The River

by Athaia

Summary

When Virdon loses his memory after almost drowning in a swollen river, he is taken in by a troubled ape teenager. Refusing to flee with the strangers who claim to be his friends, he settles into his new life as the young ape’s pet. But when he learns that Burke is in the crosshairs of a dangerous local militia, Virdon has to make a far-reaching decision.

Notes

So, this story is a bit special, because it was inspired by another fanfic, which, you could say, started it all - the whole insane, four-series-spanning madness that is slowly appearing here. I stumbled upon Pat Ames' "Call Back Yesterday" about two years ago, and was enchanted. I can't even say what exactly made this story different from all the other (really excellent) stories I had read until then; but whatever that something was, it threw me into a muse-inspired frenzy that saw me outlining almost all stories for the series (which, back then, had "only" three seasons. Only, ha!). I think I spent two months just outlining.

So, you could say that Pat's story inspired this whole fan reboot of mine. Check it out - it's a lovely story! 'The River' is my tribute to it.

I borrowed the name of Aboro and the idea of an anti-human militia from the episodes "The Tyrant" and "The Deception," but the story doesn't follow those episodes. I'm just a magpie LOL.

Not to make this even longer, but a shoutout is absolutely necessary to my incredible beta Nay, who catches almost all superfluous commas, typos, and grammar slip-ups (the remaining ones are all my fault)!
See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by Call Back Yesterday by Pat Ames
They were stuck in the mud again.

“Why do I even bother going back inside,” Burke growled as he jumped out the back of the wagon, “when the damn thing snags every five minutes!”

Virdon followed him slowly, not bothering to reply. The rain had never stopped for more than an hour since they had left Etissa, and the roads were soaked now, sucking at the wheels of their wagon and stopping it in its tracks. Whenever the wheels sank up to their axis in the mud, he and Burke had to climb down from the wagon and push it out of the pothole again, while Galen urged on their tired horses; and as Burke had observed, this happened with increasing frequency.

They should probably have heeded the advice of Etissa’s chief of police to hibernate south of the passes - if not in Etissa itself, then in one of the neighbouring towns. The relentless winter rains created huge landslides in these mountains; the road they were traveling on could be gone after the next bend, flushed into the canyon yawning to their right. And then they’d be stuck in the middle of nowhere, with no way to turn their wagon around and retreat back into the last village they had passed - the road was too narrow for that maneuver.

But nobody had wanted to stay south of the passes; nobody had wanted to risk Urko catching up with them yet again. They had escaped the relentless gorilla too often to challenge fate that way. And he - he had wanted to put as much distance between himself and Etissa as possible. Virdon knew that he should’ve been the voice of reason, of caution... but he had kept silent, and his friends had pushed on, deeper into the mountains.

They had crossed the passes about a week ago - they were on the northern side of the mountain range now, finally out of Urko’s reach. And they should’ve celebrated that achievement, that almost unimaginable feat of defying the Chief General of the southern simian dominion, but everyone was tense and silent - whether out of exhaustion, or because the road was still so treacherous, Virdon couldn’t say. If this was their redemption, it had come too late.

Virdon pushed his shoulder against the rear wheel and tried to find traction for his feet. He had sunk into the squishy brown loam up to his ankles; in fact, he and Burke were covered from head to toe with it.

“This is like wading through shit,” Burke wheezed, and threw himself against his wheel. “I’m telling myself that it’s not really shit, but it... don’t... help...”

Virdon’s feet were slipping in the cold, wet depths of the pothole. Beside him, Burke was cursing, but the strain made his words unintelligible.

It was like wading through shit, being covered with shit, being soiled on the outside, just as he was on the inside-

Not now. Virdon consciously focused on the wheel pressing into his shoulder.

It was a thought that never really left him, though. It slowed his limbs and silenced his tongue; averted his eyes from Zana’s searching gaze, and had him studying the desolate landscape around them instead.

Virdon knew that he should talk to her about Etissa - should heed his own advice to Burke, back in
Sapan. But every time he so much as thought of it, shame flushed his throat and clenched his fists, made him want to punch the wooden frame of their wagon until his knuckles bled. And what could she really do?

Nothing helped. Bullet to the head, that’d help. He hadn’t understood it back then.

He couldn’t talk to anyone anymore. If there was still a prayer left in him, it was *don’t look at me.*

The wagon slowly moved forward. Virdon strained against it, welcoming the sharp pain in his hip, the dull ache where his shoulder pushed at the wheel. Burke had fallen silent, except for a grunt when the mud finally released its grip, and the wagon climbed out of the puddle.

Burke reached for the tailboard, then the bow, to haul himself up and climb back inside. Virdon didn’t follow him; it wouldn’t be long before they’d have to push the wagon out of the next mudhole. They couldn’t avoid them on this narrow road, and-

The right wheel sagged into the mud until the lower edge of the tailboard touched the road. Before Virdon’s unbelieving eyes, the left wheel followed, sinking into the mud up to its axis, as the wagon slowly tilted towards the chasm to their right. Someone in the wagon yelped, a high-pitched sound of shock and fright.

And then the wagon lurched, leaning even more into the abyss.

_The road... the road is sliding off._ Virdon realized. He felt strangely detached. _We’re on top of a landslide._

At the front end of the wagon, Galen was yelling something; the wagon jerked as Tala and Apache jumped into their harness, trying to wrest the cart from the edge that was tipping it over. Virdon watched, unmoved by the sudden certainty that they wouldn’t make it this time; the cart was doomed. As were the horses. They’d plunge into the river below, crushed by the wood and metal of the wagon, if not by the fall itself.

_“Haul your ass over here, Al, goddammit!”_

Burke’s face suddenly appeared in the back, red and sweaty. He dragged Virdon up and into the still tilting cart. “What the hell were you doing back there, sleepwalking? The whole road is coming down, wanna get stuck on the wrong side of the gap? Move!” He shoved him towards the front, where Galen was still urging on the horses, then crawled through the slipping, sliding crates and baskets and jumped off. Zana was nowhere to be seen - she was probably the first Burke had sent off the wagon.

Galen threw a hasty glance over his shoulder when Virdon reached him. “Can you take over for just a moment?” he asked desperately. “We need the money, at least, or we can just jump into that abyss ourselves.” He pushed the lines into Virdon’s hands without waiting for an answer, and leaped into the back of the wagon.

The wagon sagged and lurched to the right, and Tala whinnied, a panicked, pitiful sound that make Virdon’s stomach turn. He didn’t have to smack the lines on the horses’ backs; feeling the weight behind them dragging them inexorably backwards, they were thrashing in their harnesses, fighting for their lives.

Virdon drew his knife and turned in his seat. “Galen! Leave it be, come here! We’re slipping!”

Galen looked up, his face a shadow in the murky light under the cart’s canopy. “I’m, I’m coming...”
He scrambled - more nimbly than any human - up to the passenger’s seat and threw his doctor’s bag and the leather pouch with their money to Zana, who was gripping a struggling Burke’s arm, keeping him from climbing back into the wagon and strangling Galen.

Virdon gave him an encouraging shove. “Jump, I’m going to cut the horses loose-“

But Galen disappeared into the back again. “I forgot the Book!”

“Galen get down here or so help me-“ Burke’s face was purple; he looked ready to kill. Virdon absently wondered how Zana dared to keep her iron grip around his arm.

Galen thundered up the wagon again, a backpack in each hand, and sailed off the wagon with a huge jump. At the same moment, the wagon jerked backwards, as both rear wheels slipped over the edge... or maybe it was the road that was crumbling away under them. It was impossible to say.

Virdon swayed, then threw himself forward, and landed on the wagon tongue, between the horses. He began to saw at the traces that were shackling the horses to the dead weight behind them. It was a delicate operation: if he cut loose one of the horses before the other, the second horse - unable to hold against the weight on its own - would be dragged to its death in a matter of seconds. He could only thin out the connection, so that it would... hopefully... snap when the wagon’s front wheels lost their last grip on the road.

If he didn’t get it right, he might plunge to his death together with the second horse and the wagon. The thought burned bright and clear in his mind, but it failed to frighten him.

The wagon slid back another few feet, and Tala kicked and stepped over the singletree, trapping her leg. Virdon cursed, beads of sweat rolling over his face. He balanced precariously on the beam now, one hand on Apache’s croup, the other sawing through another leather strap, not cutting it completely.

He had all of them cut down to a fraction of an inch. He should jump off now, too, before the wagon-

The straps snapped, all at once, just as he had hoped, only-

Only too soon, too soon...

