "No! All interrogation must be done under my supervision. That is the law."

"You may supervise. But Wanda is to control the experiment." Zaius stared into the gorilla's angry face, and a small battle of wills was fought and won.

"Ahh!" Urko looked away first and began to pace in front of the large stone desk. "Why must we go to all this trouble? Just let my surgeons perform the usual brain operation on the humans!"

Wanda's horrified look spoke volumes. "Are you talking about the hole in the skull and the removal of the front bump?"

"Yes, that's right, exactly."

"But—" she began, but was cut off by the gorilla.

"Then the patient will be docile and cooperative. He will tell us whatever we want and answer all our questions."

"If he doesn't die—" Zaius interrupted.

"Or become a vegetable." Wanda finished. The surgery Urko was suggested had no scientific value. They would learn nothing new about the strange humans if he had his way.

Urko shook his fists in frustration at the other apes' inability to see the simplicity of his solution. "At any rate, Burke will be no more trouble to us."

"What you suggest is our last resort," Zaius finally conceded. "In the meantime, Wanda will proceed." He ignored Urko's growl of disapproval. "And since this process is new to us, there is to be no public discussion. Only the three of us, and your most trusted guards," he stared pointedly at Urko, "will know about it."

When the four gorillas stopped for the night, Burke began to realize just how dire his situation was. They had ridden late into the growing darkness, with a large, full moon rising around sunset. With clear skies and the moon to guide them, the gorillas pushed on toward Central City. Only when both horses and riders were near to exhaustion did they stop for a few hours and make camp.

Instead of the loose security that Burke and Virdon experienced the first time they were captured by the apes after their arrival, the gorillas were taking no chances tonight that he might escape. On their way to see the High Council the first time, the two astronauts had been bound at the wrists and ankles and left under a tree to sleep. Virdon had managed to cut his ropes on a sharp rock, but was discovered before they could turn it to their advantage.

Now, however, Burke found himself restrained in a kneeling position, his hands bound behind his back, and a rope around his neck that was tied to his ankles on the other end. If he tried to stand or move his legs in any way, he would strangle himself. A guard sat alertly about ten feet away, a loaded and cocked rifle on his lap. Burke surreptitiously wriggled his hands to see if he could loosen them enough to slip one free, but he feared that too much movement would draw suspicion from the guard. Eventually he realized that the ropes were just too tight and gave up...for now.

Earlier, they had loosened his hands so that he could eat some stale bread and drink some water. The entire time, the guard had kept the rifle trained on him, ready to fire at his first wrong move. "What you been using this stuff for, boot soles?" he tapped the hard bread with his fingers. Nevertheless, he chewed and swallowed with a grimace, both at the taste and the difficulty caused by the rope. The tepid water he had to wash it down tasted like the inside of some gym shoes he had left in his locker too long. All in all, a wonderful culinary experience. "You sure know how to treat a guest," he muttered when they refastened his hands.

For probably the first time in his life, the wisecracking astronaut had nothing more to say. The gorillas were obviously under strict orders from someone to deliver him alive; there were no words to persuade any of the guards to let him go. Unfortunately, gorillas floated in the shallow end of the simian gene pool when it came to intellectual ability. They followed orders without much independent thinking. He had dealt with enough soldiers to know that any comments he ventured would either go right over their heads or get him a backhand across the face.

He hunkered down as much as he could to get some slack to ease the constriction around his neck. Sleeping upright was never something he was very good at, except at zero G, but he had a bad feeling that he needed to catch it while he could. He dozed on and off for the next couple of hours, waking himself occasionally when his head drooped forward and the rope cut into his trachea.

As a predawn glow stained the eastern horizon, the gorillas decided they were ready to move again. Burke's ankles were unbound, and he was jerked roughly to his feet. "Hey, they haven't even sounded reveille yet!" His legs, numb and stiff from hours of kneeling, refused to follow his commands; he was dragged to the nearest horse and hoisted over the saddle. The tether around his neck was tied to the saddle horn. The rider swung into the saddle behind him and spurred the horse into a gallop. Burke swallowed hard and tried to ignore the protests of his sore muscles to this new insult.

In the early morning hours, the quiet of the forest was disturbed by the passage of running footfalls. Virdon splashed noisily through a stream that crossed his path, while

the chimpanzee Galen gingerly stepped across the water on a fallen log. He looked distastefully down at the water, one foot dipping into it briefly as he jumped for the shore. "Ahh!" he yelped in surprise, and shook the water from his shoe once he was safely on solid ground again.

Unnoticing of his companion's distress, the blond man sprinted ahead, his jaw set in a determined grimace. As he turned to climb a small rise away from the stream, he became aware that Galen was no longer behind him. In fact, the chimpanzee was a few dozen yards back, sitting on the ground, holding his side with one hand, and panting heavily. Virdon doubled back.

As he approached the chimpanzee, Galen looked up and shook his head. "Oh Alan, I can't. I can't!" he moaned, his breath rasping with every syllable.

Virdon sat down on the grass next to his friend, his head bobbing from side to side scanning for any sign of trouble. He was also panting from the exertion of traveling a long distance at high speed. He simply said, "You've got to."

Galen shook his head again, swallowing hard. "Central City is nineteen hours away. Can you run all that distance?" He looked at his companion, an expression of weariness mingled with anguish on his simian visage.

"Galen, by now Pete must be in Urko's hands." They both knew the implications behind the statement.

"We will be, too, if we keep running blindly. They'll be expecting us. They'll be setting traps."

"I know that," the astronaut shrugged. "We avoid them."

"Stay off the main roads?" Galen said incredulously. He heaved a great sigh of consternation. "It'll take us two days to get there."

"Look, we go the shortest, fastest way, whatever that is." Virdon looked up at the sun. It was still early in the morning, and they were both already exhausted from traveling late into the night. Despite his growing dread and sense of urgency, the blond man knew that neither of them were going to make it to Central City on foot in time to...he let the rest of the thought go unfinished. If he and Galen were captured in their headlong rush to save Pete, then they would all be doomed.

Galen was studiously examining the dirt beneath his feet, obviously unwilling to offer any more protests. He, too, was worried about what might happen to Pete before they were able to reach him, possibly more so because he knew exactly what kinds of brutality Urko was capable of where humans were concerned.

"All right," Virdon began gently, giving Galen's shoulder a brotherly squeeze, "we'll try to find some transportation other than our feet. You ready to move out?" He jerked his head in the direction they were heading.

Galen sighed and nodded. With a grunt, he levered himself back to his feet and began to jog along behind his human friend.

By midmorning, the patrol of gorillas has neared their destination with their prisoner. Burke craned his head to see when they entered Central City, but they never did. The hills that the gorillas rode through were craggy and steep, and their pace slowed as they picked their way around sharp rocks. Finally, they reined in at the entrance to a cave, and the gorillas all dismounted. Two of them retrieved Burke from the lieutenant's horse, and, with vise-like grips on his arms, led him inside.

Burke shook his head to clear it so that he could carefully observe his surroundings. He wasn't sure how deep into the cavern they planned to take him, but he wanted to be sure to be able to find his way out in case he managed to escape.

A series of winding passages led to a large, metal-bound wooden door, which the lead gorilla pulled open. The roughly hewn room inside was spartanly furnished with a chair and a stool, but the feature that caught Burke's immediate attention was the set of bars delineating a small cell against the back wall. He tried to dig in his heels, wrench himself out of the grasp of his captors, but the strength of two gorillas was too much to overcome. After a third guard unlocked the door to the cage, the others shoved him inside. The door slammed home with an ominous clang.

"Back against the bars if you want the ropes off," one of the gorillas commanded. Burke gingerly pushed his bound wrists through the narrow gap between the bars and waited for the ropes to be removed.

"Gee, thanks," he muttered as he turned around, rubbing his chaffed wrists to restore the circulation to his hands. But the guards were already on their way out the outer door. He heard a key rattle in the lock. "Well, what's your hurry?" he commented to thin air.

Surveying the tiny cell didn't take long—three stone walls and a barred door, barely enough room to lie down. 'Definitely not the luxury accommodations,' he thought wryly. Even though he knew it was late morning outside, the room, dimly lit only by three torches ensconced on the walls, was filled with gloomy shadows that flickered and danced. Overcome by a wave of fatigue, Burke slid down one of the cell walls and rested his head on arms across his knees.

Chapter 2

The sudden sound of discordant drums and bells startled Pete from a half-doze. Looking around the room, he was unable to locate the origin of the noise. The door to the outer room opened, and two gorillas and a female chimpanzee entered. The chimp wore a blue medical smock and carried a large, battered book under her arm; she seemed to wield some authority as she signaled the gorillas toward the cage. After unlocking the door to his cell, the guards pulled him to his feet and out into the main room, over to where the chimpanzee waited.

"Burke, my name is Wanda. I am your interrogator." She squinted at him from behind wire-rimmed glasses, her nose twitching. "Now, this interrogation can either be pleasant or unpleasant. It is up to you. Well?"

The gorillas on either side of Burke shook him roughly, as if to remind him to be polite. 'Interrogator?' he thought with dry amusement. 'That's different.' He fought to keep a smirk off his face as he replied, "Well, pleasant is better." Only his brown eyes revealed his trepidation. The drums and bells in the background continued.

Wanda clapped her hands together. "Hmm. We're going to get along just fine. Good, good." She waved the guards off of Burke and moved to her chair. "Sit down, sit down," she indicated to the human to sit on a rough stool.

Burke glanced over each shoulder at the gorillas standing behind him against the wall before taking his seat. Folding his hand in his lap, he scrutinized Wanda carefully while waiting for her to speak.

"Now, I want you to answer my questions," she commanded. "The first one: Which humans on this planet have helped you?" She expectantly raised her eyes to meet his.

Taken aback, Burke's mind began to race. The apes had never tried this line of questioning before. Not that Urko had been big on conversation any time either Burke or Viridon had been his prisoners; Urko's only concern was how soon the humans would be executed. Burke glanced around the room again, then back at Wanda, his eyes narrowing slightly with suspicion. "Almost all of them," he replied, hoping that he managed to sound casual and unconcerned, "and, uh, many apes."

Wanda's reaction was immediate. She had looked down at her pad to begin to write, but her head snapped up at his answer, animosity playing across her face. "Obviously you're not taking this interrogation seriously," her words were clipped. "Let me warn you. It's very important that you cooperate with me. If I fail, you fail...totally. You die...or you become a vegetable."

"But I answered your question," Burke replied in his most reasonable voice.

"You did not! I want names, places, times!" The drums and bells beat counterpoint to her tirade.

Burke sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. I, ah, can't remember that."

"If you're counting on your friends, Burke, forget it. They'll never find this place. No one knows of its existence except Zaius, Urko, myself, and a handful of guards. There's no possibility of escape," she tapped the ring on her right hand on the arm of her chair for emphasis, "or rescue." She tapped again. Burke's eyes traveled to the source of the sound. "I will ask a question. You will answer it...fully...honestly. Then," she chuckled dryly and nodded, "you will be allowed to go." Tap, tap. Staring at the ring, Burke perceived the connection between her tapping and her deceit. No matter how much he cooperated, he would not be allowed to leave this place alive. Not that he intended to betray those who had helped them.

Wanda leaned forward and asked the question again. "Which humans have helped you?"

"Say, that's a really lovely ring you have there on your tapping finger," Burke countered, knowing that he was risking Wanda's wrath.

Indeed, Wanda made a guttural noise as she leapt out of her chair. "You have a contempt for apes, Burke. You'll change your mind before you're finished," she proclaimed ominously.

Burke shook his head, "I have no contempt for apes. Nor for any other thinking animal on this planet."

"Hmm," Wanda huffed dubiously. "Then be sensible. Be sensible! Answer my question. Which humans have helped you?"

Over the bells and drums, Burke began, "Well—," then thought better of finishing the sentence and just shook his head, making a noise of indifference.

Wanda grunted in frustration, and signaled the guards to pull Burke to his feet. They shoved him back into his cell and slammed the door. The chimpanzee regarded him for a few seconds, her bright eyes flashing behind her glasses, before she left the outer room. The two guards remained behind.

Eyeing the gorillas, Burke settled back down in the cell to wait for Wanda's next move. This whole situation was damn peculiar. He resisted the urge to get up and pace, but an anxious little knot was growing in his gut. Of course, all the background noise wasn't helping. Thinking over the cacophony of ringing bells and banging drums was becoming increasingly difficult. And it was starting to annoy the hell out of him. Something about the situation nagged at the edges of his mind, like a name that was on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't remember.

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes in an attempt to shut out the noise. At a sharp pain in his side, Burke's head snapped forward, and his eyelids flew open. One of the gorilla guards was withdrawing a club that he had just used to slug the astronaut's ribs. His face flushing with anger as much as pain, Burke attempted to grab the club, but missed. "What the hell was that for?" he demanded, getting quickly to his feet in case any more blows followed.

"No sleeping. Wanda's orders," the gorilla replied. He had obviously enjoyed the chance to inflict a little discomfort on this upstart human. If gorillas could smile, this one would be grinning ear-to-ear.

Burke opened his mouth to give a sharp retort just as the outer door slammed open, and in swaggered Urko. The astronaut felt his muscles tensing, and unconsciously took a couple of steps back as the general approached the bars.

"Burke," Urko snorted with disgust.

"Yeah, it's nice to see you again, too, Urko," Burke hoped his voice didn't belie the panic rising in his throat. The last time he encountered the head of the military, the two of them had been trapped in an old subway station for several hours. During that time, Burke had used every trick he knew to keep Urko from killing him, and in the end, Urko had pulled a knife on him. If Virdon and Galen hadn't found a way to dig them out.... "I would have sent you a get well card, but I couldn't find a mailbox," he taunted before he thought better of it. To protect himself from being knifed by Urko, Burke had defended

himself with the only available weapon—a solar-powered electric light. The gorilla had almost electrocuted himself.

A large, gloved paw shot between the bars and grabbed a handful of Burke's shirt before the dark-haired man could react. Urko yanked Burke hard against the bars, pressing his muzzle to within inches of the human's face. His other hand went to Burke's throat, squeezing just enough to make the astronaut's brown eyes go wide with fear. "If I had my way, human," he spat the word out like it had a bad taste, "you would be dead now."

"That's enough!" a shrill command came from the doorway. Wanda rushed over to Urko, and grabbed the arm choking her captive. "Let him go. Now!"

Urko released Burke with a shove. The astronaut hit the back wall and doubled over, coughing fitfully. The gorilla continued glaring at the human for a few moments before turning his attention to the chimpanzee still holding his arm. He shook off her grip, and with a gruff snort, stalked out of the room. Wanda surveyed the prisoner, wrinkling her muzzle and tilting her head to one side, before following in Urko's wake.

Burke sucked in a painful breath when the coughing subsided, gently rubbing his neck where telltale red marks remained. He ran his hand through his dark hair while he contemplated his situation. 'Not your best move, Pete,' he chastised silently. 'Note to self: try not to piss off the large gorilla who wants you dead.' Straightening up, he began to pace the small area of the cell.

Wanda caught up with Urko in the tunnel leading to the entrance of the complex. "Urko, wait," she requested. "Please," she added as an afterthought.

Urko swung around to face her. "I don't believe in your experiments, doctor," he rasped between clenched teeth. "The only cure for this disease is extermination." His eyes flashed darkly, as if daring her to contradict him.

"Please, Urko," she implored coyly. "I have an idea about how you can help." She ignored the narrow look of suspicion that crossed Urko's face and led him into her makeshift office.

The "office" was barely more than a cave with a desk, chair, and bookshelf. The candles dimly illuminated the mess of papers that covered the stone desk. Behind a partially curtained doorway, a cot and chest comprised her sleeping quarters. Wanda motioned for Urko to sit in one of the chairs that faced the desk. With a growl of annoyance, he complied.

"General Urko," she began in a conspiratorial tone. "I wish you could understand the importance of the work that I am trying to do here. If we can condition Burke to lose his foolish ideas of independence, we can rehabilitate other humans who forget their place in the natural order. By using these methods," she tapped the book that she carried everywhere, "that were developed in Burke's own time, we can make a real breakthrough in controlling the destructive tendencies of the human animal."

"And exactly how do you expect me to help you with this task?" Urko's displeasure with the idea was evident.

"One of the passages in this book speaks of a way for the interrogator to gain the trust of the prisoner. If the interrogator is seen to be...wait, let me find the page," she flipped through the dog-eared leaves. "Ah, here it is. 'If the interrogator is perceived to be friendly and considerate, often apologizing for the bad treatment received by the prisoner, and promising to improve his lot if he is reasonable, a strong sense of dependence upon the interrogator is developed.'" She looked up at Urko, trying to gauge his comprehension.

Urko's slack expression, however, indicated that he had not followed her lead. She could see the frustration mounting in his face and spoke quickly to diffuse it.

"You see, if Burke feels that I am sympathetic to his mistreatment, he will let down his defenses more easily. But in order for that to happen, I need someone who will act as an antagonist. Someone who will be Burke's obvious enemy so that he will begin to see me as an ally. You have already perfectly cast yourself in this role." She smiled her most charming smile. "What I would like you to do is to break down his physical resistance. Threaten him, beat him, do whatever you like, as long as you don't permanently damage him." She shrugged nonchalantly. "And he must believe that I am the only thing that keeps you from killing him."

Understanding dawned slowly on Urko's face, but he began to vigorously nod his head. "I think I see your point. If I become the 'bad ape' then Burke will look to you to be the 'good ape'. He will begin to trust you," he finished, sounding almost as if he believed the idea were his own.

Wanda sighed, but was content that she seemed to have Urko's cooperation. "Yes, yes, that's it. It would really make my work so much easier."

"All right," the general pronounced. "We'll do it your way...for now. But if he can't be reconditioned, he will have to be exterminated."

The sun was still climbing to its zenith as Virdon surveyed the road from his hiding place in the bushes. A wagon with a single gorilla sitting in the driver's seat came rumbling down the dirt path. 'Perfect,' Virdon thought to himself, and glanced to the place where Galen lay in the middle of the road, feigning injury. After continuing on foot for the rest of the morning, they had finally come across a road that was sparsely traveled enough that they could risk hijacking vehicle.

Virdon had pushed them hard, setting a pace that Galen could barely keep up with, and seemed unwilling to stop for more than a few moments of rest. His concern for Burke was obvious in the grim set of his jaw and the furrowing of his brow, but he finally acknowledged Galen's request to find a better way to get to Central City.

Now, the blond astronaut watched as their plan came to fruition. As the wagon full of hay came to a stop a few yards from Galen, Virdon began to ease silently from his hiding place. He carried a large piece of black cloth and a short length of rope. The gorilla driver eyed the chimpanzee in the road with suspicion, but jumped down and began to move toward him. As the driver bent down to examine Galen, Virdon threw the cloth over the gorilla's head, while his simian friend scrambled to his feet and poked a handy branch into the gorilla's side.

"Move and I'll shoot," Galen said ominously.

"I won't move," their captive conceded.

"Turn around real slow," Virdon commanded. "Put your hands behind you." After quickly securing the gorillas hands with the rope, Virdon turned him toward the edge of

the road. "Okay, now walk." He guided the gorilla to a large clump of bushes, Galen trailing behind, still menacing their captive with his "gun".

Once they were hidden from sight of the road, Virdon took the branch from Galen and clubbed the gorilla on the back of the head. After hiding the unconscious driver deeper in the undergrowth, the two fugitives raced back to the wagon. Galen jumped into the drivers seat while Virdon buried himself in the hay. Urging the horses into a brisk trot, Galen could only hope that the rest of their plan went so well. And that their friend would still be alive when they arrived in Central City to rescue him.

Burke looked up from where he was huddled in the corner of his cell as Wanda entered the outer room. Behind her followed two gorillas pushing one of the heliographs that the military used to communicate over long distances. He squinted at her from behind a blackened, swollen eye as she approached the bars. The eye, along with the broken finger on his left hand that he was desperately trying not to move, were courtesy of Urko.

The guard who had remained when Wanda and Urko left had continued to bludgeon him with a club every time he started to doze. The only good consequence of all the background noise they were subjecting him to was that he had been unable to sleep. Some time later—he wasn't sure, but his stomach told him it was probably late afternoon—he had asked when they were going to feed him and if he could have some water. Both requests were ignored. Then Urko had returned. When the guard unlocked the cell to admit Urko, Burke had flattened himself against the back wall, his face flushing with impotent fury, but there was no escaping through the relocked door.

The scuffle that followed had been short and brutal. Burke hadn't been able to fight back, especially after Urko had landed a couple of blows in his midsection that took his breath away. A blow to the face had knocked him on the dirt floor, and Urko had ground his booted foot onto the human's outstretched hand for good measure. Burke had heard as much as felt something snap.

He turned his attention back to Wanda as she waved to the guards to retrieve him from his cage. When he was standing in front of her, locked securely in the grasp of two

guards, she reached out to push his chin to the side to scrutinize his eye. Then she held up his left hand to observe where he had used scraps of cloth to wrap his last two fingers together. She made tsking noises in sympathy.

"I see you've had a visitor," Wanda said, raising her eyebrows. "Let him go," she commanded the guards.

"Yeah," Burke's reply dripped with sarcasm. "Urko and I had a nice little chat. Funny, though, he didn't seem to let me get a word in edgewise." He cast a glance over his shoulder at the gorillas as they stepped a pace away.

"I'm sorry that I was unable to prevent..." she paused to wave her hand in the direction of his injured hand and face, "this. But, unless I have some information to give Urko and the High Council soon, I fear that Urko will get his way." She measured the words carefully and judged their impact on her captive.

"Look, I already told you—" he began, but Wanda cut him off with a sudden flash of rage.

"You've told me nothing. I can't help you unless you start being reasonable and answer my questions."

She turned and motioned for the gorilla at the heliograph. As the large, polished dish shifted down, it cast a bright light directly into Burke's eyes. He squinted against the glare and began to raise his right hand to block it out. One of the guards standing just out of the light batted his hand back down. "No," the guard barked gruffly.

For another two hours, Wanda made Burke stand in place while she asked him the same questions over and over again. Every time he tried to turn away from the flashes of light or lean against the wall to rest, he was roughly reprimanded by one of the guards. The continued assault on Burke's senses by the light and the unceasing noise, along with the hunger, thirst, and exhaustion he was already battling, were beginning to take a toll on his ability to think clearly. He found his mind wandering, trying to escape from his present situation.

Wanda must have noticed the glazed look in his eyes; she stepped forward and grabbed his chin, forcing his to look straight into her face. "Are you listening to me, Burke?" she shrieked at him.

As he mumbled an acknowledgment, she returned to her chair and began her litany of questions again. "Who are the humans that have helped you? I also want to know how you get their names, where they could be found, and when you made contact," Wanda demanded. "Simple questions."

Burke raised his hand to shield his eyes from the glare, but was stopped again by one of the guards. He sighed. "Look, I can see your mouth moving, but I can't hear anything you're saying. All those bells and drums are too loud. They're deafening me." He waved his hand in what he thought was the direction of origin of the noise.

"If they're too loud now, after four hours, think how they'll sound after eight hours."

"What? Can you talk louder?" he countered.

"After twenty-four hours." She glared at Burke, who shook his head and stared at the floor. "Lieutenant," Wanda turned her head slightly to address the gorilla behind her, "shoot."

As the gorilla pulled his pistol, Burke's head snapped up. "Hold it, hold it! You've gotta be kidding." His heart began to race as he stared down the muzzle of the pistol.