Virdon threw himself forward, trying to grab Tala’s harness, but the horse buckled and slipped away, racing towards safety. The wagon fell away under his feet, giving him no resistance to push against, push away from, and he was falling, staring helplessly at the muddy edge rising above him.

The wagon’s tongue whipped into his bad hip, a last, vicious goodbye before it tumbled into the depth beneath him. A hand shot down and grabbed his wrist, grabbed it and held it, a tearing pain almost equalling the screaming, sawing pain in his hip. Virdon tilted his head back with a titanic effort and stared up into a tense face.

Galen.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Peet was struggling in Zana’s grip, but he didn’t make any attempt to turn around and attack her.

And why would he? Peet was trying to rip his throat, Galen realized - for wasting time inside the wagon, time that forced Alan to stay on the coachman’s seat-
“We need this,” he yelled back, shaking the backpacks he held in each hand. “We won’t survive without money, without my equipment—“

“Damn you!” Peet wasn’t listening to him, wasn’t listening to Zana who still hung on to him, trying to calm him down. “Al, what the hell are you doing? Get down here, leave the horses—“

Galen turned around to follow Peet’s gaze; their wagon tilted at a dangerous angle, dragging the flailing horses towards the edge. Alan was between them now, no longer on the driver’s seat, sawing through their harness with his knife.

“The idiot will get himself killed,” Peet yelled, and Galen agreed with him. This was madness! Sure, he had come to like the horses - giving them names had been a factor, he supposed - and he’d mourn their loss, but what Alan was doing went against any sane consideration.

Galen dropped the backpacks at Zana’s feet and sprinted back to drag Alan from his precarious position. He hadn’t made more than two steps towards the horses when they suddenly leaped forward and raced towards him.

The wagon jerked back and vanished over the edge.

Alan was jumping forward, hands stretched towards that muddy, crumbling edge of the road, and Galen found himself on his belly, lunging for those hands. He caught a wrist, and the sudden weight of the human snapped painfully through his body and dragged him through the mud, over the edge-

Something heavy landed on his legs, stopping his slide. Peet.

The humans were both silent now; Galen could feel Peet scrabbling behind him, searching for leverage to anchor them. They were still sliding towards the edge, incrementally, inexorably. Below him, Alan was staring up to him, blue eyes huge in his pale face. Galen forced himself to focus on that face, and not on the emptiness behind the human, or the whitewater below.

So, so far below him.

Alan’s hand was still coated in mud, cold and slippery, and to his horror, Galen felt it slipping in his grip, fraction by fraction. “Alan, hold tight,” he said urgently. “Peet will help me to hoist you up, but you have to hold on!”

He turned his head; he still couldn’t see Peet, only feel him sitting on his legs, but he hoped the human would hear him. “Peet, I need your help, he’s slipping...”

Peet shifted his weight; he didn’t dare to climb off him, for which Galen was grateful - without Peet’s additional weight, both he and Alan would fall over the edge - but stretched out on top of him, until Galen could feel the human’s breath moving the fur behind his left ear. “I’m here. Gimme your other hand, Al!”

Alan had still not said a word - maybe he was in shock? Galen found himself caught in the human’s stare, blue eyes suddenly impossibly bright. Alan was speaking to him, silently, but Galen couldn’t make out his meaning.

“C’mon, Al, gimme your hand!”

Galen realized it a moment too late - too late to tighten his own grip, too late to shout a warning for Peet, a plea for Alan-
Alan’s fingers went slack.

Galen watched, without a breath to cry out, as the human fell away, blue eyes still boring into him.
Chapter 2

Zana watched, her heart frozen in her chest, as Peet stretched out on top of Galen and reached for Alan - at least that was what she thought he might be doing. From her position, she couldn’t really see what her friends were doing, and she... and she wasn’t really sure if she had the nerve to come any closer and watch...

... she was still grabbing the horses’ reins, her palms burning from the force of the leather whipping through her hands before she had managed to stop the panicky beasts. Alan’s daring... insane... maneuver would’ve been in vain if she had allowed them to race over the edge of the dissolving road in their frenzied flight.

Zana hastily wrapped the lines around the horses’ forelegs and forced her own wobbly legs towards Peet and Galen, who were still prone in the mud. They’d need her help to drag Alan back onto the road, before the road itself would vanish-

And then Peet shouted something, and lunged, and he and Galen were suddenly toppling head-first into the-

Zana jumped forward without thinking and grabbed kicking legs, one human, one simian; threw herself back, slipping in the soapy mud, landing hard on her behind, and then everything was a jumble, Peet and Galen scrabbling, shouting, and then Galen struck out, and Peet went down, suddenly silent.

Galen blinked, mouth open, looking afraid. Then his eyes searched hers, huge and dark... probably like her own; Zana felt as if he had knocked the breath out of her, just as he had done with Peet.

“He, he wanted to jump after him...” Galen managed to say. His voice wavered as if he was on the edge of tears.

Jump after him. Jump after him. After...

Alan.

Zana moaned. No, no, Alan, no... that’s what Peet had been screaming before, too, her brain reconstructed the human’s cries.

They had lost Alan.

No that’s not true, that can’t be true, this can’t be happening...

Peet stirred, and Galen grabbed his wrists and dug his knees into the human’s sides. “Listen to me,” he said urgently when Peet opened his eyes, “we’ll find Alan, but not by jumping after him! Do you hear me? That’s pointless, that river at the bottom of the gorge has already carried him downstream, we’ll never overtake him by jumping into the river after him, do you understand? Peet!”

Peet was staring up into his face, and Zana wasn’t sure if he had even understood Galen’s words - maybe he was still too dazed from that strike against his temple. But she was hanging on Galen’s words, desperately clinging to the hope these words had stirred in her. We’ll find Alan. We’ll find him.

“He’ll be washed ashore somewhere,” Galen was saying, “we’ll find a path down to the riverbanks
and follow the river downstream. We will find him, there’s no need to attack Zana and me.”

Attack- Peet had attacked Galen? But why-

“You,” Peet said. His voice was rough, and he sounded choked, but his eyes were dry.

Baleful.

“You let go. I saw it. You let go of his hand.” Peet’s face was reddening again.

Galen froze for a moment. Then he shook his head. “He slipped, Peet, his hand was slippery from the mud. I...”

But Peet kept glaring up at him, and now an angry tear was slipping from the corner of his eye.

“You let him fall to his death. You let go. You let go...”

“I swear to the Mothers, I didn’t let go,” Galen protested, but Zana could hear the resignation in his voice. Peet wasn’t ready to believe in the blind randomness of muddy hands and failing strength. It had to be intentional - the dark intention of an ape.

Oh Peet...

The fight seemed to have drained from him with those words, though; when Galen got up and pulled him to his feet, he didn’t resist or slap him away. The men crawled to the edge of the crumbling road and stared into the deep; when they returned to her, their faces were grim. Zana didn’t dare to ask how far down Alan had fallen. She didn’t want to know - he had to have survived. He had to be alive!

Galen bent down to pick up her backpack and handed it to her, before strapping on his own and reaching for his doctor’s bag and his purse - the two items that had cost them those precious moments... had cost Alan those precious moments that would’ve allowed his escape.

But she couldn’t blame Galen. These things were the cornerstones of their new life; without the money and his medical equipment, their journey would’ve been over just as certain as it was for Alan-

Stop thinking like that! He isn’t dead! He can’t be!

Peet had nothing to pick up but Betsy, the only gun that hadn’t gone over the edge together with the wagon. Everyone still had their handgun, but their ammunition was now down to the bullets that were already in the weapons. While Peet loosened the fetters around the horses’ legs, Zana tried to calculate what else they had saved from obliteration: water bottles and rations of dried fruits, nuts, and leaves; clothes, a blanket, flintstone, steel, and tinder, rope, her lock picks, Galen’s scrolls...

And the Book. And maybe Alan could still be with them, if Galen hadn’t gone back a second time to retrieve it.

If Peet was entertaining the same thought, he didn’t say it aloud; he grabbed Ahpahchee’s reins and dragged the horse down the road without looking back. Galen fumbled with Tala’s reins, looking miserable. Maybe he had realized in the meantime that it had been his obsession with Zaius’ cursed Book that had cost Alan his... time to jump off the wagon.

When they rounded the next bend in the road, Ahpahchee was waiting for them, his reins hastily hitched to a crippled tree on the side of the road, while Peet was nowhere to be seen. After a
moment of stunned immobility, Galen handed Tala’s reins to Zana and walked along the edge, searching for Peet’s tracks. He found them a moment later, and waved for her to come.

“He went down here.” Galen pointed down the slope.