Wanda waved off the lieutenant. "I'm quite capable of it, Burke. Obviously you can hear when it suits you."

"Look, there isn't any list of humans to contact." He squinted as the light flashed in his eyes again. "We never expected to land here, and we don't exactly want to be here now. In fact, all we want to do is just to get out of here."

"First, you have to get out of prison. I want the names of the humans that have helped you!" she demanded again.

"Look, I...I," Burke raised his hand to run it through his hair, but it was knocked back down by the gorilla. Rage flared, but he knew it would do him no good.

"Names, places, times!" Wanda screamed.

Tight lipped, he replied to his tormentor, "I can't answer that. They were just people!"

Wanda's eyes narrowed, and Burke felt a lump of fear rise in his throat. He was beginning to recognize that look of resolve in Wanda's face; she would not give up until she had the answers she wanted.

Chapter 3

In the fading light of the day, a wagon driven by a single chimpanzee lurched from side to side as it traversed the rut and pothole covered dirt road. They had been traveling hard and fast to put some distance between them and the site of their hijacking. Now, Galen stopped the hay wagon, pulling off the road behind a grove of trees. The chimp hopped from the driver's seat and padded quietly to the back of the wheels. There was no sign of other traffic on the road; he waited a few more moments to be certain they were not being pursued.

"Alan," he hissed at the load of hay. "You can come out now."

The hay pile suddenly stirred as Virdon emerged from it, covered with straws from head to toe. He rubbed his sleeve across his face to wipe the sweat and hay out of his eyes, then started brushing the rest of the hay from his clothes and his blond hair.

"You know, I used to love hiding in the hay in the barn when I was a kid," he said wistfully to Galen. "I guess it loses some appeal when getting caught means getting killed." He jumped down from the wagon bed. He squinted at the sun as it was starting to slide toward the western horizon. "How far have we come?"

"At this rate, we could be in Central City later this evening. But we have to stop and rest." Galen gave Virdon a sideways look as he prepared for the coming protest.

"No, Galen. We have to keep going. It's been too long already. Pete could be..." the sentence trailed off in a tight-lipped grimace as he turned away from Galen. Virdon put his hands on his hips and hung his head for a moment. When he looked back at Galen, a fierce determination had taken over his features. "We just have to keep going."

"Alan," Galen began softly, reaching out to tentatively touch Virdon on the arm. "I'm worried about him, too. But we have to make plans for getting into the city. We aren't going to do Pete any good if we end up in Urko's clutches, too," he sighed. "Or worse." He was also concerned about Virdon, who hadn't slept more than a few hours since Pete's capture. Dark smudges encircled Virdon's blue eyes.

"I know," the astronaut conceded. "I know. All right, we'll camp here until it gets light enough to move on."

They camped in the wagon for the night after formulating a plan for entering the ape city, knowing that traps would be awaiting them. They rigged up a platform under the wagon where Virdon would hide, and concealed the underside with a straw skirt. Hopefully it would be enough to get them past any checkpoints. As the night deepened, they made a nocturnal visit to a farm they had passed earlier, where laundry left to dry overnight provided a perfect costume to disguise Galen. Once everything was in readiness, they both lay down in the soft hay, but sleep eluded them.

"Alan?" Galen asked hesitantly after about thirty minutes.

"Yeah?" came the gruff reply, too quickly for Virdon to have been asleep.

A long pause hung in the air. "What if... I mean...what are we going to do if...well, if our worst fears are true?"

"I don't know, Galen," Virdon sighed deeply. "I just don't know."

Burke tried to ignore the aches and pains that emanated from everywhere in his body. The cramps in his empty stomach and the burning in his dry throat were constant but tolerable companions. His head and ribs sent flares of white pain through him with every movement. Wanda had stalked out of the room a few minutes ago after backhanding him across the mouth. He wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of a hand, grateful for the respite, however slight, that Wanda's absence provided.

The guards, however, continued their vigilance in preventing him from moving from the spot where he had stood for the last several hours. He wasn't sure exactly how long this session of questioning had lasted; his sense of time had begun to blur, along with his surroundings.

As Urko entered the room, both guards snapped to attention. Trying to focus his brown eyes on the enormous simian figure looming toward him, the young astronaut was too exhausted for his body to respond to the fear that screamed in his head. 'Oh, great, here we go again,' flickered through his brain, and he tried to steel himself for the blows he knew would come next.

But instead, the gorilla simply stood a few feet away, staring at the dazed man.

Pete squinted at the light in his eyes, trying to discern the expression on Urko's face. He blinked rapidly to clear the mist from his vision, tried to focus on something, anything other than the flickers of light and shadow that floated by. After waiting several tense minutes for the gorilla to react, the dark-haired astronaut decided he couldn't endure the silence any longer.

"What do you want, Urko?" he asked in a hoarse voice, rising anger knitting his brow together. "Why don't you take a picture, it'll last longer." Urko's eyes narrowed dangerously, his lips pressed together as he continued to survey Burke. 'Oh shit,' the human swallowed hard, knowing he shouldn't push the gorilla, but he couldn't seem to prevent the sarcastic comments from slipping out, 'now he's pissed.'

"Tell me where I can find Virdon and Galen," Urko rasped through clenched teeth. His hairy paws began to curl into fists.

Burke's laughter had a desperate edge to it. "Yeah. Right. What makes you think I know where they are?" Shifting uneasily from foot to foot, he drew his arms around himself in a defensive gesture. "And if I did know, what makes you think I'd tell you?" His frustration with Urko's baiting game grew by the moment. He ducked his dark head slightly as the heliograph flashed in his eyes again.

The general took a single step toward the weary astronaut. "It doesn't matter," he said with sudden indifference. "Soon they will come straight to me." Urko chuckled, an ugly sound that contained not a trace of humor. "And then I will kill them." In his mind, it was a perfect plan. Simple and flawless.

"That's not going to happen. Virdon's not stupid, despite what you'd like to believe. He's not going to come anywhere near here." Pete hoped that he sounded more convincing to Urko's ears than he did to his own. As his chances of escaping on his own diminished with every passing hour, he was counting on Alan and Galen to rescue him.

Urko advanced on Burke, covering the distance between them in a few paces. Pete backed against the wall, his face an open mask of terror. The gorilla pressed his forearm across the astronaut's collarbone. "Virdon will come for you. He and Galen have risked their lives before to save you. He's done it before, and he will do it this time!" He was close enough now that Burke could feel the gorilla's breath on his cheeks.

The dark-haired man shook his head, but didn't trust himself enough to speak. He wanted to tell Urko to go to hell, but couldn't get the retort past the lump in his throat. "No," was all he managed to croak.

"And when they do, I will catch them. And they will be publicly executed to make an example to other humans and to other apes who sympathize with humans that this kind of uprising will not be tolerate." He paused, a smirk playing across his lips. "Maybe I'll even make you watch before I have you killed, too. After all, I will have you to thank for finally bringing the renegades to justice."

"NO!" Burke shouted, unable to contain his fury any longer. He reached up with both hands to push the gorilla away, to strike at his head and shoulders, but froze in mid-movement as Urko drew his pistol and pressed it into the hollow under Pete's jaw. The cool metal of the barrel was a stark contrast to the heat in his cheeks. The combined smell of oil and gunpowder, along with the bitter taste of bile in the back of his throat threatened to bring the darkness encroaching on the edges of his vision crashing in on him. Swallowing hard, he gulped mouthfuls of air to shore himself up; he refused to give Urko the satisfaction of seeing any weakness. Instead, he simply locked eyes with Urko, brown meeting hazel, bristling with defiance.

The gorilla returned the stare for a few moments, then stepped back and reholstered his pistol. His dry laugh mocked the prisoner, even as a small degree of relief flooded the human's features. 'Don't let him get to you, Pete,' a small voice said in the astronaut's head, along with an unbidden memory that it was important not to give in to his captor's goading. But at the moment, he couldn't remember why. Burke sighed deeply. Once the adrenalin rush from his outburst began to fade, the fog crept back into his brain.

"Deny it all you want, but you know they will come. And you will be responsible for their deaths." With that final remark, Urko turned on his heel and swept out of the room, leaving Pete to contemplate his friends' fates.

As the edge of the sun crested the eastern horizon, Urko rode back to Central City to supervise the preparations for the anticipated arrival of the other two fugitives. His

white horse easily navigated the rough road that led from the Crystal Cavern, stepping around sharp rocks that jutted out of the packed dirt. As he rode, he contemplated the capture of his enemies, especially the traitor Galen. Burke and Virdon were dangerous because they were different than other humans; they believed that they were better than apes. But the time they came from was very long ago, and they would soon learn the natural order of things.

Now Galen...he disturbed Urko much more than the two astronauts. Galen was an ape, from a reputable family. His father Yalu was recently elected to the High Council. And yet, the chimp had chosen to turn his back on his own kind to live with humans. For that crime, he would be punished with impunity.

He was still relishing the thought of Galen's demise when he arrived at his headquarters in Central City. Dismounting, he handed the reins to one of the soldiers posted outside. Two gorillas saluted crisply as he passed through the curtained door into the garrison. Urko smiled to himself, pleased with the discipline of his command.

As he pushed open the wooden door to his office, his assistant met him in the hallway, a sheaf of papers in his hand.

"I have all the information you requested, sir."

Urko nodded, then stomped into the office. After depositing his helmet on the desk, he sat in his chair and accepted the bundle from Jolan.

"Good, good." He spread the papers on the desk in front of him, using his pistol as a weight to flatten the curling parchments. After examining every document closely, he picked up a map of the city with one hand and his pistol with the other.

"Every entrance covered?" he asked, pointing to the map with the barrel of his pistol.

"Nothing will get into the City without being stopped by our guards," Jolan replied, a smug expression on his face.

"Orders issued to stop and search carefully every cart and wagon, whether driven by ape or human?" Urko glanced sideways at his insubordinate.

"Yes, Urko."

"Now, inside the city," he gestured to the area in the center of the map, "I want everyone available on patrol. Mounted units sweeping the streets. Individual troops on every corner."

"It will be done," the gorilla nodded.

"Good," Urko chuckled, his eyes narrowing. "Good. This time we will catch Galen."

Alan and Galen crept silently toward the guard outside what they guessed to be Pete's cell. The gorilla had his back to them, securing the rough-hewn lock on the door. Virdon covered the last few feet in a sprint and brought his fists down on the back of the soldier's neck. As the large ape slumped to the floor, he retrieved the key. He handed it to Galen, who slipped it into the lock and turned, listening to the bolt pull back. He and Galen flattened themselves against the wall on either side of the portal, and he signaled with a closed fist that he was about swing open the door.

No other guards were in sight inside the room; the two companions entered quickly and pushed the door most of the way closed behind them. At the end of the room was a small barred cage, and inside it lay a single, still form facing the wall.

Alan couldn't mask the anguish on his face as he grabbed the key from Galen and rushed to the bars. "Pete," he called, desperation causing his voice to break. "Pete, can you hear me?" His suddenly numb fingers fumbled with the key in the lock, finally slamming it home and wrenching the door to the side. His partner has still not responded, and from the skewed position of Burke's arms and legs, Alan could tell he was badly injured. Galen stood rooted to a spot just inside the door to the room, one hand over his muzzle, his eyes glistening.

As Virdon knelt next to Pete, he made a quick visual assessment. The younger man's hands were bound with rope, and the flesh beneath was raw and swollen. His blue shirt was torn in several places, and through the gaps Alan could see welts and bruises covering Pete's torso. One leg was obviously broken, jutting out at an impossible angle.

"Oh, God," the blond man whispered. "Oh, God, no, no." With shaking hands, he reached to turn Burke onto his back. The dark head lolled toward him, and Alan felt his

stomach lurch. A painful lump rose in his throat as he noticed the curls on one side of Pete's head matted down with a sticky wetness. Blood caked one side of his face, and despite the fact that he looked relaxed in sleep, Alan knew it was an illusion. As tears welled in his eyes and streamed unnoticed down his cheeks, he quickly felt for a pulse at the carotid, and found none.

"NO!" he screamed as the harsh realization seared into his brain. The screams that followed were primal, formed without words, an outpouring of grief and anger that welled up from the very bottom of his soul.

He vaguely felt Galen's hairy hands touching his shoulders, gently at first, but then violently shaking him. He tried to turn to Galen, to tell him to go away, to curse at him for what his kind had done to his best friend. But the shaking hands were relentless, and, he suddenly realized, coming from outside his dream.

"Alan," Galen's soft voice called to him. "Alan, wake up."

The blond man sat bolt upright in the hay, clamping his hands down on the chimp's shoulders. His breath came in ragged gasps, forcing down another scream as it paused on his lips, and he could feel the sweat trickling down his scalp. He shook his head, but was unable to clear away the final image of Pete's face covered with blood. Galen shifted and whimpered slightly, and only then did Virdon comprehend how tightly he gripped his friend's shoulders. He released the chimp and rubbed his hands over his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Galen," he whispered, "I was having a nightmare."

"That much I gathered," Galen replied. "You were screaming."

In the early morning light, Virdon watched concern wrinkle Galen's nose. He looked up at the sky in alarm. "What time is it? Why didn't you wake me earlier?" His voice growing harsh with anger, Virdon lurched to his feet and waded through the hay to the edge of the wagon. "Damn it, Galen, we could have been in Central City by now! God knows what Urko could be doing to Pete." He jumped from the back of the wagon, then turned to look up at his companion, a hint of crimson rising in his cheeks. "You just don't seem to get it! Pete is my responsibility!"

Galen's eyes turned sorrowful as he pressed his lips together in thought. "Oh, I get it. Believe me, I've seen what happens to humans in captivity." Landing nimbly next to

the tall human, the chimp cocked his head to one side and pointed at Virdon's chest with one finger. "But you are going to get reckless if you keep pushing yourself like this. Isn't that what you would say to Pete under the same circumstances?"

"That's different, and no, I am not." His eyes flashed a challenge at Galen to contradict him. He planted his hands on his hips in a stubborn stance that reminded him so much of something Pete would pull that he couldn't suppress a smirk. He offered Galen an apologetic smile. "Okay, okay. You know, I'm starting to get tired of you being right all the time. That's my job." His simian friend knuckled him affectionately in the chest as he moved past Virdon toward the front of the wagon.

Pete cringed against the stone wall, wishing that he could slide into peaceful oblivion. He knew that at least a day had passed since they had brought him into the cave, but beyond that vague reckoning, he wasn't sure whether it was day or evening.

He ran his hand through his dark hair, pushing back sweat-soaked curls. His eyes stung and burned, and not just from the salty sweat dripping into them; they would no longer focus on anything other than shadowy forms. Although the heliograph was no longer in the room to torment him with blinding light, his ears were beginning to buzz from the continued banging and ringing that didn't quite drown out Wanda's perpetual drone.

A wave of light-headedness washed over him, and he slouched even further.

"Stand straight!" Wanda shrieked as he cowered against the wall.

One of the guards bodily turned him so that he was facing his interrogator. "This way," the gorilla prompted.

Pete sighed and braced his hands against the stone wall for balance. Wanda saw him waver on his feet and moved closer, like a lioness approaching her wounded prey. "Now, once you have answered my questions," she bargained with him, "you can get some much needed sleep, food, rest." Her request sounded like the most reasonable thing in the world. Except Pete knew that answering her questions would get innocent people killed.

"I've been telling you the truth," he asserted again, for what felt like the hundredth time. His tongue moved like a piece of dry leather in his mouth, and the words came out slurred. Somewhere in the back of his head, his instincts screamed at him to maintain his facade of ignorance.

"All right, I will make it easy for you. Which apes have befriended you?" She spoke to him as if he were a child.

"There have been many apes that befr—" he began, forming the words carefully.

"The truth!" Wanda interrupted.

"That is the truth!" he shouted, then squeezed his eyes shut against another wave of dizziness brought on by the exertion. His frustration with her continual denial of the truth further eroded his resolve.

"It is not the truth! There is only one ape that has befriended you, and that is the traitor, Galen."

"There were others," he insisted, even as he wondered why it was so important that she believe him on this issue.

"Only Galen," she said with a finality that breached no other contradiction.

"Okay, have it your way," Burke gave in.

"Right," she nodded. "Now, which humans have helped you?"

Wanda was back to the same old tune. 'Well, if that's the way she wants it,' Pete thought, 'two can play at this game.' He looked straight into her eyes and said, "No humans helped us."

"The truth!" she screamed at him again.

He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know what you want," he added lamely.

"I want their names!"

Pete squeezed his eyes shut and flicked them open again, but the cloudy shadows continued to chase each other across his vision. Right then, if someone had asked him where he was from, he wasn't sure he could give a straight answer. He shrugged and shook his head. "I...I can't. My mind's a blank," came his truthful response.

Wanda's eyes grew wide at this admission, and she turned to one of the guards. "Lieutenant, you know what to do?" The tone of her voice sent an ominous shiver down Burke's spine. Some part of him knew that his resolve was beginning to waver, and a

cold sweat trickled down the back of his neck as he imagined what might be next on her agenda.

"Yes, Wanda," the lieutenant replied.

One gorilla grabbed a handful of Burke's dark hair while the other put a vice-like grip on his arm, and together they maneuvered him into the hallway. Between his rubbery legs and lack of coordination, he was practically carried to a room a short distance from his cell. When the guards paused to unlock the door, Pete's ingrained need to escape rose to the surface of his murky thoughts. Even though he knew that his chances of success were nil, part of him remembered his Air Force indoctrination that a prisoner's first priority was escape. When the soldier holding his hair released him to fit a key into the door's lock, the astronaut suddenly struck out with an elbow at the tender muzzle of the gorilla still holding his arm, and was rewarded with a satisfying crunch. The simian soldier grunted in pain and backed away, holding his hands over his bloodied nose. But Burke's impaired coordination betrayed him as he tried to swing at his second opponent, who landed a solid blow to the lean man's abdomen. Pete crashed to his knees, retching and gasping for air.

The gorilla whose nose he had bloodied came up behind him with a fist drawn back to inflict another blow in retribution.

"No," the lieutenant ordered, grabbing his subordinate's arm. "He'll get what's coming to him. Wanda will see to that." The two soldiers hauled to barely conscious man up by his arms and half dragged him into the room.

The room was small, with rough-hewn stone walls that bore torches as its only source of illumination. The center of this room, however, was dominated by a large oval table set on a pedestal. At the middle and one end of the wooden table, shackles were attached to the surface with metal spikes.

His captors hoisted Burke onto the table, which spun slightly around the pedestal as he was positioned on his back. When apes began to secure the restraints around his wrists and ankles, he regained enough awareness to struggle feebly, but he was too well confined. His head throbbed from the abuse his body had taken, and a wave of nausea washed over him, threatening to engulf him. With a weary groan of resignation, he swallowed dryly and slumped back on the table.

'C'mon, Alan, now would be a good time for the cavalry to ride to the rescue,' he thought. Then he remembered Urko's threats about what would happen to his friends if they should be captured trying to liberate Burke. A memory of Alan from their former life flashed through his mind. Alan laughing, his wife Sally on his lap, nuzzling his neck. It was a cookout at Virdon's house. Pete's date had cancelled on him at the last minute, and Sally had teased him about running out of women in Houston that he hadn't dated. Then Alan's son Chris had dumped a cupful of ice down his back. Yelping in surprise at the shocking coldness, he had chased the tow-headed boy, finally pinning him to the ground and tickling him without mercy. Chris has called him "Uncle Pete," and he had liked the sound of it. Without his realization, a tear slowly slid down one cheek at the intensity of the memory.

Chapter 4

"No!" Galen said, curling his lip at the pink dress that his blond friend held out to him. "I am not going to wear that. You'll have to find something else." Alan had returned from a visit to a nearby farm with what he considered to be a great disguise, only to be rebuffed by Galen.

Alan smirked at the chimp's discomfort. "C'mon, Galen. You can't just drive the wagon into Central City without a disguise. By now, Urko's got every patrol under his command waiting for us. A little old lady driving a wagon full of hay is not going to arouse anyone's suspicion. It's the only way." A shadow fell over Alan's eyes as his expression turned serious. "Do it for Pete."

Galen stared hard into his friend's face for a moment, then snorted his displeasure. "All right, but next time, you get to put on the dress, and I will do the hiding." He snatched the proffered dress from Alan and wiggled into it, smoothing the fabric over his tunic underneath. Wrapping a shawl over his head, he glanced at Alan for approval.

Alan nodded silently and crawled onto the platform hidden under the wagon. After adjusting the straw blinding around the wagon's underside, Galen climbed into the driver's seat and flicked the reins to spur the horse into motion. He glanced at the overhead sun and wished for this day to be over.

They passed two checkpoints without drawing any suspicion. The sentries barely even glanced at an old woman driving a hay wagon, waving him through without bothering to search the vehicle. But Galen knew that the closer they got to the heart of Central City, the more vigilant the patrols would become. He prayed silently to the Lawgiver that their deception would hold.

As the wagon rumbled along a dirt road along the waterway that ran through the city, Galen noticed the increased number of mounted patrols passing him. He ducked his head, trying to act like a downcast peasant, hoping his nervousness would be interpreted as the anxiety of a country ape in the big city. He pulled on the reins to guide the horse onto a wooden bridge over the water. The clomping of the hooves on the wood matched the pounding of his heart. The eyes of the mounted soldiers seemed to linger on the wagon and its driver longer than necessary, and Galen's throat constricted.

Ahead, another checkpoint waited between him and his destination. Galen pulled on the reins to slow the horses as he approached the line of other wagons. He couldn't see much past the wagon in front of him, but he heard a commotion coming from the head of the line. The grunts of the gorillas and the protests of the human driver told him that at this checkpoint, the search would be thorough. After a few minutes, the wagon in front of him moved forward about ten feet. Galen resisted the urge to get down and walk around the wagon to ensure that Virdon could not be seen; he didn't want to draw any attention to himself or his cargo. He tried to breathe normally, despite the growing pressure in his chest. He could hear every beat of his heart in his ears, feel it in the vessels in his neck, and prayed that it couldn't be heard by anyone else. Every nerve in his body felt like it was on fire, as alternating sensations of numbness and tingling surged up and down his limbs. He pulled the shawl closer around his head.

The line progressed again, and the wagon in front of him was approached by three gorillas. The human driver immediately ahead of him was roughly pulled from the driver's seat and thrown to the ground. The soldier with the markings of a lieutenant grabbed the man by the front of his shirt. "Have you seen any stray humans? One male, tall, with yellow hair, traveling with a chimpanzee?" the gorilla growled at the terrified man.

"N-No, sir," the human stammered. "I'm just delivering grain for my master, sir. I don't know anything about any stray humans, sir." Galen's stomach turned at the man's tremulous obeisance. No amount of verbal groveling would save this or any other human from a beating if the gorilla decided to administer it. Behind the lieutenant, the other sentries rifled through the contents of the wagon, not caring what they broke or damaged. When the officer barked the order to move on, everything—including the driver—was immediately dropped into a heap and left where it lay. The group of gorillas shuffled menacingly toward Galen's wagon.

Alan's ass hurt like hell. Every bump that the wooden wagon wheels hit jarred through his aching muscles and joints like steel spikes. The narrow slats of their makeshift platform dug into his back, and his whole body was coated in what felt like a

six-inch layer of dust. Several times he had to clamp his hand over his mouth to stifle the cough that threatened to erupt from his tortured throat and lungs. He stared at the bottom of the wagon bed above him and concentrated on remaining absolutely quiet and still.