Zana peeked over the edge; she could see the holes where Peet’s feet had sunk into the mud. Here and there, long flat marks showed where he had lost his footing and had slid down a bit of the way.

“It’s too steep for the horses,” Galen mused. “That’s why he left Ahpahchee on the road.”

Zana stared down the wooded path. “Well, he can’t go searching for Alan all on his own,” she decided. “He can’t be left unsupervised, not in his current state.”

“His current state?” Galen murmured.

Zana ignored that comment. “You need to go after him,” she said resolutely. “I’ll take the horses and meet you at the riverbank.”

Galen gaped at her. “There is only wilderness all around us, Zana,” he protested. “How do you think you’ll find us again? And what if there’s robbers-”

“I still have my handgun,” Zana interrupted him. “And if you don’t climb down there, I will. We just lost Alan, Galen, for a book - I don’t want to lose Peet, too. Besides, you promised him to find Alan.” You promised it to both of us.

She gestured down the slope. “And Alan doesn’t have much time. I bet the water in that river is icy.”

Galen flinched at her mention of the Book, but he didn’t move. “Zana... there is something you should know.”

She sighed. She didn’t want to lose any more time with talking. “There is a lot I should know, but neither you nor Alan trusted me enough to tell me.”

He winced again, but met her gaze. “I told Peet the truth when I said that I didn’t let go of Alan. But I didn’t tell him the whole truth.” He paused and turned his head to gaze down into the treetops beneath them. “Alan didn’t slip through my hand because his wrist was muddy. He slipped because he let go.” He looked back at her. “He gave up, Zana. He just stopped fighting.”

It took her a moment before she found her voice again. “How can you say that? Alan would never... he’d never give up! He wants to go home to his family, he’s been searching for a way home ever since I met him!”

Galen averted his gaze. “So you think I let him fall to his death, too?”

Zana drew a deep breath. “Of course I don’t think that! But if Alan let go, it was to save you and Peet from falling into that canyon with him.” She grabbed his arm. “You must find him, Galen! He cannot just... vanish like that!”

Galen nodded and began to climb down the narrow path between the trees without uttering another word.

Zana stood in the middle of the road as if her feet had been bolted to the ground, valiantly resisting the despair that was rising up like a dark wave and threatened to crest over her. The rain was getting stronger again, the drops pounding on her waxed robe; it was feeding the river down in the
valley, and the river would continue to swell, getting faster and deadlier by the atseht.

Alan had... had let go. Zana refused to believe that he had wanted to give up, as Galen had said, but... She had seen a terrible devastation in Alan’s eyes - the eyes of a man who had survived a great conflagration, but had lost everything dear to him in it.

She should have talked to him, made him talk to her... or she should’ve talked to Galen, forced him to finally tell her what had happened to Alan in Etissa. But she had put it off, telling herself that she was respecting the human’s boundaries, something immeasurably precious in a world that didn’t even acknowledge that a human should have boundaries to his simian masters in the first place.

Or maybe she had put it off because she didn’t feel remotely equipped to help him, or Peet.

With an angry sniffle, Zana mounted Tala and unhitched Ahpahchee from his shrub. Peet and Galen would find Alan, and he’d be alive. And she wouldn’t put off taking care of her humans any longer, no matter if she felt up to the task or not. There would be no ‘later’ anymore - it wasn’t as if the string of crises would ever end, anyway. There was no point in waiting for that mystical ‘normal life’ they would have in the North. They already were in the North, and their lives had only gotten worse, not better!

She gently urged Tala onwards, praying for a village to turn up in that valley. But even more fervently, she prayed for Alan to turn up down there.

The weather was uniquely unsuited for a walk, Zatis had told his young warden before grabbing an umbrella and hurrying after him; therefore, the young Chimp had chosen a path that was uniquely unsuited for a walk with an umbrella. Maybe his teacher would tangle up in the underbrush, and he’d have this day for himself.

Besides, he liked walking along the river.

He tried his best to ignore the old Orangutan behind him who was gently freeing his umbrella - yet again - from the low-hanging branches of an alder tree, and swept his gaze over the white foam of the river instead. This time of the year, nobody came out here, which suited him just fine. He wasn’t in the mood for talking today.

“What a bristly tree the alder is,” his mentor murmured behind him. “And yet, it has its hidden talents, and is aiding us in secret. It reminds me a bit of you, young Ennis.”

“I don’t have any hidden talents,” the boy muttered without turning around.

“Since they are hidden, you wouldn’t know about them, would you?” Zatis said gently. “But I have no doubt that there is much talent slumbering in the depths of your soul, waiting to be discovered. These years of your life are ripe with opportunity, with the joy of exploration...”

If that was true, Ennis thought sourly, why wasn’t he allowed to explore the valleys and mountains around his town? Why did he always need a bodyguard, either a bored watchman who’d haul him back to the estate after a meager atseht, or Zatis, who was patient enough, but insisted on turning every hike into a lesson... or a philosophical lecture?

It was as if he was still a toddler, Ennis grumbled in the privacy of his mind. As if his father had never realized that he had grown up and didn’t need a babysitter around anymore. His father claimed it was because the mountains were teeming with wild humans, eager to tear out a lone ape’s throat, ‘and other unsavory folk’, though he hadn’t elaborated, and Ennis still didn’t know who they were supposed to be. Maybe Gorillas.
Maybe his father really hadn’t realized that he was older than the last time he had surfaced from his office. As the District Chief, his father basically lived in that office - he seemed to only come out to scold Ennis for grades that were below expectation, or to quiz him on some long-ago (and long-forgotten) lesson from Zatis. Ennis couldn’t decide which he hated more.

Yes, his father hadn’t realized he wasn’t three anymore. Ennis was pretty convinced of that by now. After all, his father hadn’t even wished him a happy birthday today. He probably hadn’t even noticed that today was his birthday.

He bent down to pick up a stone, and hurled it into the river.

“Hopefully, no fish was harmed by this latest addition to the riverbed,” Zatis joked.

Ennis half expected the old ape to regale him with a story of how the ancestors had caught fish with their bare hands - or by throwing stones - but the Orangutan’s umbrella had tangled up again, and that gave him the opportunity to put some more distance between himself and his chaperone while Zatis was fighting with the shrub.

He lengthened his stride when he saw the beach glowing white through the thicket of alders and willows. It was just a pile of rubble, actually - stones the shape and color of eggs, smoothed by the ferocious power of the river, and accumulated over time in the quieter waters of a gentle curve of the riverbed - but it was wide, and flat, and perfect for throwing stones into the water... and the fish would just have to duck.

He jumped over the dead trunk of an uprooted willow tree-

...and froze, his heart beating wildly even before his eyes had recognized what he was looking at.

A dead human.

It had to be dead - it was lying face-down half in, half out of the water, unmoving save for tiny jerks as the current tugged at its legs. Ennis swallowed and threw a glance over his shoulder. Zatis had still not caught up to him.

He jogged to the prone form and stared down at it.

It was a big male - tall and muscular, its fur the color of a bushcat. It must’ve fallen into the river somewhere upstream, and had been carried along by the torrent until it had washed up here. Too bad that it had drowned - he would’ve loved to own a tan-colored human. Ennis bent down to touch the human’s fur. It was wet, and cold, and...

...and the beast was trembling under his fingers. Shivering... shivering from the cold.

Ennis yanked his hand back as if he had burnt it.

It was alive!

“Ennis! Step back! It could be dangerous!”

Zatis was standing by the toppled willow, his saggy face radiating firmly suppressed alarm. “There are wild humans in these mountains, and this here looks like one!”

“It’s unconscious,” Ennis called back. “At first I’d thought it was dead.” He bent down again and rolled the human on its back. It didn’t wake up, its head lolling to one side. A deep gash ran across its forehead, and the skin was raw and oozing blood on its chin and cheekbones, and... everywhere,
basically. Ennis imagined being thrown into a huge washtub with a bagful of river rocks, and then whirled around with them...

*That must’ve hurt a lot more than a whipping.*

Maybe it had also broken bones. Or a broken skull. But it was still breathing.

A blue-tinted shadow fell over him, and the rain stopped pelting his robe - Zatis had finally left his place by the willow and was staring down at the human from under the sky-colored canopy of his umbrella. “If it’s not a wildling, it’s most probably an escaped slave,” he said. “In either case, I don’t want you to be near it when it comes to.”

“It’s alive, vetes,” Ennis said. “And it’s bleeding all over. We can’t just leave it here.”