The wagon had stopped twice, and he had heard the voices of gorillas, questioning Galen before sending him on his way. The blond astronaut smirked at the efficacy of the disguise he had devised for his friend. No one seemed too concerned about an old female chimp driving a load of hay. 'Maybe it's the pink dress,' he thought wryly. He knew they were approaching the center of the city when the dirt road below him turned into a neatly constructed wooden bridge.

The wagon stopped again, for longer this time, and Alan knew that they must be at another sentry checkpoint. After a few minutes, the wagon moved forward, then stopped again. After a couple of more slow advances, he heard the approaching footfalls of gorillas.

"What's your business in Central City?" he heard a voice near the front of the wagon demand as two other sentries began to circle the wagon.

He held his breath as Galen answered in his best falsetto, "My son. He raises hay for the troopers' horses." Pausing, Galen whimpered slightly, reminding Alan of his grandmother. "He usually—"

"Give me that pitchfork," the gorilla demanded, ignoring Galen's patter.

"Oh, yes, of course." Alan heard the scrape of wood on wood. "He usually delivers it himself," the chimp continued in a tone that sounded like a worried mother, "but this morning he had this terrible cold." The wagon sank on its axles as two gorillas climbed into the wagon bed and began poking around. Small pieces of hay drifted down onto Alan's face. Suddenly, he squinted against unfiltered daylight as the soldiers uncovered a broken board in the wagon bed. Luckily, the gorillas were already jumping down from the vehicle and didn't notice the blue eyes staring out the hole. Galen's voice squeaked nervously, "I said, 'Now you stay in bed. I'll deliver that hay myself.' Oh, yes, he's such a good boy. He likes all of you gorillas. He's so helpful and kind and considerate..." his voice trailed off as the lieutenant returned to stand next to the front of the wagon.

"All right, go ahead. Dump your hay and come right out." Air escaped Alan's lungs between clenched teeth as little starbursts began to flash before his vision; he hadn't even realized how long he had been holding his breath.

Galen tittered a high-pitched, "Oooh, thank you. Good bye." Then the reins lashed at the horses, and the wagon moved ahead at a brisk clip. 'When we get out of this, nominate that ape for an Oscar,' Alan grinned with relief.

The wagon continued for another ten minutes, slowing down to take a number of twists and turns before finally pulling to a slow stop. Alan felt the wagon shift as Galen hopped down from the driver's seat and padded to the back of the wagon. The straw skirting around the bottom of the wagon bed that had hidden him from view was pulled away, and he blinked against the light that assaulted his eyes. The chimp waved for him to emerge and follow him behind a fence and into a thick copse of shrubs. Galen quickly stripped off the dress and shawl from the tunic he wore underneath and shoved them under a bush.

"We must hide until nightfall," the chimp began, cutting off the astronaut's protests with an upraised hand. "There are mounted sentries patrolling all the streets. I saw them as we entered the city. And we need a place to stay while we gather information and form a plan. My parent's house is in the heart of the city. We can go there."

Alan placed a hand on Galen's shoulder, and asked hesitantly, "Galen, they won't turn us in? I mean, I know they're your family and everything, but I'm just another human, and a hunted one at that."

"It will be awkward, yes. But they are my parents, and they would not hand either of us over to Urko. Believe it or not, my father dislikes Urko almost as much as you do," he finished with a roll of his eyes. "Besides, you haven't met my mother. She is quite formidable. My father wouldn't dare do anything to upset her."

"I hope you're right. Ok, we'll wait until dark." Virdon hunkered down into a cross-legged position and pulled open his backpack. Delving into the sack, he produced a chunk of bread and offered it to his companion. "Hungry?"

Once the sun set, the number of pedestrians on the streets dropped dramatically. Galen suspected that the city lay under a blanket of near martial law; even if a curfew was not official, no human and few apes wanted to face one of Urko's soldiers in a deserted street. However, the cover of darkness provided anonymity to the two figures furtively scurrying along fences and rows of shrubs, and their frequent backward glances belied a paranoia of discovery.

With one final look around for detection, the two ducked into a doorway under a thatch-roofed porch attached to one of the larger stone dwellings. Galen raised a furry hand and quietly rapped his knuckles on the wooden door. After a moment they heard the rattle of a bolt being drawn back, and the door opened slightly to reveal an older female chimp peering cautiously into the night.

When she saw the identity of her visitor, her face lit up and she gasped in surprise. "Ah, Galen!" She motioned with her hands for him to come to her.

"Oh, mother!" Galen exclaimed as he embraced her in a fierce hug. Alan smiled slightly at the reunion, but then dropped his eyes respectfully.

"Oh, oh, oh, Galen...." Ann patted her son on the back with both hands, her affection beaming from her face. "Come in, come in." She was already pulling him into the cozy living room. Ducking to the house after them, Virdon closed and bolted the door. "Oh, how are you? Oh, Galen," she crooned, continuing to pat and embrace her son. "So good to see you."

"Wonderful to see you, too," Galen replied as he gently withdrew from his arms. Ann hadn't even noticed that there was a human in the room. Galen turned toward Alan, guiding his mother over to his friend. "Mother, I would like you to meet my very good friend, Alan Virdon." The two friends watched as a wall came crashing down over Ann's face.

"Hello," Alan injected quickly, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible.

Ann eyes raked up and down the human, as if she were looking at an exotic animal that she thought might bite. "How do you do, Virdon?" She asked in a neutral voice, now studying the human's face.

"Fine." He waited nervously for Ann to turn her gaze away from him. Finally, she turned back to Galen and held his face between her hands.

"Have you eaten? Oh, you look so tired." Indeed, Galen had dark circles under his eyes, and he had lost weight since his mother had last seen him.

"We'd love something to eat. Only tell me first, where's father?"

Ann nodded toward a door on the other side of the room. "He's in his study. He has a great deal to do these days. He's just been elected to the council." She patted his clasped hands. "Now, sit down. I'll get your father." After tapping her knuckles on his chest in affection, she left them standing alone in the living room.

Galen walked a few more steps into the room with hesitation, almost as though he was afraid of moving too far into the house. His eyes focused on the door through which his mother had exited. Alan trailed behind him.

"Your mother seems very nice, Galen," he commented quietly, breaking the awkward silence.

"Oh, yes," he replied with a wistful sigh. "You may need to find another word to describe my father." He turned his head to roll his eyes at his friend. Just then, the door opened again, and an older male chimpanzee preceded Ann into the room. The shape of his face was similar to Galen's, and there were streaks of white in the fur around his chin. He carried himself with a quiet strength that could be sensed even from across the room. His expression, however, was one of suspicion and scorn. With narrowed eyes, he studied his son.

"Father." Galen said simply. Yalu remained silent, his hands clenching into fists at his side. Galen sighed deeply and after a moment, turned slightly towards Alan. "Uh, Father, this, uh—" he stumbled, unsure how to introduce his companion and friend to his stoic father. He closed his eyes with another sigh as he realized that Yalu would rather be introduced to a slug he found in his garden. Galen decided to cut to the chase. "We need your help. Our friend, Peter Burke, has been taken prisoner." There, he'd said it. His friend.

Yalu slowly crossed the room, eyeing Virdon warily. "He's a human. I'm an ape. He's my enemy." The derision in his voice cut deeply into Galen's heart.

Galen turned to Alan again, and gave a roll of his eyes as an explanation. He knew that if he was going to get his father to help him, he needed to stand up to him on this issue. He stepped forward to approach his father. "He is not an enemy!" he snapped,

perhaps more harshly than he had intended, but he screwed up his courage and continued. "He is my friend! You'll be helping me!"

"Then it's between you and Burke," the older ape replied in kind. He turned to retreat to his study, but as he did, he glimpsed his wife's face. Her expression was a riot of emotion; anger, fear...love. Yalu stopped in his tracks, locking eyes with his wife. Then he spoke over his shoulder to Galen, not trusting himself to turn around and look at his son.

"I will give you shelter, but I won't help you in any other way. I'll send a servant to the roof as a lookout." His voice was gruff and thick with emotion. He glanced back toward Ann with an expression of relief that rivaled the one on her face. Then he regarded his son once more, giving him an opportunity, should he choose to take it. "If you wish to see me, I'll be in the garden. Just you, son!" he stabbed a finger in Galen's direction while glaring daggers at Virdon. The door only slammed a little bit on his way out.

Burke waited, alone and strapped to the table, for what seemed like hours. No guards prodding him, no Wanda interrogating him, no background noise ringing in his ears. He tried to close his eyes to catch some sleep while he had the chance, but within minutes, his mind was flooded with gibbering demons that clawed their way into his memory and dragged out terrors he had forgotten. His eyes flew open and he bit back a scream. He felt his own teeth tear at his parched and cracked bottom lip, and tasted the salty flow of blood.

At first, there were just flashes of imagery: a large, thick hand swinging toward his face, a dark-haired woman with tear-streaked cheeks, a damp cement floor lit only by a bare bulb swinging overhead. With the images came emotions, anger, fear...pain. He'd experienced all these emotions before, but something about the images made the feelings more intense, as if he were enduring them for the first time. His head tossed back and forth on the table as he tried to shake the memories from his consciousness.

"No!," he screamed before he could stop the word from erupting from his throat. But it was too late for denials any longer. The floodgates of his mind were open, and the ugly memories began to spill forth.

Pete looked up from his intense study of the cement floor at the sound of a key rattling in the lock of the main door. Man, his mom was going to be majorly pissed. For the hundredth time in the last four hours, he wondered how he had let his buddies talk him into such a stupid stunt as shoplifting. It was supposed to be easy. The three of them were going to surreptitiously pocket some rubbers at the corner drug store and casually stroll out as if nothing were wrong. After all, they were too young to buy the lousy condoms, but not too young to know what to do with them. But he had gotten caught. He still didn't know if the clerk has seen him or if he just had a guilty look on his face, but the fact of the matter was, he'd been busted and his friends were gone. He'd given the officers his mom's work phone number, and now waited for her to come bail him out of jail. Yeah, she was going to be angry at him, and he was probably going to be grounded for the rest of his life, but he deserved it.

He snapped out of his reverie when a police officer stopped in front of his cell. The officer turned his head to speak to someone. "Here he is, Frank." As a burly man stepped into view, Pete's eyes widened with fear. Shit! He watched as Frank ran his hand over his crew-cut hair and turned a piercing stare at the 16-year-old in the cell, a snarl curling his lip.

"Thanks for calling me, Joe, instead of Rita. It would break that woman's heart to see this," Frank patted Joe on the shoulder.

"Sure, Frank. When I saw the kid's parent info, I thought she was probably the same Rita you've been talking about for the last year. And I thought maybe you'd be better equipped to handle this than she would. I'm sure if you talk to Mr. Garazano, he'd be willing to drop the charges. Be a shame to see the kid's future ruined." Joe opened the door to the cell.

"C'mon, boy," Frank growled. "Don't make me come in there and get you." Pete pushed himself up from the cot and his long legs covered the distance to the door of the

cell in two strides. Even though he had shot up over the last summer and was one of the tallest kids in his class, Frank still had a good six inches over him.

"Wouldn't want to inconvenience you," Pete quipped softly, stopping in front of the big man. Frank's expression grew more furious as he grabbed the boy's chin and viciously tilted his head back to look him in the face.

"What did you say, boy?" The threat behind the thin veil of civility was evident in the man's dark eyes. Pete swallowed audibly, mentally cursing himself for not knowing when to keep his big mouth shut.

"Nothing, sir." He tried to sound contrite. Frank released his chin only to put a vice-like grip on his arm and began to walk him down the corridor. By the time they reached Frank's car, Pete was sure his arm was going to fall off from the bruising hold. Frank opened the back door and shoved the boy in, slamming the door shut before getting in behind the steering wheel.

"If you know what's good for you, boy, you won't say a word to me until we get home." Pete stiffly wrapped his arms around himself and turned his head to stare out the window. He knew that when they got home, there wasn't going to be much talking going on from either side.

In fact, Frank had barely closed the front door behind them when Pete felt the first blow on the side of his head, sending him sprawling on the floor. He opened his eyes in time to see the big man straddling him, reaching down to pick him up by the collar of his shirt and slamming him into the wall. There was no point in fighting back, he had learned that lesson the hard way. Ten years in the marines and another twelve as a cop had loaded Frank with plenty of muscles and the training to overpower someone twice Pete's size. He hung limply in Frank's grip, the only noise in the room was the occasional grunt from the big man as he rained blows onto the boy's head and torso.

After a few minutes, Frank's rage subsided and he released Pete, who slid boneless down the wall with his arms wrapped around his hurting ribs. "You want to be a criminal, punk?" Frank spat at him in disgust. "Fine, I'll treat you like a criminal."

Suddenly a pair of handcuffs appeared in the big man's hand as he threw Pete onto his stomach and wrenched his arms behind his back. After clicking both cuffs into place, he pulled the boy to his feet and began to steer him deeper into the house. Frank

yanked open a door in the kitchen to a staircase leading down to the basement. Pushing Pete ahead of him, he muscled the boy down the stairs. When he was released, Pete fell to his knees on the hard cement, barely twisting to the side in time to keep him from falling flat on his face. He felt the cold dampness of the cement floor against his cheek, and watched the shifting shadows as the bulb overhead swung to and fro.

"You can cool off down here for a while. And when your mother gets home, all you are going to tell her is that you got into a fight at school." It was the last thing he heard before he slid into unconsciousness.

When Wanda and the guards entered the interrogation room, Burke was in a semi-fugue state, trapped in the memories replaying in his mind. She was pleased that he had not been able to fall asleep, just as the book indicated would happen. Everything was progressing well.

Chapter 5

Urko looked disdainfully at the soldier standing in front of him holding a pink dress. "All right. Now," he spoke slowly, as if to a child, "tell me one more time. What happened?"

The gorilla swallowed nervously and began his story again, hoping that the general would not be so displeased as to punish him. "Well, the abandoned hay cart was driven through a checkpoint by a female chimpanzee." He thrust the clothing in his hand towards Urko as proof of his words. "She said she was delivering hay for patrol horses."

"And this female, where is she? Have you located her?"

"No," he said with trepidation, "I knew the situation was suspicious, but she was alone. There was no sign of the fugitives on the cart." He winced as he saw the storm beginning to build on Urko's face.

"What did you expect them to do, stand up and wave at you?" Urko growled and tore the fabric from this subordinate's hands. The unfortunate guard flinched, expecting a blow from his superior. "Take three troopers. Ride to councilor Yalu's home. Search it from one end to the other." He knew that Galen's father would harbor the fugitives if his son asked. "If he tries to stop you, go ahead anyway! Tell him those are my orders!"

"Yes, Urko!" the trooper scurried past Urko, but not fast enough to avoid being slapped on the back with the dress.

Once his lieutenant was gone, Urko threw himself into his chair and cursed the three fugitives for the hundredth time that day. Galen and Viridon were here, in Central City. He was sure of it. Somehow, they had slipped in under the attention of his soldiers. But they would be found, if he had to search through every house in the city himself! The idea of getting his hands on the traitor Galen filled him with such excitement that he began to rend the fabric of the dress in his hands without even realizing it, as a smile crept across his face.

Burke. He would be the key to the capture of his friends. They would try to rescue him. But they would need somewhere to hide, to stay while they hatched their devious plans. Galen's father may be a council member, but Urko believed that the old chimp wouldn't turn away his son if he came asking for help. He snorted at the thought. Would

Yalu be willing to commit heresy and treason to help the fugitives? Of that, he was less certain. In council meetings, Yalu seemed to dislike and distrust the human animals as much as the next ape. Urko nodded to himself absently, then drew himself out of his musings.

Time to return to the Crystal Cave and check on Wanda's progress. He curled his gloved fingers into fists at the opportunity to put a few more bruises on Burke. The dark-haired human had a lot to answer for. His death would not be swift, and Urko would enjoy every moment of his exquisite suffering.

"Apparently it doesn't matter to you that your mother worries," Yalu paced back and forth in the garden, not looking at his son sitting contritely at the table. The smoke rose lazily from the candle, blissfully unaware of the tension growing between the two chimpanzees.

'Oh, here it comes,' Galen thought to himself, rolling his eyes while being thankful that his back was to his father. 'Just sit here and listen. In one ear and out the other. Once he's said his peace, then you can talk him into helping you. Helping Pete.' What came out was, "Of course it matters."

"Then why aren't you at home, instead of running around the country like a hunted human?" Yalu turned on his heel and slammed his fists on the table in front of his son.

The pained look on Galen's face went unnoticed by the older ape. "It's not my fault that I'm hunted!" He finally wrenched his eyes up to meet his father's, but now they were flashing with barely repressed anger. "My friends are willing to live in peace. So am I!"

"You are an ape!" Yalu shook his head in disappointment. "Your friends are human," the last word fell from his lips as if it were bitter poison. "Strange friends for a chimpanzee." He snorted with derision at the thought.

"Not if you know them." Galen's voice was small and filled with sadness. "You'd respect them, too, if it weren't for your...stupid prejudices." He turned away again to study the flickering candle.

"I am older than you," Yalu sighed. "Perhaps those so-called stupid prejudices are based on reason." Why couldn't he make the boy see that he was playing with fire, as surely as if he'd held his hand over the flame before him?

"No, they are not! They are based on custom and on habit!" Galen faced his father with righteous indignation on his tongue and in his countenance. He stabbed a finger at the gray-haired ape in accusation. "And you know it!"

Now it was Yalu who glanced away first. "Even if I agreed with you...and I don't," he added hastily, "do you think you can change the whole world?" He hoped that Galen heard the plea in his voice, the fear that he barely admitted to himself.

Galen's sigh was heavy with resignation and regret. "I'd like to."

Virдон sat at the stone table in front of the fireplace, watching Galen's mother prepare vegetables for drying. He stared at the small movements of her hands while desperately wishing he could hear the conversation between Galen and Yalu. If they were to have any hope of rescuing Pete without falling into one of Urko's traps, they needed Yalu's help. However, the older ape had made his feelings about humans quite evident already. A tapping noise worked its way into Alan's consciousness before he even noticed that it was coming from his own fingers drumming on the table.

"We didn't come to this city to visit," he finally blurted out in exasperation. "I'm sorry, but we came to get Burke." He eyes fell on the door to the garden, and he began to rise with the intention of going through it.

"Only a few more minutes," Ann's calm tone stopped him. "My husband is not entirely unreasonable." She reached across the table in a gesture of compassion, but couldn't bring herself to touch the human's hand. He seemed so sad and concerned; emotions she hadn't thought the human animals were capable of feeling.

As much as he tried to distract himself, Alan's thoughts kept returning to Pete. He rubbed his forehead and pinched the bridge of his nose in a futile attempt to not think about what his dark-haired partner might be enduring. Colonel Virдон was supposed to keep Major Burke out of trouble, even though trouble seemed to find the younger man with unsettling frequency. Hell, the first time they met, Pete was on the carpet in front of

his commanding officer receiving a royal reaming for nearly getting himself killed while on a surveillance run over Iran. While on his mission, Mr. Hot-Shot Pilot saved a squad of marines in a helicopter by flying in front of a heat-seeking missile and diverting it from its intended target. Captain Burke then pulled nearly six gees in a high speed climb, leaving the missile to slam into an exposed cliff and detonate. When Pete's commander had asked him where he learned that maneuver, he answered that he'd seen it in a movie once. Alan remembered having to cover his mouth to keep from bursting out laughing. When he got back to Houston, he immediately went to his boss at NASA and recommended Pete Burke for the astronaut program.

The corner of Alan's mouth twitched at the memory. 'Hang in there, Pete,' he prayed to whoever would listen. He just hoped they would still have someone to rescue when the time came.

Out in the garden, Galen decided it was time to open his father's eyes to the truth, even if it was a painful truth. His father was sitting in a chair, his head held in his hands, slowly shaking it back and forth. "Father, I know you can't understand this, but Burke is my friend and I won't just sit by while Urko brutalizes him and then executes him!" Galen rasped out through clenched teeth. He pushed himself out of his chair and leaned over the table, his muzzle scarce inches from that of the older chimp. "Without your help, we're going to have to do something—"

"I don't want to know what you are going to do!" Yalu turned his back to his son again. But Galen was relentless.

"You can help us get Burke out without compromising yourself," he implored.

Yalu stood so quickly he almost knocked over the chair behind him. He slammed both fists onto the stone table in a gesture of finality. "This conversation is over!"

Galen sighed and closed his eyes briefly, gathering his courage to calmly make his next statement. "All right, father. Good bye."

He was about to leave when a pounding sound above them caused Yalu to grab Galen's arm in a near-panic. Pointing at the roof, his father hissed, "That's a signal from

Loomis." Yalu pushed past his son and hurried into the house. "They're coming! The police are coming!"

Ann and Virdon rose as father and son rushed to them. Galen moved to his friend's side and spoke quickly to his parents. "We'll leave now. We won't risk your lives by being caught here."

Alan agreed. "Is there a back way out? A window? Something?" he asked in a tense whisper.

Yalu stopped the two fugitives with a raised hand. "I'll hide you. It's as big a risk for us if you're found nearby," he insisted. He stepped over toward a large chair in the living room.

"Not as big as being caught here!" Galen was encouraged by his father's willingness to help them avoid being caught, but he feared for his parent's safety. Yalu's status as a council member would mean little to Urko.

The older chimp ignored his son's argument, and he began to move the heavy wooden chair. "Listen to your father for once! Help me!" Despite his confused expression, Galen grabbed the other side of the chair and lifted. "Help me!" Yalu repeated, this time directed at the human. "Pick up the rug! Help me!" Alan bent and quickly rolled up the fur rug that had been under the chair to reveal a circular hatch cut into the stone floor. He reached for the leather handle attached to the cover and hoisted the heavy stone. "I put this in for security." Yalu offered to Alan as he helped the human. Beneath the opening was a gap under the floor of the house. "Down you go! Hurry, hurry! One at a time, down," he seized Galen by the elbow to guide him through the portal. The young chimp carefully lowered himself into the narrow space. "Hurry, down," Yalu urged.

All heads turned at the sudden pounding on the front door. "Open up! Police!" Alan jumped down into the hiding place, barely missing landing on top of Galen. Terrified, Ann looked to her husband, then helped him to replace the rug and the chair over the trapdoor. "Open up! Police!" they heard once again through the heavy door.

Yalu rushed to the door and threw back the bolt as Ann settled herself into the chair and picked up some knitting. Putting on his best look of indignation, Yalu opened the

door to reveal three gorilla troopers with rifles. "How dare you bang on my door!" he barked.

The lieutenant pushed past Yalu as he declared, "I have orders to search this house." His subordinates followed him into the living room and moved into the kitchen.

"Search this house? There's a mistake. I am council member Yalu." He closed the front door before turning to confront the lieutenant.

"I'm sorry, councilor, but the order was given to me directly by chief of security Urko," the trooper explained. Despite his apology, there was very little regret in his voice. He turned to open the door to a small bedroom off of the living room. It used to be Galen's bedroom.

"I demand you stop!" Yalu tried again to assert his authority. The lieutenant ignored the old chimpanzee and waved one of the other gorillas into the other, larger bedroom visible through an open archway. "Where is he going?"

"To examine the bedroom," the senior trooper replied as he peered through the door he had just opened.