“I’ll alert the police as soon as we’re back in town,” Zatis assured him. “They can take it to Doctor Ropal, and he can-“

“That’ll take much too long,” Ennis interrupted him impatiently. “It’s already shaking from the cold, and the rain is getting worse. It’ll be dead before the guards turn up here.”

“Well, it...” Zatis heaved a sigh. “What do you suggest? I can’t leave you alone with it here in the wilderness. What if it wakes up and attacks you?”

Ennis snorted. “It’s half-dead. It won’t attack me.”

“And what if the rest of its pack is roaming these woods?” Zatis slowly shook his head. “No, young Ennis, you will not stay here all by yourself.”

“Then I’ll go back to get our cart and drive out here as far as possible, and you wait here,” Ennis suggested.

This was met with the same vigorous refusal. “Send you back alone? Five miles through the underbrush, all alone-“

*Mothers, Zatis!*” Ennis exploded. “I’m not a baby anymore!”

“Don’t invoke the Mothers in a fit of rage,” Zatis scolded him. “Those are your father’s orders, and I will honor them. Besides, I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you...”

“Fine!” Ennis snapped, feeling his last thread of patience unravel. “Then you’ll *carry* the human. We won’t need a cart, we won’t need to wait for the police, and I won’t get eaten by humans! Everyone’s happy!”

“Why do you care so much about that beast?” Zatis sounded honestly confused.

Ennis stared down at the pale, bloodied face, and shrugged. “It’s my birthday, and...” He stopped to get his voice under control. “Nobody remembered it - Mother hasn’t written...”

“Maybe the mail was delayed in this weather,” Zatis murmured.

Ennis shook his head. “It’s been the same weather for weeks. She just could’ve sent it earlier. And Father hasn’t even come out of his office.” He tore his lips through his teeth.

“This is my birthday present, Zatis.” He looked up at his old teacher, daring him to disagree. “From the Mothers. Nobody thought of giving me something, so they did.”
“The human may not even survive this day,” Zatis pointed out. His voice was gentle, as if he was trying to soften the blow of his words.

Ennis rocked back on his heels and defiantly held his teacher’s gaze. “No, it’ll live. It’ll live because I say so.

“It’ll live for me.”
Chapter 3

The rain was pouring down harder now, or maybe the sensation was just stronger because Burke had stepped out from the denser canopy covering the slope. He wiped the rain out of his eyes, fought for a deep breath - he still hated having water on his face, even though he knew perfectly well he wasn’t drowning, goddammit - and tried to orient himself.

The river had cut its bed into a narrow valley, following the path that the mountain ridges determined; the riverbank was just a small strip of soggy soil, held in place by the trees that clung to it. Burke only recognized willows; the rest of the scenery consisted of unknown plants, whose gnarled roots and leathery leaves snagged his feet and obscured his view as he followed the river downstream. He couldn’t see much of the water from where he was stumbling through the thicket, but the river was a steady pounding just beyond the underbrush, glimpses of white and gray rushing to an unknown destination. Twice he almost lost his shoes in the sucking mud, but stepping on sharp stones or thorns would slow him down more, so he didn’t take them off.

No sign that Virdon had reached the embankment anywhere.

Burke stopped and peered up the steep slope. He could see the gray patch of naked soil where the road had broken off, an open wound in the mountain’s side. There was the spot where they had lost... lost the wagon.

He lowered his gaze to the ground, trying to trace the trajectory of the... he drew a deep breath... Al’s trajectory. He would’ve fallen into the river, not on solid ground - the river was chafing at the slope, leaving no space for a bank.

So - Virdon had plunged into the water. Burke let his gaze wander over the foaming surface, where dark bodies of felled trees and dead deer were whirling around their own axis as they raced by him. A man could still drown in this whitewater... or be clubbed to death by a dead tree, smashed against a rock...

He moved on, crashing through the underbrush, straining his eyes to detect his friend's body somewhere. Galen had been right - he couldn’t hope to overtake or even catch up with Virdon. He could only hope that the river would spit him out somewhere... and soon.

As if Burke’s fleeting acknowledgment had conjured him, Galen was suddenly by his side; the ape didn’t say anything, thankfully, just swept his gaze up and down to both sides of the river as they hurried downstream.

Burke was absently aware that he should be furious at the chimp for killing Virdon, but he was too caught up in the search, too focused on scanning the embankments - he couldn’t even muster enough energy to feel that rage anymore. Instead, he felt something else lodge in the pit of his stomach and spread into his chest like ice water seeping through the mud.

Dread.

Something crashed through the underbrush ahead of them, and Burke yanked at Betsy’s lever without thinking, lifted the gun to his shoulder to-

“Mothers, Peet, it’s me!” Zana’s indignant voice sounded through the willows.

Burke sucked in air and lowered the gun. He could see her now, floating among the branches - she was on horseback. Had found a path that the horses could go, too.
She didn’t ask if they had found Virdon yet; instead, she rode to the waterline and stood up in the
stirrups to peer at the opposite shore. “Shouldn’t we search the other side, too?”

“Ah, no,” Galen said. “The river makes a bend there, see, to the right - so the current will carry
Alan ashore at the outer curve... if there is an embankment. There hasn’t been one to speak of until
now.” He gestured for her to take the lead; maybe he hoped that moving towards that bend would
be easier if they let Tala clear a path through the thicket.

When they came closer, they saw that there was an embankment - a pretty wide and flat one, even,
covered with round, white rocks that would’ve displayed Virdon like on a screen. The water
lapping at the stones was shallow and calm compared to the roaring hell in the middle of the
riverbed, but Virdon wasn’t there.

Galen bent over something at the water’s edge. “I believe something was washed up there,” he said
thoughtfully. “See this indentation? Something big.”

“As big as Alan’s body?” Zana asked, and Burke clenched his teeth at the hope in her voice. He
wouldn’t let himself get sucked into a false hope like that.

Galen shrugged. “It’s hard to say. Those rocks don’t yield like sand would have - it’s not really an
imprint I can read. But then I’m not a hunter... I can’t read tracks the way Alan could... can.”

He straightened to scan the rest of the embankment. “It seems that someone did cross the shore
from this spot, though.” He pointed, his finger tracing a line in the air to the dead trunk of a willow
tree.

Zana turned her head to follow his outline. “Or maybe I made those, when I rode out here,” she
said dejectedly. “I don’t think that Alan would’ve been able to get up and walk away. And it
would’ve been sensible to stay and wait for us to find him, anyway. He has no map, he wouldn’t be
able to find a nearby settlement...”

Galen drew a deep breath and held it for a moment. He shrugged and opened his mouth-

Burke cut in before the ape could say anything. “Yeah, guess that’s your tracks, then. Al’s...” He
choked on the words. “He’s not here. And this here would’ve been his best chance to survive.” He
clenched his fists for a moment, then forced the words out. “He’s dead.”

For a moment, the only sound was the roaring of the river. Burke stared out over the water,
focusing on every carefully drawn breath, trying not to think any thoughts. Trying to white out.

_That’s not how we do things, Al. That’s not what we do._

That’s not what Virdon had done, though. Galen had let go.

_I was a second too late. A goddamn second!_ He didn’t know who deserved his rage more, in that
moment - Galen for letting Virdon fall to his death, or he himself, for being too slow to catch him.

_Just a second..._

“I refuse to believe that without proof,” he heard Galen’s voice. It was completely calm.
Unconcerned. Burke squeezed his eyes shut and kept his fists pressed to his sides.

“And the only proof I accept is Alan’s body,” Galen continued, and now Burke couldn’t ignore
him any longer. He spun around.
“Have you looked at the water, Galen?” he snarled. “It’s a goddamn maelstrom - if he didn’t break his neck when he hit the surface, he was ripped apart by the fucking tree trunks in there, or smashed against a boulder, or carried to the sea, or wherever that fucking river ends! We’ll never find his body!”

“It’s too early to give up the search,” Galen said stubbornly. “And Alan didn’t give up so quickly on you.”

Burke’s field of vision narrowed, a hazy pink like a closing aperture, and then Zana was there, wedging her horse between him and Galen, and Burke took two tumbling steps back until he stood ankle-deep in the icy water. The cold bit into his feet, and he focused on that pain until the tunnel vision had faded.

“Maybe Galen is right,” Zana was saying somewhere far away. “Maybe Alan has already washed up here, and someone found him and took him away. There are settlements in that valley, according to our map - we’re not so far away from Chubla, actually.”

“Who the hell would stumble around in the wilderness in this weather?” Burke ground out.

“Apart from us, you mean?” Galen said. “Hunters, for example. Traders. People needing to travel to town to call a doctor to their village, and taking a shortcut through this valley. It’s not as impossible as you’re making it out to be.”