"This is an outrage!" Yalu's voice carried an implied threat.

But it was Ann's soft, cold words that finally caught the gorilla's attention. "I will expect everything to be just as you found it." She didn't even look up from her knitting as she delivered her pronouncement.

Meanwhile, they could hear the grunts of the other soldier as he dug into a storage chest, strewing clothing left and right. His superior rushed into the bedroom and delivered a stinging backhand to his subordinate. "You think you are pawing through a junkyard? You heard the councilor's wife!"

"Thank you, officer," Ann's attention never left her knitting.

"That's all right," the lieutenant replied. Urko may have ordered this search, but if the councilor or his wife decided to file a complaint with the high council, he knew that the general would not be able to protect him from repercussions. Best to follow procedure to the letter and do nothing more to alienate the powerful chimpanzee.

The trooper from the kitchen returned to the living room and told his superior that he had found no sign of the fugitives. The lieutenant looked around the living room in growing frustration, his eyes falling on a fur rug on the floor next to the dining table. In a

flash of inspiration, the gorilla considered that maybe, just maybe, Yalu was clever enough to have a hideout under his floor. He yanked the rug, convinced that he would find a secret door beneath it, but it flew into the air to reveal a plain, solid stone floor. He threw the rug down in disgust, then turned toward where Ann was sitting.

Yalu's heart leapt into his throat as the trooper began to look suspiciously at the rug under Ann's chair, but his wife appeared to be completely unaware of the scrutiny. Her face peacefully neutral, she continued with her knitting while the gorilla opened and closed his mouth several times. He was not sure how to ask the councilor's wife to move so he could search under her chair. Yalu decided it was time to put a stop to this before their secret was discovered.

"Have you found whatever it is you're looking for?" the old chimp asked in a tone that allowed no further argument.

"No, councilor."

"Then I suggest you leave," he strode over to the front door and flung it open. "Now!" he pointed toward the open door.

The lieutenant bowed his head slightly to Ann, a show of respect. "I apologize for this intrusion." Ann flashed the gorilla a sympathetic smile. The other two troopers headed for the door, their commanding officer the last to leave.

"The apology is not sufficient," Yalu shouted at the lieutenant as he went past. "You may so inform chief Urko!" Once the soldiers were gone, he slammed and bolted the door before turning back to his wife in relief. Ann let out a small whimper, hugging her arms over her head to stop herself from shaking.

Together, they uncovered the trapdoor and helped the two fugitives climb out. Alan and Galen were covered in dust and cobwebs, but thanks to Yalu's quick thinking, they were still alive and, more importantly, free to continue planning Burke's rescue.

The gorillas grunted with the effort of spinning the wooden table; they would take turns grabbing the wood and giving it another shove. The creaking of the table on its axis and the noises of exertion were the only sounds in the room for a long time. Wanda stood nearby, clutching her precious book, simply watching her prisoner as he

lay bound to the rotating device. Burke had his eyes tightly squeezed closed, trying to shut out the disorienting blur of faces as they whirled above him.

He listened to the rhythmic thumping as the soldiers spun him. The centrifugal force wasn't any worse than he'd experienced in some of this astronaut training, but at NASA, he hadn't been beaten, starved, and sleep deprived for three days beforehand. His head pounded in time with his heartbeat, and he couldn't decide if he was going to throw up or pass out first. In his light-headed state, he couldn't concentrate on his stomach to quiet the churning that threatened to bring up the little fluid that his captors had allowed him.

He knew what Wanda wanted from him, but he couldn't give it to her. He let his mind float free, trying to escape the misery that his body was experiencing. Unfortunately, his traitorous brain fixated on the unpleasant memories of his dysfunctional childhood; he had to think about something else. About his training in the Air Force. A nagging feeling darted around the edges of his consciousness that there was something he was supposed to remember.

A drill sergeant yelled something at him, but he couldn't quite make it out. He remembered that particular instructor, a mean, old, crusty career military man who seemed to take a perverse delight in terrifying the recruits under his tutelage. O'Sullivan. Sergeant O'Sullivan. Pete felt a little encouraged that he was able to remember the man's name. O'Sullivan had been in charge of their resistance training, and he hammered into Pete's class that no information was to be given to an enemy except...except.... Damn. This was important.

The table stopped spinning abruptly, and the change pushed the human's nauseated stomach over the edge. His eyes popped open, and he turned and lifted his head as much as his bonds would allow before he started retching. His tormentors stood by with amused expressions while his body was wracked with dry heaves. After a few minutes, he slumped the small distance back to the table and watched the room continue to spin.

Wanda stepped up to the table and leaned over the disoriented astronaut with a satisfied look on her face. Yes, everything was going as the book predicted. She would soon break the spirit of this pathetic human, and then she could mold him into whatever

she desired. She leaned a little closer over Burke's sweat-covered face. The damp dark curls clung to the sides of his face and his forehead. He was blinking rapidly, his brown eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot.

"Have you had enough?" she taunted. She was rewarded with a confused look from her captive. She waved her hand at the guards. "Untie him."

Burke felt the ropes on his wrists and ankles loosen, but he could do little more than lift his wobbly head, and even that small movement brought on another wave of nausea. "Was one of the humans named Roras?" his interrogator probed, impatience tingeing her voice. As his vision swam, Sergeant O'Sullivan's face appeared in front of him again.

'NAME!' he heard the Sergeant shout. His brain tried to reengage. 'Name?' He fumbled for the words.

"Uh, my...my name is...Burke...Peter. J." he muttered.

'RANK!' O'Sullivan shouted in his face.

"Rank...Major," a little more clearly.

'I CAN'T HEAR YOU, MAJOR!' Pause. 'SERIAL NUMBER!'

The human was so busy trying to retrieve a now meaningless number from his memory that he didn't see the fury spreading across Wanda's face or even hear her demands that he stand up.

"My number is zero-zero-four-seven...three-six-six-eight...nine-seven," he blurted out as the chimp tried to lift him bodily off the table. Burke's limp form slipped from her grasp and flopped back.

"Oh!" Wanda growled in frustration. "Haven't you had enough? Do you want more?" she threatened as Burke began his litany again, this time with a little more strength and conviction.

"Burke, Peter J. Rank, Major. Number, zero-zero-four-seven-three-six-six-eight-nine-seven." He had found a life preserver in the ocean of his despair. He concentrated on repeating those three magic items to his tormentor.

"We know the humans that have helped you!" Small grunting noises escaped from Wanda as she began to lose her composure with the stubborn human. "Tie him!" she ordered the gorillas, stepping back as Burke was once more secured. "Start!"

The rhythmic thumping of the table began again, but barely audible over the noise, Burke continued his muttering.

From their hidden position behind a large boulder, a human and a chimpanzee watched the soldier as he walked his patrol route around the main Central City prison. Both Galen and Alan were familiar with the layout of the prison and they knew for certain where Pete would be kept. The two astronauts had been incarcerated there when they first arrived on the planet several months ago, while they awaited a decision from the High Council on their fate. To bypass the Council, Urko had arranged for them to be gunned down during an escape attempt. In the process of foiling the execution, Galen had accidentally killed a prison guard, an offense punishable by death. In turn, he had been rescued from imprisonment by the two humans, and was forced to flee with them as a fugitive.

With a silent nod to his friend, Galen rushed toward the guard as he finished his circuit and headed toward the prison entrance. "I've been looking for you!" the chimp called out to the armed gorilla as he swung around. "I have this message from Council Chairman Zaius. Here." He shoved the folded paper into the guard's hand. The gorilla stared suspiciously at Galen and down at the note as if someone had just handed him a live snake. He turned the paper over and began to unfold it. Galen quickly added, "Of course, you can read it if you want to, but it is addressed to the commanding officer of the jail!" An expression of concerned confusion slowly dawned on the guard's features and he leaned in closer to Galen to peer at him more closely. The chimpanzee's face was partially obscured by shadows, but the gorilla thought he looked very familiar. "Is there any question that you want me to answer?" Galen countered in his most haughty tone. He kept his expression neutral as he watched his blond friend sneak up behind the occupied guard.

Viridon smashed down on the back of the gorilla's neck with a two-handed blow. As the large body crashed to the ground, Galen snatched the rifle from the guard's grasp. "Aha," he said with satisfaction. He quickly reversed his grip on the gun and pointed it at his victim as Alan pulled the stunned simian to his feet. "Okay. You announce your

arrival as you normally would. Come on!" Gesturing toward the prison door with the gun, he fell into step behind the gorilla and Virdon.

The two fugitives pressed themselves against the walls on either side of the door as the guard pounded on the heavy wood. When a small window opened in the door at eye level, he announced, "Guard 22. Ready." With a rattle of the lock, the door opened. Virdon booted the gorilla through the entry, and watched with satisfaction as both guards landed on the floor in a heap. Galen rushed into the room and pointed his rifle at the two sprawled jailers. Alan grabbed another rifle from where it leaned against the wall inside the door.

"All right, on the floor! Face down!" Galen commanded. The two gorillas began to shuffle back toward the main entry. "No, not by the door! The wall." The chimp gestured at the far wall with the rifle as Alan sprinted through the archway to the prison cells. The guards eyed the barrel of the rifle pointed in their faces and lowered themselves to the floor. A moment later, Alan returned.

"Pete's not here." His voice was heavy with fear and frustration.

Galen's cocked his head at this human friend. "He must be!"

"Well, he's not!" Alan snapped. "What do we do now?"

The chimp sighed deeply and closed his eyes for a moment. He didn't want to say anything in front of their gorilla prisoners that would give away their plans. "We'll figure something out. Let's deal with these two first." Galen wrinkled his nose and turned back to the waiting apes. "You two have just earned yourselves a night in a cell. Now move!"

Galen and Virdon directed the gorillas to the cell farthest from the entrance, following behind with their rifles ready. After making sure to relieve both guards of their keys, Galen slammed the door closed and locked it. With luck, no one would realize anything was amiss until dawn. By then, they would be back at Yalu's house planning their next move.

Chapter 6

Pete didn't even notice when the table was slowed to a stop again. After four hours of spinning, he didn't even know which way was up anymore. His body was floating, being carried by unseen currents that tossed and swirled him in a sea of disorienting light and shadow. Simian faces blurred before his eyes, multiplying and shifting in a dizzying dance. Sweat beaded on his face and neck as he fought the sensory overload.

Wanda put her book down on the table next to Burke's head. "Untie him," she ordered her assistants. Leaning over the dark-haired man, she lifted his head and brought a cup of water to his lips. Even though his eyes were half-closed with exhaustion, he drank greedily from the offered cup. "Where do you come from?" Wanda asked gently. She could sense the vulnerability of this human, and decided to modify her approach to exploit his weakness. "Where do you come from?" she urged again. She was so intent on her prisoner's face that she didn't notice as General Urko loped into the room.

When Burke began to recite his name, rank, and serial number again, Urko's patience snapped. The female wasn't getting anywhere with the stubborn astronaut. The only thing that humans knew and responded to was brute force. Moving around the table in three quick strides, the general pushed the female aside and hauled Burke off the table by the front of his shirt. His balance totally shot, Pete couldn't even keep himself upright in Urko's grip. He's knees began to buckle. Thinking that the human was being deliberately difficult, Urko struck him with the back of his hand across his face.

Pete was thrown several feet across the room by the force of the blow, and landed on his back with a bone-jarring thud. Moaning with pain, the human curled into a tight, protective ball as blood ran unchecked in thick rivulets from his nose. Wanda screamed at Urko. "Stop it! How dare you interfere!" She rushed to place herself between the general and the helpless human.

Urko looked at her, confusion and suspicion narrowing his eyes. Hadn't she told him to be rough with Burke? Was she continuing to put on an act of compassion for the prisoner? "I...I was just trying to help. You weren't getting anywhere," he stammered, unsure of exactly what was transpiring.

Wanda's anger seemed genuine. The human was at a delicate stage right now, and she feared that Urko's brutality would undermine her progress. "Obviously the prisoner is completely disoriented." She clutched the book protectively against her chest. "And now that he is, there are certain methods which will yield results." She opened the book and began to read in a tightly controlled voice, "'After a long period of severe interrogation, excellent results have been achieved by a feminine presence.' The message here is—"

"Oh, gibberish! Books! Books!" Urko grabbed the book from her hands and slammed it onto the table. "There's only one way to—" he trailed off with a growl as he reached down to effortlessly pull Burke from the floor and throw him onto the table. He raised his fist to smash the human's face, to crush his skull with his bare hands. He should never have gone along with this charade. The humans and the traitorous chimp should have been exterminated like the vermin they were.

"Leave him alone!" Wanda screamed, grabbing Urko's arm before he could strike. She lowered her voice to a dangerous tone. "Zaius will hear of your behavior."

Urko's eyes widened in surprise at the thinly veiled threat. She was right. As long as Zaius controlled the Council, they would continue to support his misguided ideas about the astronauts. The general could not afford to endanger what little support he had been able to garner in the Council. He looked down at Burke again in disgust, and shook off Wanda's grip on his arm. He raised his fist again, but knew that she had won this time. Sometimes a good soldier knew to forfeit one battle in order to win a war. He grunted as he reined in his anger, and slowly lowered his arm. Releasing the human, Urko turned and pushed his way out of the room.

Throughout their entire exchange, Pete lay limp and unresponsive on the table, his eyes dark and glassy, the bottom half of his face smeared with blood. Wanda pursed her lips as she considered her prisoner. He needed a break from the turntable, something that would bring him back to himself before she continued his interrogation. A spark of insight flashed in her eyes, and she began to issue instruction to the guards.

He opened his eyes when he heard heavy footfalls coming down the basement stairs. A large shape loomed over him, straddling his narrow body. Here it comes, the lecture.

"Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to have to go down to my place of work and bail my girlfriend's punk son out of jail?" Frank asked in that low, deceptively calm voice that he saved for after a punishment. "Well, I'll tell you, it's damn embarrassing. But that's what you do, isn't it, boy? You are an embarrassment and a disappointment to everyone around you. Your teachers, me, your mom, hell, even your own father was too embarrassed to stick around to see you born." Pete closed his eyes against the words that hurt more than any beating ever could. "And I'm left cleaning up his mess. Dealing with his mistake." Pete felt the handcuffs being released and grimaced in pain as blood flowed back into his arms and wrists. "For once in your life, try not to disappoint your mother. Go get cleaned up before she gets home from work." Frank climbed the stairs without looking back.

Pete slowly rolled onto his back and painfully wrapped his arms around his torso. The slightest movement of his shoulders was pure agony after two hours of being in the handcuffs. But his mom was going to be home soon, and he didn't want to upset her. He pushed himself to a sitting position and carefully climbed to his feet. When the room started spinning, he leaned heavily on the washing machine to keep from toppling. After looking down at the blood stains on his T-shirt, he pulled it off over his head and dropped it in the washer. He tried not to notice the livid bruises forming on his ribs and stomach. It didn't matter.

He loaded some more dirty laundry in the machine and set the controls. When he felt a little steadier, he turned and slowly ascended the stairs. He peered into the living room at the man who sat on the sofa reading the newspaper. Hugging his arms around his stomach, he glided behind the sofa and ran up the stairs two at a time. First stop, the bathroom. After relieving his aching bladder, he stood in front of the sink and reluctantly examined his reflection. Black eye. Split lip. A cut on his cheek and another one above his bruised eye. Usually Frank was more careful not to land any punches on his face. He must have been really pissed to lose control like that. After washing away

the dried blood, he applied some antiseptic and Band-Aids to the cuts. Not much he could do about the eye and the lip. He'd have to come up with a good story for his mom.

In his bedroom, he selected a long-sleeved turtleneck from his dresser and gingerly pulled it over his head. He made sure that the sleeves covered his chaffed wrists. He turned on his tape-deck, plugged in the headphones, and flopped onto his bed to stare at the ceiling.

Two songs later, his bedroom door opened slightly, and a dark-haired woman with a smile that could melt a Siberian winter poked her head into the room. "Hey, Petey, how was—" the words trailed off when she saw his battered face. Her expression darkened as she flung the door open wide and rushed over to the bed. Pete sat up and pulled off the headphones as his mom approached. She gently held his chin and turned his face side to side. "Oh, Petey, what happened this time?" The disappointment in her voice cut deep into his soul, echoing Frank's earlier words to him.

"Nothin', Mom. I got into a little bit of a fight, that's all." He cleared his throat and shifted his gaze out the bedroom window. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"Did you get suspended from school?"

"No, it happened on the way home. And I didn't even start it, Mom. I never even landed a punch on the other guy." Well, at least that part was true. He hated lying to her. He felt like one look into his eyes would reveal the truth.

"I want you to tell me who did this, Petey. I'm going to call that boy's parents."

His one good eye widened with fear. "No!" he said with more force than he meant to. "Please, Mom, don't. It'll just make things worse. I can handle it. Please, let me deal with this my own way."

Rita Burke looked down at her son, affection tinged with sadness shining in her eyes. She reached down and pushed his curly bangs out of his eyes. "All right, sweetie, but if it happens again, I'm going to call the principal."

"It won't happen again. I promise."

"Okay." She flashed him a half-hearted smile. "Frank wants to take us out for pizza tonight. You feel up to it?"

"Yeah, sure."

She held out her hand to him, and he stood, towering over her by at least six inches. As she pulled him into a hug, he grimaced and bit his lower lip to keep from gasping when she squeezed his sore ribs. He finally disengaged, and flashed her his most charming smile. She pushed at his bangs again. "You need a haircut."

The sky was brightening rapidly by the time Virdon and Galen made their way back to the house. They entered through the garden gate, which was well camouflaged by rose bushes and poplar trees. Once inside the house, they crept quietly past the slumbering residents into Galen's old bedroom. Since leaving the jail, they had barely spoken, subdued from the disappointment of not finding Burke and the exhaustion of the last 24 hours.

Alan turned to face Galen once the door was firmly shut. "Galen, we've got to figure out where they are keeping Pete." The blond man paced back and forth in the small room, his hands balled into fists.

"I know, but we can't really do anything more now that it's light out. The risk is just too great. And my father may be able to find out something from the council." He turned down the covers and sat wearily on the bed. "But for now, I am going to sleep. I suggest you do the same. We'll both be able to think better when we are rested." Laying back on the bed, Galen turned to face the wall while tugging the blanket around himself.

Virdon stopped pacing and sighed, then looked around the room. With his hands on his hips, he turned back to the reclining form. "Uh, Galen?" His friend grunted sleepily. "Exactly where am I supposed to sleep?"

"Wha—" Galen sat up as the question filtered into his brain. He glanced at this friend with a sheepish expression. "Oh. Sorry. Do you want the bed?"

"No, I'll take the floor tonight, but some blankets would be nice. And a pillow?"

"Sure. Be right back."

Once they had arranged a comfortable place for Alan in the corner of the room, they both let exhaustion seep into their bodies.

"And Galen?" Alan mumbled toward the wall.

"Hmmm?" A touch of annoyance in his voice.

"Tomorrow night, I get the bed."

After a few hours sleep, Alan's body had recovered enough to let him swim to the surface of consciousness. He scrubbed the sleep from his eyes and turned toward the bed, noting the lump curled under the covers and the soft snores permeating the room. He thought about trying to drift back to sleep when his stomach rumbled loudly. Instead, he retrieved his shirt from where he'd dropped it last night and pulled it over his head. The hinges on the door were well oiled enough not to make a sound as Virdon eased it open just far enough to slip out into the living room.

Ann worked in front of the large fireplace, stirring the contents of an iron pot with a long wooden spoon. Alan's stomach contracted with hunger at the smells permeating the room, and a loud, protracted rumble erupted from his abdomen.

"Would you like some stew, Virdon?" Ann asked in a bemused voice, without even looking up from her cooking. "There's also fresh bread."

'How did she—?' Alan's own mouth twitched in a smirk as his appreciation for Ann grew. "Yes, thank you, that would be wonderful." Retrieving a wooden bowl from the table, he sat next to her on the hearth while she ladled the thick chunks of vegetable into his bowl. She ripped off a generous piece of bread from a loaf on a warming tray and handed that to him as well.

"You were not successful in finding your friend last night." The even tone of her statement stopped Virdon's hand as the spoon was raised halfway to his mouth. After a moment's pause, the spoon finished its journey to his lips, and he greedily slurped down the delicious stew.

"No, we weren't."

Ann cocked her head at the rueful tone of his voice, wondering again about these strange men that her son had allied himself with. Galen had told her that they were different; the humans she knew were base creatures, without character, without honor, no more capable of ethical and moral judgments than any other beast of burden. Yet, Virdon's reaction to his friend's capture spoke of a deep loyalty and a strong fellowship that she had never thought possible. "You are very worried about this Burke, aren't you?"

"Yes!" Alan exclaimed. Locking eyes with Ann, he found a friendly warmth in their brown depths and a desire to understand. "He's my friend!"

"And so, you are willing to risk your life for him? And my son's life?"

"Galen's life is his own to risk. As for mine, I would gladly trade places with Pete right now if I could."

"You would trade places with him? Even if it meant your death?" The incredulity in her tone matched her wide-eyed expression of surprise. "Why?"

"He's my friend." Alan repeated as he spooned a generous heap of stew into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "And he's my responsibility. You see, the mission that brought us here, that was my mission. I was in charge. When we crashed here, our other crewmember was killed. I couldn't do anything to save Jonesy. I won't lose Pete, too."

"Hmmm." She turned back to continue stirring her pot. These humans were strange, indeed, but she was beginning to see why they fascinated her son. "What if he's already dead?" Glancing at the human, she watched his face pale. He put down the bowl and rose to his feet, turning away from her, yet there was no mistaking the anguish in his suddenly husky voice.

"Then I need to see it. I need to know that I did everything possible to reach him." He closed his eyes as he thought back to the nightmare that had invaded his sleep the past several nights. The sight of Pete's broken and lifeless body had torn something inside him that might never heal. Alan had always felt protective toward the younger man. As Burke's commanding officer, he had read in the other man's service record how his early days in the Air Force were marked by commendations and reprimands in practically equal number. He had flouted authority, his actions always just short of outright insubordination, and disregarded orders whenever he had disagreed with them. Yet his ability to think quickly, act without fear, plus fly a fighter jet like he had been born with the controls in his hands, had made the difference between success and failure on many critical missions.

However, Virdon also recognized a destructive streak in Burke that needed to be curbed before he spun out of control. He threw himself into dangerous situations too

readily, without regard for his own safety. Sometimes it seemed like Alan worried more about him than he did.

Ann stood and brushed her hands on the front of her apron. She walked behind the blond human and reached up to pat him on the shoulder. "I'm sure you will do everything you can. I've never met a human with more," she paused, searching for the right word, "determination than you, Virdon. If you didn't smell so bad, I'd almost think you were an ape."

Pete felt warm, rough hands on him, pulling away his clothes and tying his hands in front of him with thick rope. Even though part of him knew that there was something very wrong with the situation, he was unable to focus enough to mount a resistance. The part of his mind trapped in his memories told him it was better not to resist. Better to remain passive and accept his punishment. He was an embarrassment and a disappointment to everyone around him. It didn't matter what they did to him. Nothing mattered now.

A deluge of cold water hitting him in the face and chest snapped him out of his private world. Coughing and sputtering, he tossed his head to shake the wet, dark curls from his forehead and blinked rapidly to clear his vision. He groaned as his mind was wrenched back into the present, into the cave, and into Wanda's clutches.

"Welcome back, Burke." He lifted his eyes to see Wanda sitting on her hunches a few feet away. "Are you ready to answer my questions now?"

He squirmed in the grasp of the soldiers, and winced at the burning ache that pervaded his body. Closing his eyes briefly, he emitted a deep sigh of weary resignation. "What do you want to know?"

"Don't play games with me, Burke. If you want me to protect you from Urko and the council, you have to give me some information to placate them." She raised her hand to gently cup his cheek. Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "What are the names of the humans who have helped you?"

Pete's mouth opened and closed several times, as if he were gulping for air. Finally, he pressed his lips tightly together and slowly shook his head. Wanda pulled back the hand that had caressed his face and delivered a stinging blow to the same cheek.

"Damn you, Burke. You will tell me everything I want to know before we are through." She stood and stepped back to give the soldiers room to maneuver her prisoner. They dragged him to the edge of a stone circle in the middle of the room that lined a deep well that was no longer used. When he looked down over the edge, he found himself peering into dark, empty space. Panic clutched at his chest, and his mind again retreated into itself again.

Wanda smiled to herself as the gorillas lowered Burke's naked form into the old well by the rope that bound his wrists. His head lolled back, exposing the long, pale neck that bore dark, finger shaped bruises, but there was no other movement from the him. After playing out a few feet of rope, they tied off the end on a stake driven deep into the rock floor.

Burke was vaguely aware of his feet dangling in the empty air. The meager light filtering down from through the well opening was cut off as a large cover was pulled into place over the stones. The resulting darkness was palpable, wrapping itself around his body and mind like a heavy shroud. He felt like he was floating in deep space, and the sensory deprivation only drove him deeper into his memories.

Pete grabbed another piece of pizza from the tray and shoved the tip and half the slice into his mouth before ripping the rest free and chewing noisily. A small rivulet of grease slid from the corner of his mouth and down his chin. Rita reached across with a napkin and wiped it off before it dripped onto the table.

"Mooomm!" the teenage Pete whined around a ball of half-chewed dough and cheese, "do you have to do that in public?"

"Do you have to eat like a slob in public?" she shot back at him, her smile belying her harsh tone.

Pete smirked, trying not to wince as the movement pulled on his scabbed lip. After swallowing and shoving the rest of the pizza slice into his mouth, he swiped a bunch of

napkins to scrub the grease from his hands. They had passed an arcade-style basketball game in the entrance of the restaurant, and he wanted to try his luck at it.

“I’m going to go shoot some hoops,” he muttered to Rita and Frank as he stood and carefully wove through the tables and chairs. His ribs still ached, but as long as he moved slowly, he wasn’t in any real pain. Right now, he just wanted to get away from having to look at Frank’s smug expression, even if for a few minutes.

He listened to the quarters drop into the machine and watched the ball to roll down to the front. In one smooth move, he arched the ball up and through the ring with a satisfying swish of net. The ball returned to his waiting hands, and he again sank it into the basket. Biting his tongue between his teeth in concentration, he continued to sink baskets on just about every shot for the full two minutes allotted to him.

Rita Burke decided to go watch her son’s gracefully display of skill while Frank returned to the counter for another pitcher of beer. He had just started another round of shooting, and was so intent on his target that he failed to notice as she approached and leaned casually against the side of the machine. As his hands flew above his head again and again, the long sleeves of his turtleneck began to creep up his forearms, revealing dark circles of bruising around his wrists.

His mother’s brow began to knit together, when the machine buzzed again to end the game. Pete felt her small hand snatch at his arm just as he noticed her presence. The action startled him, allowing Rita a chance to push the sleeve up further and examine his wrist. Pete’s eyes widened as he realized what she was staring at, and he jerked away, quickly yanking the sleeve back into place.

“What the hell happened, Pete?” she demanded in an urgent, hushed tone. “And don’t tell me you got that from a schoolyard fight.” Her dark eyes locked with his, and he could see the anger flashing there.

Suddenly, the entire scene seemed to move in slow motion, punctuated by the loud cadence of the pounding of his heart. “Mom, it’s nothing. Please, leave it alone.” He turned and leaned into the glass door, escaping into the cool night air. But Rita was right behind him.

“Peter James Burke, you stop right there!” Her shrill voice froze him in his tracks, not more than fifteen feet from the door to the restaurant. He closed his eyes, his mind

racing, but her hand gripped his shoulder and turned him to face her. He winced as the twisting of his torso shot a line of fire across his bruised ribs. "I asked you a question, young man. What happened to your wrists?" she demanded again.

"One of the guys twisted my arms behind my back while the other one pounded on me." He knew it was a lame story, but it was the best he could come up with under pressure. His mother's stare wilted what little resistance remained in him, and his shoulders slumped in resignation.

Rita gripped one of his hands, moving the concealing sleeve up his arm again, then did the same with the other. She inspected both wrists before looking up at her son's battered face. "Those don't look like marks left by someone's grip, Petey. They're too thin; they look more like—" her eyes widened and both hands flew to her mouth before she could finish the sentence.

'Shit,' Pete thought. 'She knows. Shit, shit, shit.' One of the side effects of dating a cop, he supposed.

"Oh my god, they're from handcuffs, aren't they, Petey?" Her voice sounded small and strangled, even without her hands in front of her mouth. The color drained from her face, and for a moment, Pete feared that she would faint. He wanted to deny her accusation, but the words couldn't escape past the lump of dread in his throat. Mutely, he shook his head, his eyes downcast.

"Who handcuffed you? Who? Who?" She had grasped his shoulders and gave him a slight shake to punctuate every word. "Who did this to you?"

"No one!" he finally squawked, his eyes snapping up to find comprehension dawning on her face, despite his negation.

"That bastard! I'll kill him!" Whirling around like a she-devil on a rampage, she yanked open the glass door so hard that Pete feared it would shatter. Overcoming his shock, he rushed after her.

"Wait, please, Mom, let me explain!" But as he entered the restaurant, the tableau before him unfolded as if he were watching a bad movie on a screen. He became detached, as if an invisible barrier had been erected to prevent him from participating in the drama.

Rita strode over to the table where Frank had just deposited a pitcher of amber fluid. "You son of a bitch! You stay the hell away from me and my kid!" Before Frank could react, her hand lashed out and slapped him across the face. The sound was sharp and jagged in the sudden silence.

Frank's face slowly flushed as the confusion was replaced by rage. He grabbed the woman by the shoulders in an iron grip that dug painfully into her flesh. "Whatever he told you, honey, it's a lie!" As he looked over her shoulder at the teenager, his eyes narrowed. "What did you tell her, you little punk-ass shit?" The words were clipped and hard as steel.

"He didn't say anything!" Despite her small size, Rita's temper was a match for anyone's, especially when she had the added incentive of a mother protecting her child. She brutally struck with both fists into Frank's chest, causing him to release her and fall back a step. "I saw the bruises on his wrists! And you just confirmed the rest, Frank! I want you the hell out of my life. If you ever come near me or my son again, I'll have you arrested so fast, your head will be spinning!"

Frank's eyes narrowed dangerously, and Pete recognized the deadly expression on his face. "Don't you dare threaten me, bitch!" As Frank's hand drew back, Pete was already moving, and grabbed the big man's fist as it descended toward Rita's face. Frank and Pete stood frozen for a moment in time, staring into each other's eyes and gauging the resolve of the other. For the first time, Frank saw defiance in the boy's expression instead of the cowed defeat to which he had become accustomed.

Finally, Rita broke the spell by pulling on Pete's arm and whispering, "C'mon, Petey. He's not worth it. Let's go home." Shoving Frank's fist away, Pete backed away toward the door, his mother shielded behind him.

"He's the one who's not worth anything, Rita. You'll see. Next time, I'm not going to be there to bail the boy outta trouble," the big man's voice dripped contempt.

Although still retreating, Pete stabbed a finger in Frank's direction. "For your information, asshole, there's not going to be a next time."

Chapter 7

Galen paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. Virdon sat quietly at the table across from Ann, studying the stone floor. Exasperated, Galen turned to face his father, who sat calmly in his favorite chair. “Why didn’t you tell us that Burke isn’t in the main jail?”

“I didn’t know. I have no idea where he’s being kept. Only Urko and Zaius know.”

Ann noticed the suspicious glare on her son’s face. “It’s not like you to doubt your father, Galen.” The younger chimp turned and walked back to the fireplace, perching on the hearth. “If your father says he doesn’t know, he doesn’t know!” The disapproval in Ann’s voice made Virdon wince in sympathy for his friend.

The human chewed thoughtfully on his lip for a moment before cautiously asking a question. “Does Urko have any other place that he keeps prisoners?”

“None that I know of,” Yalu replied.

“But Urko knows.” Alan’s eyes widened as he turned to Galen for confirmation.

Galen had already jumped to his feet as he caught Alan’s trail of thought. “And he keeps records!” A smile turned up the corners of his muzzle. “That’s the place to look.” The two friends turned toward the door, prepared to act on their latest idea.

Yalu’s protest pulled them up short. “Son, I—” A deep breath, and he swallowed the idea he couldn’t express. His eyes swiftly fled from his son’s face. “You’ll never get away with it.”

“Still, we have to look in Urko’s office.”

As they hurried through the door, they heard Ann call to them, “Galen, Virdon, be careful.” If Galen had turned, he would have seen the bright sheen of tears in his mother’s eyes.

Pete lay in his bed, exhausted but unable to sleep. He lifted his head off the pillow just enough to glance at the clock on his nightstand. Three a.m. With an exasperated sigh, he let his face fall into the pillow, and tried to will himself to sleep.

After the confrontation at the pizza parlor, Rita and Pete had a long talk about everything that had transpired between him and Frank. His mother had been full of tears and self-recriminations for not recognizing sooner the abuse her son had received at the hands of her boyfriend. They had talked about the past, about the future, and exchanged vows never to keep any secrets from the other again. It was past midnight by the time Rita sent her clearly exhausted son to bed, thankful that the next day was Saturday. Pete had barely made it up to his room and stripped down to his boxers and t-shirt before falling onto the mattress in a boneless lump.

But sleep had not come easily. At some point, he must have dozed off, because his next awareness was of someone roughly pulling his arms behind his back. He tried to buck the weight from his back, but his assailant was too heavy. The only sound in the room was the staccato grunts of the struggle. Pete felt something being wound around his wrists, and from the ripping sound, he knew his hands were being bound with duct tape. His struggles increased when he sensed that whatever Frank had planned for him was going to be deadly serious.

He lifted his head to scream a warning to his mother, but before the sound escaped his throat, a piece of duct tape sealed his mouth. Pete's muffled screams continued as Frank lifted him from the bed and slung him over a shoulder, holding his bare legs in place with one arm. The big man descended the stairs with his burden and turned toward the kitchen. The door to the basement stood ajar, and a ghoulish light spilled out of the doorway onto the linoleum floor.

Frank's shoulder dug into Pete's already bruised ribs, leaving him gasping for breath when he was dumped on his back on the familiar cement floor. His eyes widened at the sight of Rita sitting a few feet away, her wrists bound behind her back, her mouth taped, her face a study in terror. Pete screamed against his makeshift gag, and lashed out with a foot at his captor. With preternatural calm, Frank plucked the offending limb from the air and began to dragged the struggling teen across the floor. He snatched a broom that leaned against the stairs, and began wrapping duct tape around the bare foot, securing it to the end of the broom handle. Once that foot was secured, Frank grabbed the other thrashing limb and secured it to the opposite end.

Pete continued to flop ineffectually as Frank returned his attention to Rita. His mother's ripped t-shirt had ridden up to expose her underwear. Tears streamed down her cheeks, leaving dark trails of runny mascara. For the first time since Pete's ordeal began, he heard Frank speak.

"Now you and your brat are going to get what's coming to you, bitch."

When Wanda gave the order to pull Burke from the well, she knew she was finally making progress in the astronaut's reconditioning. Beneath dark bruises the human's skin was pale, and despite the chill that seeped from the rock walls, sweat glistening in a fine sheen on his face and torso. Once his feet cleared the edge of the chasm, Burke curled into a fetal position. As the gorilla guards worked loose the ropes binding his hands, Burke remained passive, his brown eyes wide but unfocused.

Waving the guards to step back, Wanda knelt next to Burke's trembling form. She wrinkled her nose at the odor, but forced herself to reach out and stroke the dark hair. At her touch, Pete scabbled toward her, curling himself around her legs. The gorillas started forward, but Wanda held up a hand and they stayed back, shifting uneasily from foot to foot. She bent her head toward her captive, who whispered softly, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

Zaius lounged back against the bench and closed his eyes, relaxing as the steam filling the room worked its magic on his old and tired body. The warmth from the stone beneath him felt particularly delightful against his back and hips, which had begun to ache at the end of the day with the telltale signs of arthritis. 'I'm getting too old for this nonsense,' he thought with a wry smirk and shake of his furry head. He pulled the cotton sheet around his waist a little tighter, and let himself sink further against the stone, visualizing the strain of the day draining out of him like grain pouring from a sack that had been punctured.

His nirvana was shattered a moment later when the door was flung open, and Urko's shaggy form stomped into the sauna. "Ah, Urko, come in. Close the door, close

the door,” the orangutan admonished, sitting up with a start, “you’re letting the steam out.”

The gorilla’s lips compressed in a sour expression, but he stopped, turned awkwardly, and pushed the door closed. He removed his bulky helmet and sat down at the end of the bench, as far from the raised bed of hot rocks in the center of the room as he could get. Zaius sighed with great force and pushed himself from the bench. He grabbed the dipper from the water bucket next to the rocks and poured a generous helping of liquid over the rocks. Steam bellowed in great clouds, replenishing what had escaped from the room with Urko’s intrusion.

“I love the heat. It’s the best thing for old bones,” the older ape mused as he settled back on the bench.

Urko raised a cloth to wipe his sweat-soaked face, and shifted uncomfortably in his heavy leather uniform. “I prefer exercise,” he replied with an impatient tone. “You sent for me?”

Zaius’ icy glare was lost on Urko. “We decided that you were to allow Wanda to perform the experiment in her own way—without interference.” Although his tone was casual, anyone but Urko would have detected the menacing undercurrent of his words.

The gorilla was rapidly wilting in the heat, and was obviously anxious, for several reasons, to be done with Zaius and get back to his duties. “She’s getting nowhere,” he growled. “The prisoner is less responsive than he was at the beginning.”

“I told you force does not work on these humans. In contradiction to my wishes—you attacked the prisoner!”

“I hate that human,” Urko ground out between clenched teeth. His hand closed unconsciously into a fist, but remained at his side. “I told you before—this is a waste of time!”

“That is still to be proved!” Zaius asserted quickly. He breathed deeply and smoothed the hair on his chin with one hand. He knew that putting Urko on the defensive would only irk the insubordinate gorilla more. “In the meantime, Wanda is to proceed without further interruption.”

“Yes, Zaius,” Urko acquiesced grudgingly.

Zaius sat back and closed his eyes again. "Let us hope she succeeds." He reopened one eye to look meaningfully at his general. "But if not, you'll take over."

Urko nodded his agreement, glad that Zaius was finally seeing reason. "I'm going back to my office. I'll inform Dr. Malthus to make preparations for the brain operation." He stabbed a hairy finger in Zaius's direction. "That's how sure I am that Wanda will fail," he finished smugly.

The orangutan sighed again, and fervently hoped that Wanda did succeed so he wouldn't have to put up with Urko's gloating. "Suit yourself," he replied brusquely, and dismissed Urko with a wave of his hand.

The trip across the hub of Central City to Urko's headquarters took longer than Galen expected. With the streets being heavily patrolled by armed gorillas and few apes out after dark, an ape and human traveling together would definitely raise an alarm if they were seen. Galen glanced wistfully at Zaius's office and the Council chambers across the dusty street, and wondered briefly what his life would be like now if he had never had his "accident" with the truth.

The two fugitives carefully circled the building, then ducked beneath a window hidden from the street. Virdon raised his foot into Galen's laced fingers to get a boost through the window opening. As his head cleared the bottom of the opening, Virdon quickly surveyed the room to make sure it was unoccupied. He knew Urko could be in his office at any hour of the day or night, but hoped that the gorilla was otherwise engaged at the moment. He clamped down on that thought as he remembered what, or more precisely who, Urko might be otherwise engaged with.

He eased himself onto the floor below the window, careful that his landing didn't make any telltale noise that might have alerted the guards he knew Urko kept outside his office. Reaching through the window to grasp the furry hand of his companion, he helped haul Galen up into the window opening. The chimpanzee stepped onto Virdon's shoulders, then dropped to the floor, jarring a chair as he landed. Both figures froze, straining to hear if their entrance was detected. Once they were assured that the guards

were not going to burst in, Virdon pulled the curtains over the window to prevent them from being seen by anyone passing by outside. Galen gave him a quizzical look that said, 'What now?'. The astronaut glanced around, taking in the massive stone desk that dominated the room. On the wall behind the desk was painted a map of the region as it was known to the apes of this time. The only recognizable feature that remained of what was once the west coast of North America was the Baja peninsula.

Alan moved toward the door to the hallway, shedding his vest as he moved. After blocking the gap at the bottom of the heavy wooden door, he turned toward a glass cabinet filled with papers. Galen fetched a large candle from a table and carried it to the desk. Using a piece of kindling from the banked brazier in the corner of the room, he lit the candle and propped two books up around it to further shield the light from escaping the office and alerting anyone to their presence. Virdon deposited an armful of rolled parchment to the desk, just as the books around the candle began to topple. He grabbed the larger one before it could land heavily on the desk, while Galen snatched away the smaller one. They more carefully balanced the books against each other to block the light. Virdon gestured to Galen to look at the documents on the desk while he turned to return to the bookcase. Suddenly, as Galen moved around the desk, he tripped over the chair. The legs scraping over the stone floor seemed to echo like a gunshot in the quiet of the office. The guards in the hallway surely must have been alerted.

Virdon extinguished the candle and, while Galen grabbed the roles of parchment from the desk, sprinted silently to the door to retrieve his vest. A moment later when the door opened and two gorilla guards entered, the office appeared unoccupied and undisturbed. Under the desk, the human and the chimpanzee held their breaths. The guards made a cursory inspection of the room that, luckily for the fugitives, didn't include looking behind or under the desk. When they heard the door close again, the two friends cautiously emerged from their hiding place to resume their search. As Galen relit the candle and began examining the rolls of parchment on the desk, the blond human returned to the cabinet.

The astronaut eyed the stacks of parchment with dismay, but something deep inside told him that somewhere in this mound of paper was the clue that would reveal

Pete's location. Mentally steeling himself for a long night, he pulled the first scroll from the shelf and began his search.

He was back on the spinning table. The only noises in the room were the grunts of the gorillas, punctuated by the slap of their hands on the table as they spun it with the enthusiasm of schoolchildren at the merry-go-round at recess. Sweat poured from their faces, stinging their eyes. Every now and then, one of them would steal a furtive, resentful glance at the female chimpanzee perched on a stool in the corner. Her entire concentration was focused on the book balanced in her lap, not even aware that she had raised one hand to her mouth and was biting at a fingernail. She had been encouraged by the human's response when he had been pulled from the old well. As the book had predicted, the hours of isolation and deprivation of the senses had further eroded Burke's grasp on the present. His pitiful whispered apologies obviously indicated that he was feeling remorse, and that was an emotion she could exploit.

Her hand traveled from her mouth to push at her glasses as she read a particularly interesting passage in the book. '...after this long period of centrifugal force, the prisoner has lost the feeling of the pull of gravity; also to some degree, his sense of identity has blurred along with the identity of others.' A devious new idea began to coalesce in Wanda's mind. '...at this point, someone, perhaps a woman who is compassionate and understanding and who may be confused by the prisoner with someone he has loved, can by skillful questioning in warm, affectionate tones, obtain information that could not be secured in any other fashion.'

'Yes,' she thought. 'a woman who is compassionate. The creature is repulsive, but I am a professional. I will make this work.' She had seen his reaction to the small comfort she provided after the well, and knew she was on the right track. His ugliness was an obstacle to overcome, but she'd had the gorillas redress the human in his clothes, and that made looking at his easier to tolerate.

Her resolve strengthened, she put down her book and ordered the gorillas, "Stop the turntable. Free the prisoner." The guards exchanged looks and hesitated for a moment, but had learned that questioning the chimp's orders would only bring them

trouble. As the table slowed to a stop, they untied the ropes that bound Burke's limbs. The human didn't even move.

Wanda preened, running her fingers through the fur around her face, straightening her glasses. Of course, she wasn't sure what would appeal to the beast as an attractive female, but she would try her best. She set the book on the human's chest, along with her notebook, and waved her hand at the gorillas that gaped at her. "Guards. You may leave."

The lieutenant's jaw dropped even further at her order. Enough was enough, this female was out of her mind. "But Wanda, he's a dangerous human."

"I can handle him," she replied, her attention focused on the slack face of her prisoner. "Go!" The gorilla pressed his lips together in frustration, but motioned the other guards to the door and exited the room himself.

"You," he said to one of his subordinates, once the door was closed "wait here, and enter if you hear anything suspicious. I'm going to go find General Urko." Urko would have something to say about this outrageous behavior.

The world blurred and swirled around him, colors blending into a kaleidoscope of fractured images like pieces of a stained glass window that had been broken and left scattered on the ground. He felt a sense of urgency that he couldn't pinpoint; someone needed him to do something. He remembered crying, and anger, but the reasons for it all were slipping away.

In fact, he felt that if he could just sleep a little, everything would be right as rain. No need to get upset, no need to fight, or resist. Just go with the flow. He closed his eyes and was just starting to doze when his companion spoke.

"I have the feeling sometimes that we're strangers. There's so much about you I don't know..."

One corner of his mouth lifted in his patented Pete Burke smirk. Nora. He listened to the brook sloshing quietly a few yards away. The birds chirping in the background; it was a beautiful, warm spring day in the park. He was glad they had decided to make a day of it with a picnic, but after the big lunch and a hike along that same brook, he was

tired. He just wanted a little nap. But Nora wanted to talk. He felt her fingers brush his face, but his eyes remained closed.

“And I always believe that people in love tell each other everything.”

‘Uh oh,’ he thought, ‘the L word.’ He’d met Nora a month ago, a pretty blonde he had picked out of the crowd at a local club, and charmed with a few of his famous one-liners. They’d been going pretty strong ever since, but he not strong enough for the L-word. He sighed, which his companion was sure to mistake for contentment, but really signaled that it was time to start extricating himself from this relationship before it got too serious.

“Not *everything*,” he replied, hoping to remain vague enough to avoid further use of the L-word. “You’re quiet today.”

Nora snuggled into the crook of his shoulder, her head resting next to the dark one. He brought the other hand out from behind his head to rest it on her waist. “Maybe I’m all talked out.”

He chortled, turning his head to nuzzle her neck. “That’ll never happen. You’re a bubbling spring—inexhaustible.”

She pushed against his chest, forcing him to look into her face. “Springs can run dry. Pete, all our conversations are a one-way street. You won’t tell me anything about yourself.”

Well, this was different. The girls he usually dated wanted to talk about themselves mostly. Once they found out he was an astronaut, they wanted to hear stories of adventure and excitement, but very few people had ever asked him to talk about *himself*. Shrugging, he tossed out a nonchalant, “What do you want to know?”

“Everything. Where you were born, went to school...”