He wanted to believe that. He wanted to believe it so bad that it hurt. But... “Even if that was true, why would they care about a drowned human?”

Galen hesitated for a moment. “He’s valuable,” he muttered, clearly uncomfortable all of a sudden. “His color... you know that.”

“Oh yeah,” Burke groaned, “do I know that. You’ve harped on it over and over again.”

“Before apes started... appreciating the different types, humans had been interbreeding indiscriminately, because their numbers had dwindled so much, and as a result, the lighter colors had begun to disappear,” Galen said. He studiously stared out over the churning river. “Now they’re rare, and what’s rare is... sought after. Whoever found him wouldn’t have let him lie there. They would’ve taken him with them.”

Burke rubbed his face. “But that’s just as bad! How in hell are we ever going to find him then? Do you really think whoever nabbed Al will just step forth and raise their hand?”

“Maybe not the one who took him,” Galen said with a shrug, turning his head to meet his gaze. “But the ones who saw them. You know how people are - they love to gossip, and they begrudge others the things they would like to own themselves, but can’t have. They will tell us if anyone has suddenly acquired a light-colored human, believe me.”

“Or they’ll call for the town watch when we turn up,” Burke muttered. “Look at us, we’re wet and covered in mud... we look like drowned rats.”

“Not at all.” Galen smiled thinly, and gestured at his doctor’s bag that was strapped to Apache’s back. “We’ll make ourselves presentable in the next inn, and then the eminently respectable Dr. Kova, his wife, and his remaining orderly will start making their rounds of inquiry.” He turned away from the waterline and let Zana pull him up behind her on Tala. “How fortuitous that I was able to save both my equipment and our money, don’t you think?”

_If you hadn’t saved your precious history book, we wouldn’t have to make those ‘rounds of inquiry’_
in the first place, you idiotic, murderous monkey!

Burke just grabbed Apache’s reins and dragged the horse after him as he followed Tala and the apes, feeling murderous himself.

“Was that really necessary?” he heard Zana’s voice. “The situation is not really comparable to when Urko captured Peet...”

“Peet accuses me of murdering Alan, and you wonder if my arguments are inappropriate?” Galen retorted.

Deny it all you want. I know what I saw.

“Believe me, I want to find Alan just as urgently as you and Peet, if not more,” Galen continued. Burke couldn’t see his face from where he was walking, but he could imagine the ape’s nose twitching.

“I can’t wait to find Alan,” Galen was saying, “and have him clear up his friend’s mistaken assumption - and hear his explanation why he abandoned him in a world of apes.”

The first thing coalescing from the void was pain. It was low and steady, a deep hum in his bones, reassuring somehow - outlining the shape of him, confirming that he had one; that he wasn’t just a dream-self floating in the darkness.

The next sensation drifting to the surface of his dream was that of weight. It took him a moment to realize that it belonged to that body, too. The pain and the weight were somehow him, pressing him against...

... something rough, and uncomfortably warm. Heated by the same painful, heavy body, reflected back into his aching flesh. The pain was getting sharper now, more defined, lodging closer to him, enclosing him in... in...

... his skull. And now the sensations all blinked into existence at once - his eyelids closed, and weak light beyond those lids; the weight of a blanket draped over him; his body spread out endlessly, his feet feeling very far away.

And then something moving, taking the light away. He jerked back, panic jolting through him like white fire.

A touch on his shoulder, warm. Skin to skin. Blanket rubbing over his skin, everywhere. That felt wrong, somehow. A blanket wasn’t enough, it made him feel... exposed, and in danger...

He wanted to curl up, but he couldn’t move his legs, they were too heavy, too long...

“Everything’s fine.” The voice was low, soothing. Woman. “You’re safe here, nobody’s going to harm you.”

The words didn’t mean anything to him. He fought to open his eyes, to orient himself. The touch stayed on his shoulder, moving against it in small circles. He wished it would go away.

His lids felt sandy, and his vision blurred, and then the light made them water, and his vision blurred some more. The silhouette between him and the light seemed to be of the woman who had spoken to him, and she was softly stroking his shoulder. He blinked rapidly, trying to see her more clearly.
“You’re safe here,” the shadow repeated. “I’m a healer, I’m here to help you get well again.”

The blanket didn’t touch his skin everywhere, he noticed now; parts of his body were covered by fabric clinging tightly to him...

... bandages. The realization came only after he strained for the word. Bandages also covered his head. Maybe he had hurt it, too, and that’s why he was so slow.

“I’m Laisa,” the woman said. He could see her outline more clearly now - dark hair, its contours illuminated by the fire behind her. Her face was in the shadows, but she looked familiar. He couldn’t place her, but he was sure that he knew her, somehow.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

He couldn’t. There was only darkness when he cast his mind back to the before.

There was no ‘Before’.

He mutely shook his head.

“Well, people sometimes don’t remember the moment of their accident.” He thought he could see the shadowy face smile, but he wasn’t sure. His eyes were still watering. “The mind protects itself from these memories. This is normal, and no reason for worry. The young master told me he found you by the river. Do you remember how you got there? What happened before you had your accident?”

The darkness was the same - a soft, friendly darkness, making him sleepy. He shook his head again.

“Can you tell me your name? Can you talk at all?” The voice still sounded friendly, unconcerned. Nothing to worry about.

It was difficult to talk; his mouth and throat were dry. The healer gave him some water, and he tried again. “I... no. I don’t... know...”

He still didn’t feel concerned. He probably should remember his name, but somehow it wasn’t bad that he didn’t. He was in a good place right now, and right now was all that mattered.

“Well... you also injured your head.” The woman lightly patted his shoulder. “Sometimes memories get buried for a while. As you heal, they will come back. Don’t worry about it for now.”

He didn’t worry. He felt sleepy and hot, but safe. It would be safe to sleep here.

He jerked awake when the warmth suddenly vanished. Someone had ripped the blanket away. He gasped, his heart thundering in his chest.

A wizened, bearded face was staring down at him behind golden-rimmed spectacles. The hairline was too low, and the beard intruded too far into the face... a face that looked somehow skewed...

*Ape,* his brain provided after a stunned moment. *Powerful. Don’t anger them.*

He averted his gaze, trying to find the woman again.

She was there, standing to one side, hands nervously knotting, head bowed. Deferring to the ape who was now removing his bandages, exposing him. His hands twitched at his sides, but he forced them to remain there, to not push the ape away.
Don’t fight. They’re in charge. He didn’t know how he knew, but the certainty froze his limbs and choked his breath.

The ape’s hands were probing at his ribs, his limbs, his joints, pressing into his cuts, digging into his skull. The chimp was examining his wounds, his touches were impersonal and disinterested, and despite the pain, that realization made his muscles relax, and freed his breath.

The ape ordered him to turn around, on his belly, and resumed his examination. When he was done, all his pains were howling with protest, a chorus of sharp and angry beasts tearing into him as if he had disturbed their sleep. He rolled on his back with a groan.

“The beast is remarkably sturdy,” the ape said to someone in the back of the room. “Some ribs are broken, and it has suffered severe contusions, flesh wounds and abrasions, as well as a concussion. It’s a miracle that it survived at all, and in such a relatively good condition. You said it doesn’t remember its name?” he turned to the healer.

The woman shook her head. “No, doctor - he doesn’t remember what happened before his accident, either.”

Maybe a brain injury,” the ape muttered. “In that case, I’m afraid its usefulness will be severely diminished.” He returned to the bed to shine a light in his eyes, capturing his head when he wanted to jerk away, then ordered him to follow his finger with his eyes, and to tell him how many fingers he could see.

“If you’re lucky, it has only lost its memory,” the ape said at last. “But that means it might have forgotten its former training, too. It’s a blank slate - a lot of work.”

“I don’t mind,” a new voice said from the shadows. “I know how to train a human.”

“Not so fast” Yet another voice! How many people were in the room with him now? He’d lost track. That new voice was deep, male - an adult. Someone with authority. Another ape, most probably.

Suddenly, this place didn’t feel safe anymore.

The doctor moved into the shadows, and he could hear him and that other voice conversing with each other - a low, unintelligible murmur that made him restless.

Another face appeared at his bed, just as hairy and skewed... ape... but much younger. The eyes of this new visitor shone with excitement as he perched on the edge of his bed. “I’m Ennis. I’m the one who found you at that riverbank. At first I thought you were dead, but then I saw that you weren’t. I bet you fell into the river from that road. A lot of deer fall into the river when there’s a landslide. Were you hunting deer?”