“Pretty boring stuff,” he quipped.

“Not to me.” He felt her smile, and her voice dropped to a sultry tone, “And even the first time you fell in love.”

He pushed himself up so that he was looming over her and stared deeply into her blue eyes. His own voice dropped to match her tone. “This is the first time.”

She laughed and pushed him away again. His own smile flashed, his brows raised in mock indignation. “Hah—you’re copping out again. I want to know,” she poked her

finger into his chest, tracing small patterns in the soft fabric of his turtleneck, “what’s inside here. What you feel...” She leaned in closer to him, teasing once again. “I want to know about your friends...”

Pete looked again into her eyes as he slipped a hand behind her neck to pull her in even closer, determined to steer this conversation away from personal matters the only way he knew how, “They’ll love you.” Her eyes wavered from blue, darkening to brown as he watched, even as his lips parted slightly in anticipation of the kiss. In the moment of his hesitation, her entire pretty face and blonde hair melted into a dark face encircled by dark fur. An ape face.

‘Wanda!’ Pete’s mind screamed as he pulled away in horror, covering his face with his arms to block out the hated visage. He curled his body away from her, pushing the book and notepad off of his chest, almost rolling off of the table in his attempt to get away from his tormentor. His stomach rolled and threatened to disgorge the small amounts of water they had allowed him to have.

Wanda pulled back, grabbing at her books as they fell to the table. Her glasses, which she had removed at the beginning of this futile exercise, clattered to the wooden surface as well. Her eyes narrowed in anger, and her fists clenched as if she would strike the prisoner herself. Instead, she grasped the edge of the table and tried to control her breathing. Her own revulsion at having almost... almost *kissed* the...the animal curled her lip. She stood still for a few moments to calm herself, her disgust with the human displayed openly on her face.

‘Well, that’s it then,’ she decided, and reached back to rub away the soreness that had infected her tense neck muscles. ‘You’ve sealed your own fate, human.’

“Guards!” she shouted, and gathered up her materials as two gorillas entered the room immediately. The Lieutenant followed a moment later.

“Lieutenant, is it night or day out?” The caves had no windows, and she had worked round the clock to try to produce results.

“The sun is about to rise, Wanda,” he answered, mentally adding, ‘and Urko will be here any moment.’ He was surprised by her next words.

“Inform Chief of Security Urko that the prisoner now belongs to him,” she announced, the words clipped and heavy with exhaustion. She then turned and stalked out of the room.

Chapter 8

Alan scrubbed his hand across his face in an attempt to force himself more alert. The words on the parchment in front of him blurred and shifted. He blinked rapidly and twisted his head, feeling his neck crack. Behind him, he heard Galen shuffling around some ledgers, in their continued search for information. The glass case he was currently searching had been locked, albeit crudely; the lock had been easily picked with his pocket knife. The fact that it had been locked at all was promising. But dim light was beginning to filter from behind the curtain over the window. The sun was coming up, and they were running out of time.

He was about to give up on the sheaf of papers he was reading and reach for another when something caught his eye. A requisition. At the desk, Galen was stifling a yawn when Alan gestured excitedly at him to come look. The simian padded on quiet feet to where his human friend stood by the window, squinting to read by the filtered light. Virdon pointed to the requisition.

“Five special guards sent to the Crystal Cavern,” Galen read quietly, tracing the words on the parchment with one hairy finger.

“Crystal Cavern? Does that mean something?” Alan searched his friend’s face for hope.

Galen softly grunted an affirmative. “But why would they send special guards to a cavern outside the city where nothing valuable is stored?” he prompted with raised eyebrows, tilting his head to one side.

“Of course, Galen, that’s it!” The two fugitives felt real hope for the first time in days. They had found their friend.

“Guards!” Urko’s voice carried from the hallway outside the heavy door. Virdon and Galen were instantly in motion, replacing books and papers, clearing away all evidence of their all night search. “Go to Dr. Malthus’ house. Tell him to meet me at the hospital as soon as possible,” the general ordered his guards, then dismissed them with a wave of his hand. “That is all.” He watched the two gorillas shuffle down the corridor before turning to enter his office. Inside, Virdon was grabbing his vest from the base of the

door, sprinting across the office, and diving out the window to safety. Galen followed right behind him.

Urko stalked into his office, his mind already going over his plans for the human Burke. Even in his preoccupied state, though, he stopped in the middle of the room, seeming to sense that something was amiss. Did he leave that candle on his desk? It usually sat on the table next to the armchair. Was that a hint of smoke coming from the wick? He had been out of his office all night, who would have lit a candle? Was the curtain in the window fluttering? Must be the wind outside. Huffing to himself, he shook his head to dismiss these unsettling thoughts. Too much time chasing the renegades. Too much time dealing with that—female, who confused him and undermined his authority. Well, she had admitted her defeat, as he had predicted. Now it was time for gorilla sensibilities to take over. The fugitive human would be dealt with in a way befitting his crimes against ape-kind.

Wanda's face loomed in front of his, then morphed again into the ruddy complexion and handle-bar mustache of the man who had also tormented him. His hands were bound behind his back, and his feet were immobilized with the broomstick forcing them apart. Tears of fury began to slip from his horror-widened eyes and run down over the duct tape covering his mouth as he watched Frank approach his mother. Like a giant cat stalking helpless prey, Frank glided up to Rita from the side and grabbed the back of her neck. Her arms and legs were also wrapped in tape, but she still struggled to pull herself from the big man's grasp. Pete screamed against the tape over his mouth, but his protests were muffled into incomprehensibility.

Frank pulled Rita's face right into his own, and pressed his lips against the silvery tape that covered her mouth as well. "I would have loved you right, baby. I would have made you my princess. But you and your bastard brat had to go and ruin it all." His mood shifted, and Pete could hear the flinty edge of anger in his voice. "You shouldn't have threatened me, Rita. No one threatens me." Frank drew back a hand and Pete winced at the sound of flesh hitting flesh, rocking his mother's head to one side.

Pete began struggling harder against his bonds. He rubbed his wrists up and down in an attempt to dislodge the tape, but that only managed to roll it into tight bracelets that cut into his skin more than ever. He watched as Frank's hands began to roam over Rita's barely clad body, his leering expression making his intentions crystal clear. Rita turned her head away, both to avoid Frank's face and her son's desperate gaze. If she'd been able to, she would have spit in the big man's face.

'No,' Pete thought, 'please, this isn't happening!' He just couldn't comprehend the idea that he was about to watch his mother be raped by her boyfriend. 'EX-boyfriend,' he reminded himself. But his continued struggle proved the futility of trying to escape his bonds. He wasn't going anywhere.

A couple of minutes later, his brain finally registered a change in what was happening between Frank and Rita. His mother no longer seemed to be trying to squirm away from their attacker; it looked a great deal like she was actually rubbing herself up against him! Pete's mind flip-flopped as he tried to convince himself he was misinterpreting her actions, because the thought that she was actually coming on to Frank just couldn't be possible.

Frank began crooning phrases that Pete found disgusting, but were evidently meant to encourage his mother's actions. "Yeah, baby, you need it from me, don't you?" the big man whispered. "You want it, don't you?"

Rita began nodding and leaned back on her bound arms, swinging her legs out in front of her. With a sultry look, she raked her eyes up and down Frank, and motioned for him to come to her with her head. Frank seemed to consider the barely clad woman in front of him for a moment, then knelt down next to her and started rubbing her body with his large, meaty hands. Rita's head fell back, and a sound like a moan escaped from behind the metallic tape over her mouth.

"Yeah, you want it. You always were such a slut, Rita." Rita's face crinkled into something that might have been a smile, and she nodded again. Frank's hands moved down her legs and hovered over the tape binding her ankles together. He turned his head to give her a fierce glare. "Don't try anything funny, baby, or I'll have to take it out on the brat over there," he motioned his head in Pete's direction.

Rita shook her head stridently, and favored him with another smoldering, wanton look. Frank slid his hands up under her nightshirt and pulled the panties down to her knees. He thrust a finger into her, as if to test if she was really ready. Rita moaned again, and began moving against the finger.

“Oh yeah, you’re hot for me.” Frank’s voice was deep and breathless with his own arousal. He moved back to her ankles, and started peeling away the sticky tape. “This might hurt a bit, baby, but you might like that, huh?” He chuckled softly at his own cleverness.

Pete watched the scene unfold with numb shock. If it hadn’t been taped, his jaw probably would have been hitting the floor. He tried to convince himself that he wasn’t disgusted by his mother’s behavior, but without much luck.

Frank finished removing the tape. He forced Rita’s legs apart roughly, and knelt between her knees. As he was concentrating on unfastening his belt and pants, he didn’t see the look on Rita’s face change from lust to rage. He didn’t see her lean back further for leverage and pull her knees up to her body. As he started to pull the pants down below his hips, one foot lashed out and struck him squarely in the groin, then the other connected solidly with his jaw. As Frank’s face flushed bright red and he began to topple toward her, she rolled to the side, ending up on her knees and climbing quickly to her feet.

As Rita delivered two more kicks with the heel of one foot to the side Frank’s head, punctuated by her sobbing grunts in an otherwise silent room. Frank made no more sound, nor did he move to avoid the blows. Rita stood over Frank’s motionless body for a moment, assessing if he was really no longer an immediate threat. She turned toward her son, who was struggling to sit up, after the shock of watching his mother’s sudden assault.

The gorilla guards deposited Burke back in his holding cell until they received orders from Urko. Their compatriots had ridden into the City to alert Urko to Wanda’s failure. The dark-haired human had not struggled, for once, during the transfer, but had hung limply between his two captors. Although his eyes were open, his blank

expression and fixed stare revealed that his mind was not engaged in the present. Once the cell door closed with a clang of finality, Burke's body contracted into a protective ball almost by reflex, as if sensing the oncoming danger. His mind, however, was very close to broken. The memories of his and his mother's assault at the hands of her boyfriend, the frustration and helplessness he experienced as the scene replayed itself with the frightening clarity of something that feels real to all the senses, had done to his will and resolve what four days of questioning by Wanda had failed to do. Luckily for him, the chimpanzee scientist was inexperienced in recognizing the signs of distress, or hadn't understood the essential differences between human and simian psyche—either way, if she had pressed him just a little bit more, he probably would have spilled his guts and betrayed everyone who had ever given the three fugitives the least bit of succor.

That realization, of how close he was to the breaking point and of how narrowly he had escaped it, crept into his brain on larcenous feet and triggered one final memory of the denouement of that experience so many years ago.

Pete watched as his mother stood still for a moment, whether in shock over her plan succeeding or trying to decide her next action, he didn't know. Then she strode to the toolbox sitting next to the washing machine (which was always breaking down, it seemed), and knelt next to it. Spotting what she wanted, she twisted and rooted among the tools until she pulled free a utility knife. She slowly turned the knife in her hands and extended the blade, then began working to carefully cut the tape around her wrists. "Hang on, Petey. I'll be right there, honey," she tried to calm her son, but her cracking voice revealed that she was far from calm herself. She finished cutting her own bonds, balling up the tape and throwing it away from her like it was a poisonous snake. She padded over to her son, her bare feet slapping on the concrete.

Rita eased the duct tape from her son's mouth, aware of how much the adhesive pulled on his split and scabbed lip. "I'm sorry, Petey," she whispered, meaning so much more than just about the discomfort of removing his gag.

“Mom, I—,” but he didn’t know what to say to her. So instead he concentrated on gulping down air that had been constrained by the gag and wetting his parched lips. Rita had moved around behind him and started working loose the bonds on his wrists.

“Hold still, I don’t want to end up slitting your wrists,” her voice was flat, tinged by too many conflicting emotions for Pete to read. She cut the tape from his wrists, then moved to his ankles to free them. While he rubbed his wrists to try to get rid of the pins and needles in his hands, his mother gently massaged his calves and feet, avoiding the red, chafed ankles. After a moment, she asked, “Can you walk now?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Good. Then I want—,” she paused, and ran her hands through her hair, pushing it back from her mascara streaked face. For a moment, she looked like she might vomit. Then she took a deep breath and started again, her voice more steady. “I want you to go upstairs, and call the operator. Tell them to send the police and an ambulance. Tell them that we had an intruder.” She turned to look over at Frank’s motionless form and paused again. “Then go upstairs and get dressed. Go in my room and get some sweats and my sneakers and bring them down here. I’m going to stay here and make sure he doesn’t wake up before the cops get here.” She was concentrating so much on what she was saying that she didn’t notice her son walk past her to kneel beside Frank.

“Pete! Don’t touch him! Do as I say, now!” Rita’s voice cracked again. Ignoring her, Pete reached out and felt briefly at the big man’s neck. His pale face blanched even further, a sharp contrast to the dark bangs hanging almost in his eyes.

“Mom, I think—I think maybe he’s dead.” Then he noticed the fluid trickling out of Frank’s ear, a mixture of blood and straw-colored liquid.

Rita’s hands flew to cover her mouth, muffling the hysterical almost-scream that tried to escape. Pete lunged toward his mother as he watched all the blood drain from her face and her body begin to sway. When she crumpled to the ground, he was able to catch her enough to lower her gently to the cement floor. “Oh my God,” she whispered, slowly shaking her head back and forth in negation.

“Mom? Mom!” Pete had to practically shout in his mother’s ear before he got any reaction from her. “Come upstairs. Get dressed. I’ll make the calls. He’s not going anywhere.” The teenager bodily lifted his mother off the floor, wrapped his arm around

her shoulder, and began steering her toward the stairs leading to the kitchen. He kept murmuring reassurances to her as they climbed the thirteen stairs that took them back to a world where there weren't dead bodies on the floor, where they could almost pretend normalcy. Even if that normalcy was short-lived.

When they reached the kitchen, Rita pulled away from her son and dove at the sink. Her stomach was already empty, despite the pizza for dinner, so all that came up was bitter, clear liquid. Pete rushed over and turned on the cold water faucet, then held her shoulders while she continued to dry heave for what seemed like a long time. When she seemed done, he grabbed a clean glass out of the dish rack and filled it with water, pressing it into her hands and encouraging her to drink. She took a deep gulp, but instead of swallowing, swished it in her mouth and spit into the sink. After that, she drank a few small sips, and seemed to come back to herself.

"Mom," Pete prodded gently, "go upstairs. Get dressed. Get cleaned up. I'll take care of things."

"Petey!" She put down the water glass and put both palms against his cheeks. "Petey, I—," but she left the thought unfinished and walked past him into the living room. After he heard her tread the stairs to the second story, he went to the phone on the kitchen wall and began dialing the police.

Although Rita Burke was never charged with the death of Frank Henderson, things changed after that. Peter Burke enrolled in karate classes at the local YMCA, and soon became a black belt. Even though he continued to question and flaunt authority, he enrolled in the Air Force ROTC when he went to college at Michigan State. He always stood up for the innocent or the weak, even when doing so meant personal hardship. Even when doing so meant he had to bend the rules, sometimes even break them, to do what he thought was right. And it was that memory, of never wanting to feel helpless again, that brought him out of his stupor. Wanda and Urko, they were just another set of bullies. Like Frank, preying on the weak. And he would do what he could to make sure that didn't happen.

Human and chimpanzee slipped out of the City with relative ease. The guards were more concerned with who was coming into the city, not leaving it. And the road to the Crystal Cavern was near to Urko's office, and luckily on the opposite side of town from where they entered, where most of the guards were posted. They made good time on foot, and arrived at the entrance to the cavern about the same time as Urko's guards. The two fugitives hid behind a rock that gave them a good vantage point down into the rock-strewed ravine fronted the cavern, but did not risk exposure to the gorillas at their lower level. A rough wooden wagon drawn by two horses waited on what passed for a narrow trail that wound around edge of the ravine and then doubled back toward the city. On the side of the wagon were painted red circles and the crude outline of an ape head.

"Any other entrance?" Virdon asked his friend. Between the two guards who had just ridden up and the two gorillas sitting on the passenger seat of the wagon, there was no way they were going to slip past them to search for Burke.

"No," Galen answered. Virdon looked at the hillside above the cavern entrance. Maybe if they could climb up above, they could find a rock chimney somewhere to access the caves within. Or maybe they could somehow lower themselves above the gorillas and get a jump on them. He motioned to Galen, then began to scale the roots sticking out of the rock. The human's mind was working on any number of unlikely scenarios when he was brought up short by the scene below him.

Two gorillas were dragging Burke out of the cavern. His hands were bound in front of him, and he was barely getting his feet underneath himself to walk. His eyes were mostly closed, and the dark head bobbed back and forth, like his neck couldn't support the weight of his skull.

"What have they done to him?" Virdon exclaimed in a voice that was no less outraged for its muted tones.

"That's a hospital wagon," the chimp explained. When they reached the wagon, one of the guards grabbed the astronaut's arms and the other his feet, and they hauled him into the wagon like a sack of grain. They dragged him to the front of the buckboard, and viciously pulled his bound arms above his head, and used more rope to secure them. Burke's eyes opened briefly at the rough treatment, but the glaring sun was too much

for light-sensitized eyes. He closed them quickly, and leaned his head back against the wagon boards in obvious exhaustion.

“There’s no way to get to him. Not with that mob around him,” the other human growled in frustration. The two friends watched as the apes remounted their horses, and began escorting the wagon away. Five gorillas. One driving the wagon, four on horseback.

“Our only chance is the hospital,” Galen declared.

“Right,” Alan agreed.

An ape hospital. Alan could only imagine what horrors awaited Pete there. They could probably count on Urko being there, along with an unknown number of guards. This was going to require a plan, and a diversion. And they had to come up with it fast.

Watching the pace that the wagon bumped along the dirt road, and knowing how the road wound around before going into the city, Galen estimated they had probably an hour before it reached the hospital. Maybe less if they were able to pick up their pace once they reached smoother road. It would take them about half that time to get back into the city. They decided to go back to Galen’s parents’ house to see if they could enlist Ann’s help. If nothing else, she might be able to provide some information about what they could expect.

Dr. Malthus’ eyes shifted nervously between the tray of instruments in front of him, and General Urko. Both were dangerous instruments if improperly manipulated. Malthus had no illusions that his status as medical director of Central City Hospital would protect him from Urko’s wrath. “You understand, I promise nothing. This operation is still in the experimental stage. I can’t guarantee success.”

“What do you mean by ‘success’?” Urko asked impatiently.

“Well, when the patient survives and is docile—,” Dr. Malthus began.

“It’s not necessary,” Urko interrupted, waving his hand in a placating gesture. Doctors worried too much, he decided. It was only a human. Who cared if the operation was a success?

“The patient can die,” Malthus warned, “or worse, be left with no brain at all.”

“That’s too bad,” Urko replied, flatly. He actually thought the idea of Burke being a brainless shell, incapable of any free will to be a rather pleasant image.

They both turned as the door opened, and the gorilla guards rolled in the gurney with Burke strapped to it. One held his gun at the ready, as if the renegade human was likely to jump up at any time and attack him.

“This is the patient?” Malthus asked. At Urko’s grunt, Malthus gave Burke a perfunctory examination. He pulled back the human’s eyelids, then put his ear to Burke’s chest to listen to his heart. “He’s in a coma,” was the doctor’s diagnosis.

“So you won’t need an anesthetic,” Urko replied. He thought the advantages of that were obvious. “How long, before you’ll be ready?”

Dr. Malthus began to get flustered at Urko’s audacity to rush him. “Well, my associates haven’t arrived yet, and so nothing is prepared—instruments, scrubbing, operating rooms, nurses. Thirty to sixty minutes.”

Urko cut him off with a chop of his hand. “You have thirty minutes. Then being the operation! I’ll be back in time.”

Malthus shook his head at the ignorance of gorillas, but knew better than to anger the powerful general. “Yes, Urko. Thirty minutes,” he acquiesced.

Grabbing his helmet off the desk, Urko headed for the door, one of the guards trailing behind him. The other guard stayed by the door, gun at the ready. The chimpanzee doctor took another look at the patient, then turned to begin the preparations for surgery.

“Mother, we really need your carriage,” Galen tried to let just a little of the urgency and desperation into his voice, but not so much as to scare Ann off completely. “If we didn’t, I wouldn’t ask.”

“Of course you can have it,” Ann replied a little too quickly, barely looking up from the ear of corn she was shucking for dinner.

But Galen’s relief was too great for him to realize what was coming next. “Thank you, mother. We’ll try to return it as soon as possible.” He was half turned on his heel when her quiet question brought him up short.

“May I ask why you need the carriage?”

Galen glanced meaningfully at his human friend. Virdon seemed to consider for a moment, then have an almost imperceptible nod of his blond head.

Turning back to face his mother, with what he hoped was his most entreating manner, Galen took a deep breath. “Well, you see, we have found out that Burke is in the hospital,” he began, another quick glance at Virdon for help. Ann looked up at her son, concern in her eyes.

“They are going to operate on him,” Alan interjected, his voice carrying a sharp edge that hinted of panic.

Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Galen explained further. “It’s that operation that Urko favors—”

“The carriage, Galen!” Ann cut him off. Now she was starting to get impatient with their dissembling. “Why the carriage?”

The son visibly wilted under his mother’s stony stare. He took a deep breath and plunged ahead, “Mother, ah, if I told you—and if father found out—he would be very angry....” he trailed off.

“Possibly. But you haven’t answered my question,” she pursued relentlessly.

At the point, Virdon decided that all the dancing around was not getting them anywhere. “We’re going to break into the hospital, grab Burke, and run,” he told her quickly, trying to get it all out before she interrupted. “We wouldn’t stand a chance against Urko’s mounted patrols—“

“—Without my carriage,” Ann finished for him.

The human nodded. “Right.”

The female chimps gaze swung back to her son. Galen sighed, “Yes.”

Ann pursed her lips and shook her head. “You don’t stand a chance with my carriage,” her tone said that she felt she was stating the obvious.

Now it was Alan’s turn to lose patience. “Well, maybe not,” he admitted grimly. “But we’ve thought of every possibility and this is the best we’ve come up with.” Didn’t she understand what was at stake here? That they were going to cut into Burke’s brain, make him into a vegetable, possible kill him. Alan tried to push that thought away.

Evidently, she did understand, but with a different focus. “If you fail, Urko will kill you. You realize that?” The question was directed at her son, but also included his human friend.

Galen heaved another mighty sigh. “Yes.”

Ann put down her corn and approached her progeny. “Son, you insist on attempting this impossible rescue?”

Galen looked deeply into his mother’s eyes, and tried to make her understand what his friends meant to him. “Mother, we have to.”

“Then you leave me no choice.” She pushed past him into the other room, leaving both chimp and human to wonder what that meant.

“Was one of them named Roras?”

“Yes.” He was so tired, so tired. If he answered the questions, he would be able to sleep.

“Who else?” The voice kept wavering between a female’s lilting tenor and a man’s rumbling baritone.

“Arna. At the Medical Center. And her father, Travin.” Water was pressed to his lips, and he drank greedily. More comforts would come with each name. Suddenly, a floodgate opened, and he began reciting the names of the humans and apes who had helped them since they landed on this upside-down version of hell. Not just names, but where they lived, the villages, the provinces.

“Good, that’s very good,” the voice crooned. His aching body was wrapped in softness, a cool cloth placed on his fevered brow. Savory food was place on his tongue; he chewed and swallowed automatically to assuage his rumbling stomach.

“What will happen to them?” he thought to ask, a bit too late.

“Why, we’ll eliminate them, of course. This poison you spread is a disease, and the only way to deal with it is to quarantine, and then to cleanse.” The voice spoke of murder and destruction in such casual terms. Nothing to get excited about.

At least, until he closed his eyes and the images of broken bodies and burning homes closed in around him. He stood in the middle of an unidentified human village

and watched as the residents were ridden down by mounted gorillas. Men, women, and children alike, shot or clubbed, and left dead or dying where they fell. Huts were torched, and if anyone inside tried to escape the fire, they were bludgeoned with a rifle butt and pushed back into the flames. Their screams pierced him like a knife. The rancid smoke burned his eyes, his lungs, and he doubled over coughing, then fell to his knees retching. Those people had been his friends. They had helped the three fugitives. And now they were dying, because of him, because of his betrayal!

Pete woke with a start, the smell of blood and burning flesh still stinging his nostrils. The gorilla standing guard at the doorway shifted at the sudden movement, tightening his grip on his rifle. The human carefully craned his head around from his recumbent position, trying to take in as much as he could without prompting the guard to do something drastic. He was still in the preparation room at the hospital. His hands tingled from the tight ropes binding his wrists, and straps held him to the wheeled gurney at the chest and legs. He swallowed down the scream that had threatened to erupt when he woke from his nightmare. Was it a nightmare, or was it a memory? Had he given up the names of the people who had helped them to Wanda? He didn't think so, but the scene had felt more like a memory than a dream. If those people died because of him—well, he just wasn't sure he could live with that responsibility.

Dr. Malthus was nowhere to be seen; he was probably off preparing to do Urko's dirty work. Burke had heard enough to understand what was planned for him. They were going to operate on his brain, do a frontal lobotomy. He would be a vegetable, if the operation itself didn't kill him. If Alan and Galen tried to rescue him now, they would be committing suicide. At this point, maybe death was the best he could wish for.

Chapter 9

The carriage pulled into the hospital courtyard, which was filled with humans and apes going about their daily business. Humans were tending the small garden, or caring for the horses tethered to one of the trees. Chimpanzees, primarily, dressed in blue smocks, were helping patients to get exercise. Most of the patients were apes, although a couple of humans also wore slings or walked with crutches around the dirt area. All was quiet and unremarkable. That was about to change.

A human, also unremarkable, drove the horse that pulled the carriage partway around the courtyard to the entrance to the hospital, then reined the animal to a stop. The profile of one chimpanzee was visible through the window on the side of the carriage. From inside, a female voice commanded, "Open my door! Human! Come and help this ape!" A blond haired human slowly looked up from his toils, and caught the female's imperious gesture for him to approach. He set his hoe against a tree, looked around to see if anyone else was willing to answer the ape's command, then reluctantly sidled to the back of the carriage and opened the door. Like the apes who were caring for patients, he also wore the blue smock that marked him as a servant at the hospital.

Once the door was open, the female glided out of the carriage, and waved the human toward the other ape still waiting inside. The chimpanzee had a bandage wrapped around his head, a large bloodied patch on the front of it, and blood trickling down the right side of his face. A slight whimper escaped him when the human pulled him up and draped the hairy arm across his own shoulders. Together, they stumbled in the wake of the female, who was already approaching the hospital door. A gorilla in a guard uniform, carrying a gun, stepped into her path and put out a hand to stop her.

"I can't allow anyone in. Lieutenant's orders," he explained.

The female looked at him like he had two heads. "But I'm not just anyone," she told him haughtily. "I'm council member Yalu's wife."

"But only the Lieutenant —," the guard began.

"Then get him," Ann dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

The gorilla looked her up and down for a moment, considering her status and his own, then turned to go into the hospital to find his lieutenant. Ann looked back at Galen,

leaning heavily on Virdon, both immersed in their roles, and then followed the gorilla inside, gesturing for her two compatriots to come along. They got as far as the spacious lobby, occupied by a chimpanzee administrator behind a desk, who rose as they entered. The lieutenant met them there.

“I’m sorry, the hospital is closed,” he told Councilmember Yalu’s wife, politely, but firmly.

“Well, how can that be? I have a badly wounded ape here!” she replied, exasperated. She indicated Galen, who whimpered in pain and pawed at the human supporting him.

“Leave him,” the lieutenant suggested, after taking in the blood soaked bandages on the chimp’s head. “Someone will take care of him.”

“Are you a doctor?” Ann countered quickly.

The gorilla was obviously confused by her change of tactics. “No,” he pointed to the silver V marking the front of his uniform, “no, I’m a lieutenant.”

“Well why am I talking to you? I need a doctor!” the female was becoming quite troublesome. “What doctors are available?”

The gorilla was losing his patience. “I don’t know,” he told her curtly.

Ann decided she needed to play the sympathy card. “Lieutenant, I was on my way to see a friend who is ill, when I came upon this badly wounded ape, here.” She turned toward Galen again, who was milking his role for all it was worth. “Apparently the victim of some accident. I went out of my way to bring him here, to this hospital, at great personal inconvenience!”

“I’m sorry—“ the gorilla began, the sarcasm dripping from his voice.

“In that case...let us proceed!” Ann interrupted, and started pushing past the guards.

But the lieutenant wasn’t fooled. He grabbed her by the arm and gently pushed her. “Back,” was his terse command.

Ann was undaunted. “While we’re arguing, this unfortunate victim could die!”

‘Oh boy,’ Alan thought, ‘she’s really laying it on thick. But then again, gorillas are not known for subtlety.’ Galen was hamming it up, too, as he put his hand up to his head and let out a pathetic whimper.

“Do you want that on your record?” Ann asked the gorilla, the implicit threat also not very subtle.

That the gorilla understood. “No, No—“ he began, but never finished, as Ann finally pushed past, and beckoned Alan to follow.

“Come, human!” Alan and Galen walked past the very confused looking guards, who were still trying to figure out how the female outwitted them.

Ann was continuing into the corridor, to the door at the end of the hallway, where she could see light shining through the window in the door. She pushed open the door, despite the resistance the of large body on the other side, and heard a surprised grunt. The door was pulled opened the rest of the way, revealing another guard with a gun. She quickly surveyed the room, taking in the site of the dark-haired human strapped to a gurney, a second gorilla with a gun standing over him, and the chimpanzee doctor starting to come toward her. She knew this was the right place.

“Ah, Doctor,” she moved into the room, ignoring the two gorillas. Virdon and Galen trailed in behind her. “I am Ann, the wife of Councilor Yalu.” She bowed to Malthus, who returned the courtesy. The gorillas, however, were not ignoring the newcomers. They both converged on Alan and Galen, and while they weren’t overtly threatening, they were definitely suspicious. Alan edged them closer to Ann, while one of the gorillas reclosed the door.

“I’m Dr. Malthus,” the blue-smocked chimp introduced himself. “But you shouldn’t be here,” he reproached her, indicating the human subject waiting for surgery.

But Ann pressed on. “I want you to take care of this wounded ape,” she waved a hand in Galen’s direction, “right away.” Galen whimpered again, and clutched at the human supporting him.

“I have an important surgery in about ten minutes.”

Ann turned to look at the other human in the room. The dark-haired man’s wrists were bound together, and he was strapped to a wheeled gurney. His eyes, however, were open and clear, and pleading wordlessly for help. Her heart went out to him.

She turned back to the doctor, allowing her indignation to show. “Do you mean a human patient is more important to you than an ape?”

“Urko’s orders,” Malthus replied, clearly unhappy about the situation.

Ann approached the human, as if to get a better look. "Well, he must be a very special human!" She stopped near the head of the gurney and looked at Malthus. "Looks ordinary to me." She turned surreptitiously to the tray of instruments on the table behind her and picked up two cutting blades, sliding them up her sleeve. "It's as if nothing were really wrong with him." The human looked up into her eyes, and she saw the intelligence, and the knowledge of the danger he was in.

"Not yet—" Malthus began.

"Then I insist you find a bed," she gave Malthus a look that could wither fruit on the vine, and moved back over toward Galen and Viridon, "and capable medical care for this poor ape." She turned her back to Malthus and the gorillas, and handed Galen and the human the instruments she had taken, the movements hidden from the others by her body.

Malthus seemed to finally realize he was not going to be rid of this pretentious female until he gave her what she wanted. "Very well. I'll see what I can do." One of the gorilla guards opened the door for him as he left, and closed it behind him.

"Oh, and you!" Ann addressed the soldier by the door. "Tell Chief Urko I wish to see him right away." The gorilla shifted nervously, and shuffled toward the other one by the cart, as if to confer about what to do. If one of them left to go get Urko, that would leave only one to deal with the prisoner and this other strange human orderly. Gorillas never liked when they were outnumbered by humans. Ann took a chance to goad them, "Are you frightened of an elderly female and a wounded ape? Do you believe that an armed police gorilla is no match for a mere human?" She waved in Alan's direction.

The gorillas grunted at each other, and puffed up their chests. Surely the human on the gurney, even though he was supposedly dangerous, wasn't in a position to try anything. One of the gorillas started toward the door to go summon Urko. Anything to get this argumentative female to be quiet!

When one gorilla turned his back on Viridon to open the door, the other one standing over Burke was looking everywhere but at his charge. Pete reached up with his bound hands and grabbed the barrel of the gun that the soldier was now letting dangle far too loosely in his hands. Galen sprang away from Alan and grabbed the

soldier from behind while Pete wrestled with the gun. Free to move now, Viridon grabbed the other gorilla from behind, bringing a very sharp scalpel to his shaggy throat.

As soon as the fugitives sprang into action, Ann threw her hands above her head and started running in circles, shouting in distress. She was loud, confusing, and complete ineffectual in helping the two gorillas as they were subdued. Galen applauded his mother's performance; if she acted shocked and afraid, no one would try to link her as an accomplice to what was about to happen. When she was sure that Alan and Galen had the guards in the room taken care of, she ran out into the corridor and started screaming for help, drawing the other two soldiers into the fray, while providing no useful information to them about the situation.

Alan pushed the gurney with Pete still strapped down through the opposite door, which led into some sort of recovery area. There were about a half dozen beds containing various apes, all with some part of them bandaged. Through this ward, they knew from Ann's information, was another exit that bypassed the main lobby where they had entered. Alan slipped the scalpel into Pete's bound hands, trusting that he could cut the leather thongs and free himself, and turned to help Galen shift a bed with an unconscious gorilla in it to block the door from the operating room from opening. Before they could get the bed in place, the other two gorillas pushed their way into the room. The patients in the recovery area helped add to the confusion that definitely favored the fugitives. They were able to pummel the soldiers with crutches, throw them into equipment, and Alan even used one poor patient's counterweight to smash one gorilla in the face, as the patient screamed in pain. Before long, both gorillas were unconscious on the floor, one half-sprawled onto of some hapless chimp's bed. The female chimp orderly who had been tending the patients cowered in the corner, her hands covering her head.

Meanwhile, Pete had freed himself, and was looking around, shaking his head as if trying to clear it. Galen and Viridon pushed the heavy bed more securely against the door. Hopefully, now it would keep anyone else out long enough for them to get away.

And just in time. They could hear banging on the other side of the door, and Urko's voice shouting "Open that door! Break it down!" What sounded like the butts of rifles

started pounding on the door. “Get some of your gorillas and cut them off at the other corridor!” they heard Urko shout. “Hurry”

‘Yep, time to go!’ Alan thought. He lifted the end of the gurney with Pete still on it and pushed it out into the hallway, the staccato sound of pounding following them. They ran down the corridor until they reached the doorway to the outside. Alan pushed the gurney against the wall and steadied it while Galen helped Pete get shakily to his feet. The dark-haired man’s knees buckled beneath him, and Alan grabbed his other arm. Between them, they half-dragged him toward the door while he struggled to get his feet to cooperate with walking. Just before they got to the exit, Alan jerked his head to the side, indicating they should duck into an alcove where supplies were kept. He put his finger to his lips to signal that his friends that they should stay there, and stay quiet.

Urko finally burst into the recovery room, just as his soldiers were pushing their way in the door on the opposite side of the room. The scene was a disaster area—medical supplies strewn everywhere, patients moaning in pain, some of them half falling out of their beds. The nurse had gotten up from where she was cowering and was starting to try to comfort some of the more anguished apes. One of the gorillas who had gone around the corridor turned to his general. “Urko, they have escaped from the hospital.”

Just then, Urko heard the sound of hoofbeats, and a human voice calling “Hyah! Hyah!” He rushed to the window and pulled aside the covering, in time to see a horse-drawn carriage careen down the road away from the hospital. He turned back to his soldiers. “Follow them!” he ordered.

The group of gorillas loped down the hallway that led to the lobby, and out into the courtyard, causing humans and apes alike to scatter in their wake. Urko could see the carriage through the fence, being chased on foot by a couple of apes who must have seen the human fugitives steal it. He was in such a hurry, he failed to notice the blond head that poked out of a side doorway in the corridor, to watch the gorillas retreat.

Urko turned to his troops. “Mount up!” he ordered, and led the charge over to his own white horse. Soon, a half dozen gorillas on horses were milling around the courtyard before galloping out into the road and after the carriage.

Meanwhile, just inside the hospital corridor, Alan turned back toward the alcove with a beckoning wave of his hand. Galen and Pete came shuffling out, Galen still supporting Pete. Alan grabbed his other arm to lend his strength.

“I don’t know how you two ever made it in here, but—” Pete’s gratitude was palpable as he let the thought trail off.

“We’re not outta this yet,” Alan replied, looking around to make sure all the gorilla soldiers had left with Urko, before the three friends made a dash for the door.

The courtyard was still in such chaos from the exit of the soldiers, no one really noticed a human in a blue smock and a chimpanzee with a bloody bandage around his head carrying a second human who could barely walk. The three friends cut through the courtyard, and went around the fence surrounding it until they found Ann waiting for them. Galen grabbed his mother’s hand and gave it a quick reassuring squeeze, then jerked his head to indicate that they should go.

The walk back to Ann and Yalu’s house showed quickly how bad Pete’s condition was. For a few minutes he would be fine, needing minimal support from Alan, and then suddenly, his legs would buckle, and Alan would have to practically carry him. They stuck to the woods and bushes as much as possible, but when they had to walk through crowded streets, Ann and Galen, after removing his bloodied bandage, walked arm in arm like any mother and son taking a stroll, with their two servants attending behind them. The fact that one servant had to sling his arm over the shoulders of the other for support didn’t really draw any attention. After all, to the average ape, human servants were like furniture. As long as they didn’t do anything that humans shouldn’t do, they faded into the background, below notice.

When they finally got to the house unchallenged, Galen wasn’t sure who was closer to collapse, Pete from the exertion of his escape, or he and Alan from relief. They came in the back gate, through the garden, and just as they were about to go into the house, Pete actually did collapse. Alan was able to muscle him up onto his shoulder; Pete’s lanky frame was so gaunt from his treatment at Wanda’s hands, Alan was shocked how easy he was to lift and carry the rest of the way. Yalu was waiting for them, and bolted

the door behind them. Ann pulled her husband aside as Galen led the way into his old bedroom. She quickly explained to her husband what had transpired, so they could present a united front and consistent story when they were inevitably visited by Urko or his troops.

Alan gently laid Pete down on the narrow bed. The younger astronaut grabbed at Alan's shirt, and started protesting, "No, no, don't." Galen rushed to Alan's side and helped to subdue the obviously confused man.

"Pete! Pete!" Alan put his hands on both sides of Burke's bruised face, gently, to try to force him to focus. "It's me, Alan. You're safe now, but you've got to keep quiet for a while. This is bound to be the first place that Urko looks for us." Some of that seemed to penetrate the fog, and Burke stopped thrashing.

"Galen," Alan hated to ask, but it was *their* lives at stake. "Will your father give us away? Will he turn us in?"

"Oh, no, no. At this point, it would be as damaging to him to be found with fugitives in his home as it would be for us to be found. He'll do his best to get rid of anyone who comes looking for us."

Ann came pushing into the room, carrying a bowl of water and some cloths. "I thought you might like to get him cleaned up, poor thing." She looked down at Burke, her eyes moist with empathy for the human's condition. "But you had best stay hidden in here for now. I can hear horses coming, and I'm sure it's Urko. Galen, if he cries out—" At the sound of Ann's voice, Pete rolled up on his side facing the wall, and was making a low whimpering noise deep in his throat.

"I know, Mother. Virdon and I will keep him still," Galen reassured her. Now if someone would just reassure him. "Please, be careful. Both of you."

Alan dipped the cloth in the water, and for now, just laid it on Burke's hot, sweaty forehead. He would examine his injuries more closely later, when the immediate danger had passed.

Urko wasted no time accusing Ann of conspiring with the fugitives. He has practically bowled Yalu over when the older chimp unbolted the door at the insistent

pounding, and obviously wanted to start tossing the place immediately to look for the humans. But after his last search of Yalu's house, he dare not suggest it without the Council's backing.

"And I assure you it wasn't Galen," Ann insisted to Urko. "After all, a mother should know her own son." She nodded at her husband for support.

"And I was told that it *was* Galen," Urko pounded his fist on the table.

"You are being insolent!"

"Not at all!" Urko was getting very tired of this...female. Why was it always females getting in the way of what had to be done? "I'm doing my job." He tried a different tact, "Let me ask you a question. If it wasn't Galen, how do you account that ape's actions?"

Ann eyes narrowed, her tone frosty and clipped. "It wasn't. And I don't. I was horrified by his actions and ran into the corridor and called for help. You saw me."

Urko shook his head, "I'm afraid that doesn't prove—"

Ann cut him off with a chop of her hand. "Use your head, Chief Urko. If I have any brains, would I ruin my husband's career," she put a hand on Yalu's shoulder, as he began stroking his beard with pride, "and risk disgrace by helping mere humans?" Urko was opening his mouth to interrupt, but Ann didn't give him the opportunity. "Of course not!" She turned away from him in disgust.

Yalu spoke up now. "May I take it that this matter is now closed, Chief Urko?"

Urko rolled his eyes. "Well—"

"If you disbelieve my wife," Yalu snapped, "I insist you arrest both of us immediately." It was a risky bluff, but Yalu had to get rid of Urko once and for all. "Arrest or total innocence. One or the other."

"I am not going to arrest you, *Councilor* Yalu," Urko shook his finger at the two chimpanzees, "or your wife." He was *not* going to be tricked into moving against a council member without iron-clad proof. It would be the end of his career. "But—"

"No buts!" Now Yalu's voice had taken on that cold tone that meant he was also deadly serious. "Produce proof or shut up."

Urko shook his fists impotently, growling low in his throat. He knew he was trapped. "All right." He picked his helmet up from the table and shoved it under his arm. As he was heading for the door, he heard Ann's voice behind change tone completely him.

“Now that it’s all settled, won’t you have something to drink Chief Urko?” He turned back to see Ann and Yalu both smiling triumphantly.

Urko yanked open the door and slammed it solidly behind him.

Once he was gone, Ann and Yalu exchanged a look of pure relief, grasping each other’s hands with joy. Yalu got up from the table and went to the door, securing the bolt to make sure Urko could not return unannounced.

As he turned back toward his wife, a door on the other side of the room opened, and Galen poked his head out, looking around before coming all the way into the room. “Oh! You were magnificent!” He bounded over to his mother, kissing her and holding her hand in an embrace. As she patted at him, Galen turned to Yalu. “Both of you. Father.”

Yalu cleared his throat to hide his embarrassment. “I couldn’t very well let them find you here.” He suddenly found something very interesting on the floor to study.

Galen wasn’t going to let his father escape praise that easily. “Urko didn’t even ask to search the house. He assumes we’re long gone.” He couldn’t keep the ear to ear grin from his face.

The father gave his son a doubtful look. “Perhaps.” But Yalu’s gruffness was not convincing. “In any event, I was defending your mother.”

Ann went to her husband’s side, and knuckled him affectionately. “And very well, too!”

Galen came up behind his Yalu, as well. “Father, you helped us.” His tone carried a note of mirth in it. “Now admit it. And allow me to be grateful.”

“You’re my son.” Yalu searched his son’s face, and seemed pleased with what he saw there. Then he turned away again, and paced to the other side of the room. “I don’t pretend to understand the friendship between you and those humans, but I do understand friendship. And I understand principles.” When he turned back to face his son again, Galen saw pride in Yalu’s moistened eyes, and felt his heart swell with love for his father that had been damped down the last few years. “Sometimes I am a little slow. Without your mother, I might never have realized the son that we have.”

Ann interrupted her husband. “I had more contact with Galen and his friend than you had.”

Yalu nodded his thanks to his wife. "It's heartwarming to know that our son is not only loving and intelligent, but also principled." High praise coming from an ape like his father, Galen knew. "I'm proud of you." All the distance of the last year, all the harsh words and hard feelings, melted away in the warmth of this father's words. Galen approached his father, gave him a loving pat on the chest. Suddenly, Yalu engulfed Galen in a tight embrace, and Galen wrapped his arms about his father in return, patting him on the back even as tears leaked onto his father's shoulder.

Chapter 10

While Galen reconciled with his father in the living room, Alan Virdon examined his junior officer to determine the extent of his physical injuries. Pete was fading in and out of awareness, but Alan kept up a running patter to reassure him. “Don’t worry, Pete, a few days in the luxury spa *Chez Yalu* here, and you’ll feel like a million bucks.” He noted the various bruises and lacerations, on both face and torso. Especially the oversized one shaped like a hand that stood out on lividly against the pale skin of his neck. Burke still had filthy strips of cloth from his own shirt tying together the last two fingers on his left hand. Virdon removed them gingerly, feeling along the length of the bones to make sure the finger was healing straight and strong. Yeah, Burke always was a pretty good field medic, even on himself. He carefully rewrapped the same two fingers with clean bandages, and tended to the abraded skin around both wrists as well, evidence of long hours spent in harsh restraints.

Alan sucked air in through his teeth as he lifted the other man’s shirt. Pete’s torso was just a mottled mess of overlapping bruises, in such various states of healing that just about every color of the rainbow as present. But luckily none of his ribs seemed to be broken. His face actually wasn’t too bad off—the telltale dark ring around one eye of a healing shiner, and his mouth and lips were so cracked and chapped, it was hard to tell, but it looked like it was still slightly swollen on one side. Alan flashed back onto his nightmare of a few days ago, and the image of Pete’s unnaturally bent leg, and even though he had just seen Pete walk a couple of miles, he ran hands over both legs to make sure there was no damage there. More red circles of abused flesh around both ankles, but not as bad as the wrists, and probably would heal faster left unbandaged. “Oh, Pete, what in the world did they do to you?” he wondered out loud. Running his fingers through his blond hair, Alan let out an explosive sigh, trying to damp down his rage at Urko and Zaius.

Urko was gone, and not likely to return. Yalu had enough sway in the High Council that they should be safe here for a few days until Pete was well enough to travel. It looked like his physical injuries should heal pretty quickly, nothing life-threatening there, although he had lost weight that his already lean frame could not really afford to lose. ‘A

few days of Ann's cooking should fix that', he thought with a smirk. 'Maybe Galen can take some cooking lessons from her while we are here. I've had bag-nasty chow that was better than some of the stuff he concocts.' His own cooking was mildly better; he spent enough time away from Sally that he'd had to learn to put together a few meals on his own. But Pete, the consummate bachelor, was the best cook among the three. He claimed he learned to cook because it was a sure-fire way to impress the ladies.