He didn’t know. He didn’t remember, so he just shrugged; but he peered into that young face with more interest. This ape was no more than a boy, brimming with the exuberance of all boys. It reminded him of... someone, he couldn’t remember who, but that sense of familiarity let him relax some more, and he smiled at his rescuer. He wanted to tell him that he was grateful for the rescue, but his throat was parched again, and hurting.

Then he remembered something - an ape gesture someone had shown him once. For a moment, he wished he could remember who it had been. They must’ve been friendly, because the gesture was one of affection.

He reached out and softly tapped his knuckles against the ape’s chest.
The boy’s eyes widened for a moment; then he broke into a grin. “Father, the human just thanked me for saving him!”

Now there was movement in the shadows, and then the ape doctor returned with two other apes in tow.

One of them had reddish fur, and a mild, slightly saggy face, and stayed in the background. But the other one exuded power, a steely authority that was comfortable with weighing people’s lives and deciding their worth.

For a moment, ape and human locked eyes, and the human felt something equally cold and unyielding rise up in himself in response to the ape’s glare.

Then he remembered his position, and averted his gaze.

“I’ve seen a lot of humans in my life, son,” the ape said after a moment of silence. “And that one is a wildling. He’s not tame, never has been. I’m not going to risk your life by letting you attempt to train him. He’ll rip your throat out.”

“No he won’t, Father,” the boy protested. ”He knows I saved his life! And he already submitted, on his own! Show him,” he turned to address him directly. “Show my father what you just did!”

He felt strange all of a sudden, exposed and ridiculous, as if he had been told to perform a trick for the apes, but he obediently repeated the gesture, tapping his knuckles against the boy’s chest in the simian gesture for gratefulness and affection.

“See?” The boy whipped his head around and stared intently into his father’s face. “He knows! He’ll be good! And he’s my birthday present from the Mothers, and you don’t defy the Mothers, right, Zatis?”

The red ape - the one with the saggy face - raised his hands. “It’s not my place to question your father’s decisions, young man, and neither is it yours.”

“Father, please!” The boy was pleading now, and the human felt he had to support him somehow; he seemed to be the only ally he had among these apes. He didn’t remember anything of his former life, as far as he could tell, but he still had retained the knowledge that in this world, apes decided a human's fate.

“Ennis!” That was the red ape again, his voice soft, understanding... but demanding the boy obey his father all the same.

Ennis hesitated; then he flicked a glance back to him, and held his gaze for a moment. There was a message in that look - *pay attention!* - and then he slowly got up from the bed and hunkered down before his father, one hand stretched out to him, palm-up.

The ape took a step back, surprise and dismay clearly written in his face. “Ennis, what...?”

The boy jumped to his feet and turned back to the bed. “Will you be good? A good human?”

His body was still hurting all over, his head a fuzzy blob of pain and nausea, but he knew... he sensed... that this was his only chance.

He crawled out of bed, hitting the floor on all four; even if he had wanted, he wouldn’t have been able to stand upright in that moment. Held out his hand to the boy as he had seen him do it a moment before, head bowed.
A moment of utter silence passed; then he felt the boy’s fingers brush lightly against his open palm. “Good boy. See, Father? He understands, and he submits, even if he’s a wildling.”

“He understands that you’re his best chance of survival.” The father’s voice was dry. “That doesn’t mean he won’t attack as soon as he’s able to. Or run away.”

“Let me deal with that.” Ennis’ voice, but it was muted, and somehow far away. “Can’t you just trust me, Father? Just once? I’m not a child anymore.”

Another moment of silence. Then a sigh. “Maybe we should put your human back on his cot again before he passes out at your feet.”

“Thank you, Father, thank you, thank you...”

Someone grabbed him under the arms, someone else his ankles. “Don’t thank me yet, son - there’s a lot of work waiting for you.”

He was lifted into the air, a moment of sickening disorientation-

“You’ll supervise its progress...”

“Yes, Father!”

He was back on his bed, the pain pouncing on him now like a ravaged beast.

“Train it...”

“Yes, Father!”

“... after you’ve done all your homework, and your lessons with Zatis!”

“... yes, Father.” That one didn’t sound as enthusiastic.

“If I see your grades suffer, this little experiment will be cancelled immediately.”

“Yes Father. I understand.”

“Good. Now I suggest we let the healer get to work and your human get some sleep.”

“Yes, Father... just one moment...”

Someone was crouching down by his side, and then Ennis’s voice whispered at his ear. “Your name is Taris from now on, and I’ll teach you everything, and I’ll take good care of you, and then you won’t run away. Because this is your home now.”

He felt he boy’s hand stroke his hair. “And now I order you to sleep and get well. Sleep!”

Taris tumbled into sleep, too exhausted to worry about his master’s other command.
It was still raining when Galen looked outside the window the next morning, but for the first time in weeks, the weather didn’t sour his mood; he savoured being able to look at that rain from the other side of a windowpane. They hadn’t taken lodgings in an inn anymore since Etissa, driving until nightfall and making camp wherever they happened to be at that time. It had paid off - they had made it across the mountains before the passes had been closed due to the winter storms.

... but at what cost?

Galen sighed a little. No, today it wasn’t the weather that had him worried.

He tried to recapture that delicious feeling from a moment before, of being warm, and dry, and well-fed for a change, but his last thought had already spoiled that small joy, and now his mind was picking at their current problem - finding Alan. Having lost Alan, and having to deal with his panicked friend who was looking at him with murder in his eyes.

I didn’t drop him - he let go of my hand. And he did it by choice. I saw it in his eyes. He... he gave up.

The memory made him sick to his stomach, and clawed at his throat, surprising in its intensity. He had preferred to see the two humans in their company as Zana’s concern, except for that time in the beginning, when he had thought Alan and Peet had come from the stars, from another world; but his initial fascination with them had given way to disappointment when they had displayed the same flaws as the humans of his time. When they had blithely sacrificed Zana’s and his baby, their future...

And to make matters worse, they had topped it off with a rebelliousness that he had found exasperating, even though he had reminded himself again and again that considering where these humans had come from, their wild spirit was to be expected, and maybe inevitable.

But despite it all, he had gotten used to them. Losing one of them had spiked a pain in him that was completely unexpected. Without Alan, their little group felt just... incomplete. Lopsided.

“Galen? Are you coming?” Zana stuck her head through the door. “Peet is getting restless.”

“Peet hasn’t been anything but restless since we lost Alan.” Galen turned away from the window. “But yes, I’m ready. Bring him in and let’s go over our plan before we head out.”

They could stay close to the truth this time - they had been traveling in a wagon, and they had lost almost everything in that landslide that had taken half of the road with it; the only problem was that Alan, should he have survived his fall, wouldn’t know that they were now using his Dr. Kova identity. Galen hoped that their stories wouldn’t differ too much when they finally found him.

Right now, he didn’t dare to hope for more than that they would find him at all.

He had barely finished the thought when both Zana and Peet filed in, already in their street clothes; Peet was carrying Betsy. Galen eyed the weapon with dismay. Considering Peet’s current state, he didn’t want to see the human anywhere near a weapon.

“Are we clear on our story?” he asked. “I’m Dr. Kova, a traveling veterinarian from the Pendan prefecture, on my way to bring the blessings of modern medicine into the northern badlands. You are?” He gestured at Zana.
“I’m Mila, your wife,” Zana said obediently. She had run out of names she liked, and they had decided that she would use her very first alias - as far as Galen could tell, their stay with the Gorilla farmers had never been discovered by Urko.

Galen hesitated a moment before he met the human’s gaze. Peet’s eyes were fixed on him with an intensity that made his fur bristle. He cleared his throat. “And you are...?”

“I’m the guy with the gun,” Peet growled. “An’ I’m the guy with insomnia, so people should think twice before they try to play twenty questions with me.”

“Uhmm, yes,” Galen said. “You’re Mila’s bodyguard. I’m leaving her safety in your capable hands. You leave the talking to her, please.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Zana said, before Peet could open his mouth. “We all learned our lesson in Etissa, isn’t that right, Peet... no, I forgot... what name did you choose again?”

Peet glared at her, his lips twitching; vacillating between anger and amusement. “Name’s Danny.”

Zana beamed at him. “What a nice name - I remember you used it before. Well, let’s go - the morning is already halfway over.”

She gently shoved him out the door and returned to Galen with quick steps. “As soon as we’ve found Alan, I will start... treating... them,” she whispered. “Mothers know I’m not qualified for it, but if I don’t try, nobody will. And then, sooner or later, Peet will get himself killed.”