"The way to a man's heart may be through his stomach, Alan-me-boy," Pete had pontificated one day during their early training together, "but cook a woman a fine meal with your own two hands, and she will fall over herself trying to find the bedroom."

No, it wasn't Burke's physical injuries that worried him, but his mental state. It was obvious as soon as they saw Pete outside the Crystal Cave that the apes had discovered a way to mess with his mind. The way Pete fought Alan when they arrived, and again when Ann came in to help, just screamed to Alan's instincts that Pete was in serious trouble. The younger man seemed to be sleeping now, although fitfully, with small twitches and moans.

Alan pulled a chair over next to the bed, and practically collapsed into it. He was bone weary, the constant anxiety of the last few days taking even more of a toll than the physical exertion of traveling here, the midnight raids on the prison and Zaius's office, not that he was getting much sleep anyway. He leaned his head back in the chair, but unable to find any escape in sleep. Too many troublesome thoughts still chased each other through his mind, not the least of which was, would his best friend recognize him when he woke?

Alan must have dozed a little bit, because when he was startled by Galen's soft footfalls, the room was filled with shadows. The blond man scrubbed a hand across his eyes and straightened himself in the chair. "How are your parents holding up, Galen?" Their survival was now dependent on Yalu and Ann's goodwill.

Galen lowered himself into the pile of blankets still on the floor where he had slept the night before, issuing a deep sigh. "They are apes of surprising resilience." He tilted his head to one side, a look he often got when considering a philosophical issue. "I've heard it said that the older one gets, the more set in their ways they become. I learned today that perhaps my father is not as old as I thought he was." A smirk crossed his

simian lips, then faded as he looked at their prone friend. “But Alan, how is Pete? How bad are his injuries?”

“Physically, nothing that won’t heal with a few days rest and some good meals. I’m trying not to think about what that surgeon would have done to him had we been fifteen minutes later.” Alan shook his head as if to banish the image, and Galen gave a small shudder. “Mentally... well, I’m worried. He seems so... dazed, unfocused. I swear, when we first got here, he didn’t remember who I was, Galen. He was talking when we left the hospital, and then during the walk here, he just seemed to fold in on himself. Like he’s retreating into his own mind.”

“Well, once he’s feeling better, physically, I mean, he’ll be able to tell us what’s bothering him, right?”

Sometimes Galen still had an oversimplified view of the human psyche. “I don’t know, Galen. In our time, they had people who were specially trained to listen to other people talk about their problems. They were called psychiatrists.”

“How odd. Why didn’t they just talk to their friends about their problems?”

Alan chuckled wryly. “Because it isn’t always that simple, Galen. Sometimes the root of the problem can be deeply buried in a person’s mind. Sometimes reaching even back to childhood, or infancy, and the person doesn’t even consciously remember why they feel the way they do. They gave us some training in psychology when we went through officer training, but I don’t know if whatever is going on with Pete is going to be within my abilities to help.”

Galen laid a sympathetic hand on Alan’s arm. “Of course you’ll be able to help, you’re his best friend.”

Pete was back on that damned spinning table. Wanda was relentless, not letting him rest, not letting him even think, just asking her questions over and over again. *Who helped you? I want names!* Had he given her names? In the end, the torment had stopped. Had he told her what she wanted to know, is that why she had no more use for him? Damn it, why couldn’t he *remember!*

Everything was light and shadow. Bright lights flashing across his eyes, shadows trailing behind everything else, making it hard to see clearly. And now, everything was growing darker and darker. The lights faded to blurry-edged blobs of brightness, undulating and turning back on themselves, like some primordial creatures moving across his vision. Then, slowly, the after-images also faded, leaving only deep and thick gloom. It took a moment before Pete realized his eyes were open, and he was seeing his surroundings. He blinked rapidly, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, details of the room came into focus.

The bedroom was small, and he occupied the only narrow bed. Not the spinning table. And this wasn't a cave; he was in a house. Awareness of his own body brought with it a myriad of aches and pains, but they also were faded from the sharp agonies in his memory. He raised a hand, a little surprised that he could move freely, and waved it in front of his face to verify that he was actually seeing in the here and now. A curtain fluttered in front of the one window, letting in a warm breeze and filtering the moonlight that was the only real illumination. Everything was painted in shades of gray in the low light.

Raising himself on one elbow, he slowly looked around the room, and his eyes came to rest on two figures slumped on the floor, one human, one chimpanzee. A shout of happiness at seeing his friends again froze on his lips as he realized that the blond head was bent at an unnatural angle, and blood glistened in the fur of the male chimp. At that moment, he knew deep in his soul that his friends were dead, and that he had somehow been responsible. Urko had said they would try to come for him, and when they did, he would be waiting for them. Sudden fury pushed aside the anguish that threatened to engulf him. Wanda! Wanda was ultimately responsible for this. She was the one who had made him betray not only his friends, but all the other hapless souls who had helped them over the last months. Well, she wasn't going to get away with it.

Pete knew he would only have one chance to find Wanda. He pushed himself up off the bed, holding on to the wall for a moment while sudden vertigo made his head swim. Once that passed, he silently tested the latch on the door, hoping against hope that the guards had somehow left it unlocked. The door opened easily, creaking only slightly on its hinges; Pete grimaced at the noise. 'Gotta be quiet, gotta move fast,' he told himself.

After checking to make sure no gorillas waited outside the door, he carefully eased through the narrow gap, into what appeared to be common living quarters. Where the hell was he?

He ghosted past the table, glancing quizzically at the vase of cut flowers in the middle of it, and the hearth with its banked embers. He stopped briefly to look at the cooking utensils to see if there was anything there he could use as a weapon. Metal cauldrons and wooden spoons weren't going to be any good against guns.

Continuing deeper into what looked like a food preparation area, he struck pay dirt. Lying next to a sink was a large knife. He snatched it up, tested an edge with a fingernail. Nice and sharp. Satisfied, he turned to go in search of Wanda, only to come face to face with the female chimp. She let out one small startled cry before he grabbed her arm with his free hand, and spun her around to trap her against his own body, pressing the knife to her throat.

"Don't make another sound, Wanda, or I'll slit your throat," he growled in her ear. The female whimpered slightly, but didn't try to summon help. He could feel the soft fabric of her nightgown beneath his other arm, where it crossed over her chest and held her in place. Her own hands reflexively came up to grip his arm, but she didn't try to struggle.

"Why did you have to kill them, bitch?" The female's trembling only made him angrier, fueling his desire to be as cruel to her as she had been to him. The edge of the knife dimpled the soft skin of her neck. It wouldn't take too much more pressure to start the blood flowing. "It wasn't enough for you to torture me, huh? You had to kill my best friends." His voice gave a little hitch, which he covered by shaking his captive. "When's it going to be fucking enough already?"

"Pete! What are you doing!"

Burke's head snapped up to see Alan standing in front of him, hands held out in a placating gesture. Behind him, Galen, was trying to squeeze into the narrow space, agitated.

"Alan?" his voice squeaked. "I thought you were dead..." Suddenly, everything was getting very confusing again. Images of Alan and Galen with blood running down their faces, the rictus of an agonizing death frozen on their features, overlapped the scene in

front of him with Alan and Galen alive and well, albeit wide-eyed and frightened, like looking at double-exposed photograph.

“No, Pete, I’m fine.” Alan tried to keep his voice calm and soothing, despite the pounding of his heart in his chest. The knife that his friend held at Ann’s neck was dangerously close to doing some serious damage. He could see a small bubble of blood beginning to well up from a nick in the vulnerable flesh. Galen was making distressed noises behind him, but he hoped the chimp would have enough sense to let him try to diffuse the situation. Alan moved one arm behind him to keep Galen from rushing forward.

Pete shook his head once as his eyes glazed over again. “No. No, she’s trying to trick me again. I’m not going to let her trick me anymore.”

Alan slid a few inches closer. “Who, Pete? Who’s trying to trick you?”

“This bitch-ape, Wanda.”

“This isn’t Wanda, Pete. This is Ann, Galen’s mother. She’s not going to trick you. And you know / wouldn’t trick you. I just want to help you.” Alan swallowed dryly. “Give me the knife, Pete,” he gestured with the hand he still held out in front of him.

“No.” But Burke’s voice wavered uncertainly. “We need to get away, Alan.”

Virдон had one final gambit. He put on what he called his “Colonel face” and let a tone of command slip into his voice. “Major. Give. Me. That. Knife.—Now.”

Luckily, the same military reflexes ingrained deep enough to help Burke resist Wanda’s torture also cut through the fog swaddling his brain, when faced with his commanding officer giving him a direct order. Clarity flooded back into the brown eyes, along with a dawning sense of horror at what he was about to do. The knife slipped from his nerveless fingers and clattered loudly on the stone floor.

“Oh, god. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Ann pushed out of Burke’s grasp and straight into Virдон’s arms. As Pete began to slump to the floor, still murmuring apologies, Virдон handed her off to Galen and rushed to keep his friend from falling flat on his face. Half sprawled on the floor supporting a boneless Pete, Alan looked back at Ann. “Are you all right?”

Galen snorted, his lips thin with fury. “No thanks to *him*.” He jerked his head in Pete’s direction. “He could have killed her.”

"Galen—" Alan began, about to make excuses for the younger man, who was now curled up in a fugue state, rocking back and forth. But Ann interrupted him.

"Galen! Can't you see that Burke had no idea what he was doing?" She put a hand to her neck. "He mistook me for this Wanda, who tortured him. Tortured, poor thing! And he thought she had killed you and Virdon. Can you blame him for wanting to kill her?"

"But, Mother—" Galen sputtered, then just shook his head and threw his hands in the air in exasperation. Just when he thought he had his parents figured out, they went and did something he didn't expect. Alan's respect for Ann ratcheted up another notch or two; he had expected to have to do some very fast talking, indeed, to keep them from being thrown out in the street.

"Virdon, can you get him back into the bedroom, or do you need Galen to help?" Ann was back in control of the situation, and Alan was surprised to find himself happy to allow her to take command.

"No, Ma'am. I think I can manage."

"Good. I need to have a little talk with my son."

Alan was able to get Pete onto his feet, barely. The younger astronaut clutched at his friend, but walked where he was led. Once back in the bedroom, he collapsed on the bed in an exhausted heap. After pulling some covers over him, Alan settled into the chair again. He had best stay awake for a while, and make sure Pete didn't wander in the night again.

'Tortured' Ann had said. And who in the world was Wanda? Obviously, if Pete had mistaken Ann for her, she must have been a female chimpanzee. But what connection did she have to Urko and Zaius?

After a few more minutes, Galen came tiptoeing into the room, looking very abashed. But definitely calmer. He started to make his way to the pile of blankets on the floor, but Alan grabbed his arm and gave it an understanding squeeze.

"Is Ann really okay, Galen?" the blond man whispered, probably unnecessarily, since Pete seemed to be sleeping soundly.

“Oh yes,” Galen replied, sounding very contrite. “And in rare form. She... how do you and Pete put it? Ripped me a new one? For not being more understanding of Pete’s condition.” Alan put a hand over his mouth to cover his smirk, and prevent the bray of laughter that was trying to escape.

“Really?” Alan couldn’t keep some of the laughter out of his voice.

Galen flashed him a frosty look. “Yes. I’m sorry I reacted the way I did, Alan. I wasn’t really angry at Pete, just worried for Mother.” He settled down onto the floor with a sigh. “My real anger is at the apes who did this to Pete. Urko. Zaius. And this Wanda female.”

Alan nodded his understanding. “I’m glad the commotion didn’t wake your father. Your mother may be sympathetic, but Yalu—“

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about him,” Galen interrupted. “He was called away for an emergency Council meeting, probably about us, I would imagine. That’s why she got up in the first place; she heard Pete and thought Father was returning home. And Mother swore *me* to secrecy, not to breath a word of what happened to Father.”

“Yeah, Yalu would have a cow if he knew.”

Galen’s jaw dropped, and he made a noise of disgust. “How could he—,” the chimp began, but then took a deep breath and shook his head ruefully instead. “Oh, never mind. I don’t want to know. I’m going to sleep. Wake me in a couple hours and I’ll take over watching Pete.”

“Sure.” Alan smiled at his friend. “And thanks, Galen.”

Galen dismissively waved his hand at the human, then rolled over and was soon snoring softly.

Next thing Alan knew, a hairy hand was on his shoulder, shaking him awake. “Virдон,” Ann called. “Wake up, it’s morning.”

The chair creaked beneath him as Alan stretched and scrubbed the sleep from his eyes. Ugh, was he sore. He had forgotten how uncomfortable sleeping in a chair could be. He turned to look at Ann, who was wearing a high collared tunic today, presumable to cover the small cut she received at Burke’s hands, and hide it from her husband.

“Thanks, Ann. How are you doing this morning?”

Ann favored him with a smile. "I'm fine. I must admit that I had trouble getting back to sleep last night after our little... adventure." She moved past him to where her son was still asleep on the floor. She knelt down and gently caressed his face. "Galen, wake up, son."

Galen must have been having some interesting dreams. "I don't want to go to school this morning," he muttered, burrowing more deeply into the nest of blankets.

Ann and Virdon exchanged a look and both burst out laughing. Galen flailed about, suddenly awake. "What? What did I miss?"

"It's morning, dear," Ann told him. "Come have some breakfast. You, too, Virdon."

Galen was still looking about groggily. He squinted at the bright sunshine coming in the window.

"Yes, ma'am," came the reply in chorus.

Ann waited until both of them had left the room. Then she turned back to the still form on the bed. "You should come, too, Burke, you need to eat."

Pete slowly rolled onto his back and looked up at her. This morning, his brown eyes were lucid, but filled with remorse.

"How did you know I was awake?" he asked sheepishly, pushing himself to a sitting position.

"I raised one very sly young ape. You think Galen never pretended to be asleep to get out of going to school? Now come on. You were fit enough last night to go wandering around, I think you can come sit at a table and eat like a civilized being."

She started toward the door, but Pete reached out and put a hand gently on her arm. She stopped and looked at him again. "I'm—" he began, but his voice cracked. "I'm sorry about last night...Ann, is it?" She nodded, and covered his hand with her own.

"I know. For Galen and Virdon to care so much for you, you must be a good man. I'm looking forward to meeting that man, when you are well again."

She gave his hand one last pat and was out the door, leaving him to collect himself.

When Pete shuffled out to the living area a few minutes later, he was suddenly ravenous, tantalized by the smell of the food. Alan started to get up to help him, but he waved him away and took a seat. Ann put a bowl of broth and a chunk of freshly baked bread on the table in front of him, then turned to pour him a glass of juice.

“You should start slow. I have a feeling it’s been a while since you had a good meal,” Ann said gently.

“Yes, ma’am, it sure has,” he replied around a mouthful of bread.

“Galen, your father sent over a messenger, he is going to be busy in Council for the entire day.” She clucked her tongue as she sat down to her own breakfast, and gave Galen a knowing look. “But perhaps that is for the best for now. After breakfast, I think I’ll retire to the garden for a while. It’s such a nice day out, and my roses are in desperate need of pruning. Galen, your turn to do the dishes, dear. Virdon did them last time.”

With Ann’s masterful withdraw outside, the three friends were able to talk freely when the meal was done.

“Pete,” Alan began cautiously, leaning forward to rest his clasped hand on the table, “who is Wanda? What happened in that cave?” Galen came back from clearing the dishes, and took a seat on the other side of Virdon.

Pete leaned back in the chair and hugged his arms around his torso, a subconsciously protective move. “Some of it’s not real clear, Alan, at least after the first day or so. Wanda is a female chimp—that you probably already guessed. I think she’s a scientist of some sort, she kept talking about her experiment, like I was a damned lab rat. She had this old book she carried with her everywhere, and kept flipping through it, like she was reading stereo instructions. I—I think it was a human book about torture techniques, about how to brainwash someone. I overheard her using that word with Urko. Oh yeah, he was there, too, big, bad, and ugly.” Pete answered Alan’s unvoiced question.

“She was using some pretty sophisticated techniques, Alan—sensory overload, sleep deprivation, flashing lights, continuous loud noises. There was this spinning table, that was the worst.” Burke swallowed noisily, and took another drink of fruit juice. His throat was raw; he wasn’t entirely sure, but at some point, he thought there was screaming... his screaming.

“And the whole time, she kept asking me questions. Who had helped us; she wanted the names of humans who had helped us.”

Names! Places! Times!

I want their NAMES!

Pete's face took on a slack look for a moment that frightened Alan. He reached over and grasped Pete's shoulder, startling him out of some reverie. Galen started to open his mouth, but a harsh look from Alan made him snap it shut, his question and Alan's unasked. Had Pete given her any names?

Burke reached up and pushed his uninjured hand through his tangled dark curls. 'I need a haircut,' he thought with vague sense that he was echoing someone else, but unable to put his finger on it. He looked back at his commanding officer again, and even he was aware of what Viridon wanted to know.

"I don't know, Alan. I don't think I told her anything. But things went seriously pear-shaped there for a while. There are big chunks of time that I just don't remember at all." With that last admission, he seemed to deflate. He was terrified, frankly, that he had failed in the primary mission every soldier was charge with if captured by an enemy—resist.

Yalu was able to find out more about Wanda and her failed experiment. Once Zaius tried to blame Urko for allowing the fugitives to escape the hospital with Burke, Urko wasted no time pointing fingers back at Zaius and at Wanda. The gorilla general told the Council all about the secrets that the old orangutan had kept from them; Wanda's experiment never had the backing of the High Council. Zaius was reprimanded by a unanimous vote of the Council, but allowed to remain in charge of it. However, his future activities would be more closely monitored by a Council representative, and more oversight and checks on his power were put into place. Wanda's career in science, at least in Central City, was most definitely over.

And more importantly to Pete's peace of mind, Yalu learned that Wanda's "experiment" was a total and complete failure, at least in the objectives that mattered to Urko. No humans were revealed as accomplices to the three fugitives; no raiding parties were sent out to exterminate humans who had been "contaminated" by their renegade ideas. Burke never told Wanda anything useful; the people who had helped them would be safe.

Over the next couple of days, Pete continued to heal and get his strength back. Although he didn't have any more hallucinatory episodes, at least, none that turned violent, he sometimes woke in the night with a scream, flailing as if trying to ward off blows, soaked in a cold sweat.

Ann talked Alan into letting her help with Pete's convalescence; she convinced him that Burke needed to have a positive experience with a female chimpanzee if his memories of Wanda were going to be purged from his psyche. She convinced Burke that she needed his help in her garden, which was in terrible disrepair from the scorching heat of the summer. Pete tried to pull his "concrete born and bred, brown thumb will wilt anything it touches" routine. Ann, of course, was having none of it. When the fugitives all protested that any one of Urko's soldiers walking by would recognize Burke, Ann pulled her straw sunhat off its hook and shoved it onto the dark-haired head. The brim flopped down in front, completely obscuring his face. In the gales of laughter that followed, no one failed to notice that Ann had, again, gotten her way.

Working in the garden put some color back into Burke's pale skin, and helped build back up muscles that had been abused and neglected during his captivity. But more importantly, while they pulled weeds, aerated soil, and pruned plants, Ann and Burke talked. Despite his initial hallucination-fueled reaction to Ann, Burke found talking to her oddly comforting. To her, he was a blank slate. She listened without judging, but drew him out of his shell with gentle but insistent prodding. And when he tried to dissemble, divert, distract, she called him on it.

One day, they were sitting in the shade, sipping cool mango juice, when Ann turned to him with a particularly penetrating look. "Burke, what do you dream about, when you have nightmares?"

Taken aback, Pete paused with his glass halfway to his mouth. He set it down on the table, and cleared his throat. "Well, you certainly don't pussy-foot around, do you? How do you know about that?"

"I hear you, sometimes, cry out in the night. I merely deduced the cause." Ann tilted her head to the side. 'Now I know where Galen gets that expression,' Pete thought. She pitched her voice into that determined tone that Pete was coming to know all too well. "What do you dream about? And don't you dare lie to me, because I'll know."

Yeah, I bet you would.

Pete cleared his throat again, and pushed his sweat-soaked bangs out off his forehead with one hand. “I, uh, I dream about the deaths of the humans who’ve helped us. I dream that I betrayed them to Wanda, and that they were killed for it.”

Ann’s brow furrowed. “But Yalu told you that didn’t happen.”

“I know, but I was so afraid of it for so long, I think it’s just taking a while to sink in.”

“All right,” Ann confirmed, although her voice was tinged with skepticism. “What else?” she pressed.

“You just don’t give up, do you?” Burke’s tone was turning harsh, but Ann was not dissuaded in the least.

“No, I don’t. And neither do you. But you do push people away. Let me in, Burke. Nothing you can say will make me think less of you. Nothing that happened to you is your fault. Please tell me what about your dreams makes you so afraid?” Hazel eyes locked with brown, and he felt like a drowning man being thrown a life preserver.

“I—” Pete’s voiced broke, and he took a deep breath to steady himself. “My, uh, my father left—left my mother before I was even born. She raised me all by herself. You remind me of her a lot, actually. She was strong, didn’t take crap from anyone.” A ghost of a smirk flashed across his face and was gone.

“But back then, it was hard being a woman, alone, with a kid. Even in Jersey. She wanted me to have role models, guys who she thought could teach me how to be a good man. She had a few boyfriends on and off when I was growing up. When I was a teenager, there was this guy she had been with for a while, it was pretty serious. And he was a cop... a, uh, policeman, who in our time were supposed to be the good guys, protecting the weak and all that. Well, this one turned out to be a bully.” Pete hugged his arms to his chest, and took a sudden interest in examining his feet.

“He... abused me for a long time, but I didn’t tell my mom, because she really seemed happy, y’know? But then I did something stupid, and he flipped out. Anyway, he ended up hurting my mom, really badly.” His breath hitched a little, and his voice dropped to a husky whisper. “And—and I couldn’t stop him. He hurt her, hurts us both, and I couldn’t stop it.”

Burke raised his face to look into Ann's eyes again, which glistened with unshed tears. His own eyes stung, but he refused to give even one more victory over to that painful time. "Sometimes, I dream about that. And sometimes, in the dreams, I'm the one hurting her. I was so afraid that when I was a man, I'd turn into a bully, like... like... Frank." Then his voice gave out, and he couldn't say any more.

Ann knelt in front of this human she had grown so fond of, and took his hands in hers. "Burke, you are not a bully, you could never be a bully. The good man that I have come to know stands between the bully and the victim, as you did with your mother, as you do for your friends. As you did for all the humans who helped you, and you protected from Wanda with your own pain and blood. What happened all those years ago wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, I know, I was just a kid; kids do stupid things."

"No. I mean it was *never* your fault. None of it. Not your father leaving, not your mother's hardship, not this man hurting you or hurting her. It wasn't your fault that you couldn't stop it. It wasn't your fault that you and Alan crashed here. It wasn't your fault that Galen decided that living morally was more important than living comfortably. It wasn't your fault that Wanda tortured you and tried to turn you against your friends. And it wasn't your fault that in your confusion, you threatened me."

"None of it, Pete," she shook his hands, forcefully, as if to drive home her point, "do you understand me?"

"But—" he began.

"No. It's time to let go of all that guilt, my dear boy. You've carried it long enough. Time to lay it down," she crooned, reaching up to stroke the side of his face, much like a mother would do to comfort an injured child.

Inside Galen's old bedroom, listening at the window that overlooked the garden, Alan Viridon wiped the back of one hand over his stinging eyes.