Galen mutely watched her hurry after the human. He didn’t want to imagine her reaction if Alan started talking about his days in Etissa...

Well. That was a worry for another day.

They split up almost immediately after leaving the inn, Zana knocking at the doors of every house down one street - and Peet having to wait at ever greater distances - while Galen headed straight for the village’s only pub. At this time of the day, and in this weather, he was sure that he’d find the entire male population of the village in there.

Thick pipe smoke, mixed with hot vapor carrying the sharp scent of spiced cider greeted him when he opened the door. The pub was packed, as he had hoped, but the noise level was moderate; none of the patrons dared to get drunk before noon meal and invoke the wrath of their wives or mothers. That would make it more difficult to loosen their tongues, but on the other hand, their information would be more coherent.

Galen made his way to the bar, smiling at and greeting anyone who happened to glance his way, and ordered a mug of hot cider for himself. In this weather, he could tolerate a hot beverage other than tea.

“Oh, this is good,” he said after the first sip, “I’ve never drunk it heated before.”

“We drink it all winter,” the barkeep said. He was a Gorilla; when he had put the mug on the counter, Galen had noticed that his right arm ended at the elbow.

A farming accident, Galen assumed. He hoped it wasn’t a souvenir from Urko’s war against the humans, fifteen years ago. That would make his inquiry... a bit more complicated.

Galen sniffed and sipped at his cider.
“So I gather you’re not from around here?” the Gorilla said. “Seeing as you don’t know hot cider.”

“You observed correctly,” Galen said with his most charming smile, and bowed in his seat. “I’m from Pendan prefecture, south of the mountains.”

“What brings you here, and in the storm season, to boot?” The Gorilla had grabbed a rag and was now slowly wiping the already clean counter, clearly in the mood for a chat. If someone had seen Alan, chances were that this ape had heard about it. He seemed to be a relaxed enough fellow, someone people would talk to.

So Galen wiggled around a bit on his bar stool to find a more comfortable position, and casually put his elbow on the counter. “Medicine brings me here. I’m an animal doctor, and I was on my way to the northern border—”

“There’s nothing up there but wild humans and sand eels,” the Gorilla said with a frown. “Your medicine is wasted on either of them. The eels are poisonous. I don’t know if they mention that at the animal doctors school.”

“Well...” Galen hedged, suddenly unsure if he should invoke relatives up there. He had no idea if that Gorilla had been to the badlands. Maybe he had lost his arm there.

“Open positions are rare in the southern prefectures,” he said finally. “I heard there’s a settlement program underway up north, and I figured they could use someone who knows how to treat an infected udder, or a coughing human.”

The Gorilla scratched his cheek as he considered that. “But you lost your wagon in that road accident,” he said, and Galen suppressed a smile. News traveled fast, and straight to this ape. He had made the correct choice.

“That’s true,” he nodded, “but fortunately, we were able to save almost all of our more valuable possessions - my medical equipment, the horses, and one of our two humans. The other fell into the river, unfortunately.” He took a deep draw from his cooling cider to give the barkeep time to remember any gossip about a half-drowned human.

The Gorilla kept silent, though; but the quick glance he flicked him before he resumed wiping the counter told Galen that he did know something.

He licked the cider from his lips and tried again. “The humans were as close as... litter mates.” The apes here probably wouldn’t use any simian relationship terms, and he didn’t want to appear as the crazy city ape to them. “And I’m sorely missing his skills, too. He’s my orderly, you know, and it takes quite some time to train a human, especially for these highly specialized positions. We - my wife and I - are still looking for him, against all hope. Maybe he has been washed ashore...”

The Gorilla didn’t look at him. “Maybe. The river sometimes washes up dead deer. What about your other human? Isn’t he trained, too?”

Galen slowly rotated his mug on the wooden countertop. “He’s... more suited as a bodyguard for my wife. He lacks the attention span for more, uh, delicate tasks. I’m afraid he won’t be able to replace my orderly.”

“Pity,” the Gorilla muttered, and turned away to serve another customer.

Galen put the mug to his lips and watched him over the rim. By now he was certain that Alan had come through here - in whatever condition - but he had no idea why this ape was so tight-lipped about it.
What am I missing?

“I’ve been thinking of putting out a reward,” he informed the Gorilla, when the ape passed by his seat. “For any hint about the fate and the whereabouts of my human. I’m optimistic that I’ll get a lot of pointers - the human has fair hair, you see - he’s unusual enough to stick in people’s memory.”

The Gorilla stopped in his tracks; then he leaned over the counter and murmured in his ear. “Yes, your human was found at the riverbank, but I wouldn’t make a fuss over the whole matter.”

Galen leaned back a bit to look him in the eye, brows raised. “You wouldn’t make a fuss? I just told you how valuable this human is, not just for his skills, but also for his color-“

“Yes, I heard you,” the Gorilla rumbled. “But your human was found by the district chief’s son - I doubt you’ll get the beastie back. And I wouldn’t get on the chief’s bad side, if I was you.”

“This isn’t a question of doing me a favor,” Galen said, nonplussed. “That human is my property, it’s a simple legal matter. Surely a district chief would respect the law!”

“Voltis is a good man,” the Gorilla said, and something - maybe his voice, maybe his stance, maybe the look in his eyes - convinced Galen that this barkeep had been a soldier in that cursed war, and that he and Chief Voltis went back a long time.

What have I gotten myself into this time?

“But his son is...” the Gorilla hesitated and shook his head, his gaze turning inward, “the boy is troubled. If he wants to keep that human, Voltis will arrange it that he does. He loves that kid more than is good for them both.”

With a sigh, he came back to the present and regarded Galen with a little ironic smile. “Ah, I can see that you’re not going to listen to me. They went back to Chubla - they had parked their coach here, and went upriver; the boy likes wandering up and down the countryside, even in this weather. When they came back, the kid’s old teacher had to carry the human, the poor guy. That beast was pretty heavy, or so I’ve heard.”

“Was he alive?” Galen had dreaded that question, but there was no point in avoiding it any longer. The Gorilla shrugged. “I’ve no idea. If not, I wouldn’t be surprised if they gave it to a taxidermist.” He grinned at Galen. “Because of the color, you know?”

“I hope that wasn’t the case,” Galen murmured, and put his semblés on the counter. He didn’t want to imagine how Peet would react to such a sight. They would probably have to tie him down... for the rest of his life.

He pushed that thought from his mind as he made his way back to the inn. Even without the gruesome image of a taxidermied Alan, the situation was challenging enough. He had lost the forged ownership papers for the humans when the wagon had crashed into the gorge, but even with new papers, getting Alan back would be difficult. A district chief was the most powerful ape in the province, beholden to no-one but the Council back in Cesarea. Here in the north, with its traditional disdain for everything south of the Iron Mountains, Voltis was a king. All the prefects were under his command.

And now this man’s son had claimed Alan for himself.

He didn’t tell Zana and Peet about any of these thoughts when they came back to the inn in the late
afternoon, wet and tired and disheartened. Instead, he just informed them that Alan had been brought to Chubla, and that they would travel there, too, come morning. Peet’s mood, which had lifted at the news, plummeted again when he was informed that yes, he would have to ride on Ahpahchee’s back, and couldn’t just run the whole distance with the horse in tow.

“Humans up in the north are not only allowed, but required to ride, Peet,” Galen said patiently. “Otherwise, they’d only slow down their masters. The roads aren’t really suited for wagons, if you hadn’t noticed. Everyone rides, if possible. And you were very impatient to meet Alan again.”

“Still am,” Peet muttered. “Jus’ want to get there in one piece.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Galen said absently. His day wasn’t over yet - he’d have to write new papers for himself and Zana, and for the humans... luckily, he had kept all his equipment in his backpack: Zaius’ special paper for official documents, the mold of Kanla’s seal (which Alan had painstakingly crafted from the wax seal on Galen’s work contract for treating her humans), his ink and quills, wax and sand...

It was a good thing he could focus on these tasks tonight. It would keep his mind from thinking about Voltis and his son.

“It’s been over a week now!” Burke gripped his wrist behind his back to keep himself from punching the wall. “When will that damn monkey finally see you?”

“Don’t use that word again, Dehni,” Zana said sternly. She had insisted that they address each other with their fake names even in private, to avoid slips of the tongue in public. “And we can count ourselves lucky that Chief Voltis has agreed to meeting Kova at all. He’s a busy man.”

Burke let go of his wrist and grabbed the backrest of a chair instead. “We still don’t know if Al’s... if he’s even alive,” he ground out. “Can’t you understand it’s driving me up the wall?”

Zana smiled sympathetically and leaned across the table to pat his arm. “I do understand it. But you have to understand that Chief Voltis isn’t just your usual prefect. He’s the district chief - he’s not someone you want to annoy. We do have an appointment - we’re just not the first in line. And all things considered, one week of waiting isn’t that long.”

“More than a week,” Burke muttered. “We’ve been holed up in here for nine days now.”

Zana stared at him with a blank expression. “Yes, exactly - one week.”

Another simian idiosyncracy. Damn monkeys insisted on doing everything different from humans. It irritated Burke more than usual today.

Nothing had gone right ever since Virdon had taken the plunge. Yes, they had been pointed to Chubla, and yes, it was a good thing Galen had been able to save their money, because there was no way of telling how long they’d be sitting on their hands in this damned inn.

But their forged papers had taken that plunge, too, and when Galen had pulled Zaius’ paper from his oiled leather sheath, he had discovered that somehow, the rain or the humidity from the constant fog had managed to creep inside, and the scrolls had gotten mouldy. As Galen had pointed out to him, you couldn’t just scratch ‘this human belongs to me’ on any old scroll. You needed an official scroll from a prefect’s or councillor’s office - they were different from the usual scrolls in some way, like the special paper used for banknotes before the switch to e-currency.

So, currently Burke was traipsing through Chubla without papers, which theoretically meant that
any ape on the street could just grab him by the neck and claim that they’d like him for themselves. He’d be considered a ‘stray’ and his new master could just drag him into the nearest forge and press a hot iron into his neck... and there’d be nothing that Galen or Zana could do.

Which was the reason they had pretty much grounded him in their rooms at that inn. Which was the reason Burke was ready to thrash the furniture, or jump out of the window, or... he drew a deep, calming breath.

“Did Gal... Kova at least find out if Al’s anywhere in that ghetto?” he asked. The human population of Chubla wasn’t corralled in some outlying village. Instead, the town had just incorporated that village, like an amoeba, and had enclosed it with a wall. The gates were guarded by apes at all times, and if you wanted out - or in - you better had the papers to prove that you had a legitimate reason to do so.

Zana shook her head. “What reason would he have to go in there? We just have to be patient, Dehnii. Whatever has happened to... to Nait, has already happened. Your fretting isn’t changing anything. If he survived, he’ll be in good hands now - since Chief Voltis’ son wants to keep him, he’ll get the best healer they have.”

That wasn’t the point, but she wouldn’t understand it. Both apes seemed to be glad for the respite - Galen was drinking tea and copying his damned book all day, and Zana was... drinking tea and reading some scrolls she had bought at the market. She hadn’t told him what she was reading, just mumbled something about ‘some stories... for entertainment’. At any other time, Burke would’ve teased her about indulging in lurid simian sex fantasies.

He blew a frustrated sigh and made for the door.

“Where are you going?” Zana asked, alarmed.

“Stables,” Burke muttered and yanked the door open. This inn had its own stables, so he had at least that option of retreat.

“Ahpahchee must be the best-brushed horse in all of Chubla,” Zana remarked, and returned her gaze to her scroll. “Why not switch to Tala, for a change? She’d be grateful, too, I’m sure.”

“Right.” He pulled the door closed behind him before she could tease him some more.

Besides, he wasn’t going to the stables.

The secret to not looking like a stray was to walk briskly and determinedly, as if you were on an errand for your monkey master. For once, Burke was grateful for the bad weather - it allowed him to pull the hood of his shirt over his head, concealing his neck and its missing brand. Neither of the apes had dared to suggest he’d get one, which was a good thing, because he couldn’t have guaranteed for the furniture then, but for a moment, Burke pondered if there wasn’t a way to at least fake a brand. But even the thought of a faked brand made him grit his teeth. He just couldn’t do it.

He rounded the wall of the ghetto, trying to find a way inside that didn’t involve dealing with the ape guards at the gates. There were three of them, each occupied by a grim-looking chimp with a rifle. He stopped at a street vendor’s cart to buy a bowl of meatballs with some spicy sauce, and used the time he had to wait in line to scan the wall and the passing apes and humans. The wall itself wasn’t insurmountable, but traffic was thick in all adjacent alleys, and Burke didn’t want to draw attention. He supposed he could try his luck after dark, but just like back in the City, Chubla had decreed a nightly curfew for its humans.
Eating his meatballs gave him a few more minutes to linger and think up another strategy for getting the information he so urgently needed. He knew he wasn’t as good at diplomacy as his commander, and he doubted he’d ever be able to relax enough to chat with an ape - save Zana - but why not try his luck with one of the humans coming out of that gate?

He threw away the empty bowl and approached an elderly woman who had just passed the guards without a hitch. “Hey, lady? Excuse me...”

The woman stopped and eyed him warily, and Burke forced a smile on his face. “Sorry for chatting you up in the street jus’ like that, ma’am, but I’m not from here an’ I...” he gestured at the wall behind them, ”... I heard you have some pretty decent healers in there. That true?”

The woman’s gaze brushed over him from head to toe. “You need a healer?”

“N... no, ma’am, not for myself.” He resisted the urge to rake his hand through his hair and throw his hood back with that movement. “It’s, uh, for my baby daughter. She’s got a fever, an’ our healer can’t get it down.”

The woman’s eyes softened at the mention of a baby. “Well, we have two healers. There’s Lovits, he’s a faith healer - he prays to the Mothers, and people walk away cured, he’s truly gifted...”

“Uhm, yeah, I’ll keep him in mind,” Burke muttered. “What about the other one?”

“That’d be our Laisa. She’s very good with herbs - she even treats the humans of the rich apes.” The woman glowed with pride. “She even treats the human of young master Ennis now!”

Ennis - that was the name of the monkey who had found Al at the rivershore. Had found him, and had picked him up like you’d pick up an odd-colored pebble and stuff it into your pocket.

And that Laisa woman was nursing Al back to health for him now. That... meant he had to be alive.

He had to be alive.

Burke kept his face straight with an effort. “She sounds exactly like the healer my little baby girl needs. D’you think the guards would let me in if it’s an emergency? I, uh, I forgot to ask our head man for papers - ran away in the middle of the night, when the fever would rise an’ rise...”

The woman raised her brows and shrugged. “You can try... but if you don’t have papers, it’s the guards’ decision if they turn you away or not. Maybe show them your brand, so that they can see which prefecture you belong to.”

“That’s a good idea,” Burke agreed, silently cursing all monkeys, “thanks a lot for your help. I guess I, ah, try the other gate. The guard there seemed to have had a good breakfast. That should mellow him out a bit.” He turned away and quickly strode down the road before the woman started thinking twice about his little story.

The alley made a slight, drawn-out bend now, and there were only a few humans milling about - it didn’t mean anything, the next ape would appear any second, but Burke didn’t allow himself to linger on that thought. He took a run, jumped up the wall, and climbed up to its crown before his better judgment could catch up to him. A human trying to get into a human corral shouldn’t cause as much alarm as a human trying to get out, right? Besides, before they’d have found him in there, he’d be out again, anyway. He was just here for a quick check-up on how Al was doing.

Just to make sure it was really him. And that he was really alive.
Ennis readjusted the shoulder strap of his bag while his bodyguard opened the gate to the human quarter for him. Zatis had tried to stop him from taking his homework to the healer’s house, but Ennis had reminded him that his father had ordered him to supervise his human’s progress, and as always, Zatis deferred to his father’s decision, although this time, he had grumbled quite a bit.

To be fair, Taris couldn’t really do anything yet, so Ennis couldn’t start with the training. But he still could keep him company, and do his homework while the human was sleeping.

The healer had said that sleeping was the best Taris could do to heal; so Ennis didn’t try to wake him when he was asleep, or keep him awake when he was nodding off. He often just sat there and looked at his new acquisition, trying to grasp the reality that this huge, odd-colored, and, if his father was right, wild beast really belonged to him now. So maybe Zatis was right, and he was distracted... just a bit.

For the last two days, the human’s sleep had been fitful, though, threaded with nightmares that wound through his naps like bramble vines, thorny and sharp. Then Ennis would quietly rise from his table, tiptoe to the bed, and softly stroke the human’s hair until his breath eased and his body went limp again. When Taris woke up, he never mentioned having bad dreams, and Ennis never asked him about it - maybe he had already forgotten them again.

Ennis adjusted his shoulder strap again as he hurried down the crooked alleys of the human quarter; the humans parted before him like water, giving him and the guard a wide berth. Hopefully, Taris would be in a better mood today, not brooding in silence and staring out of the window without really looking at anything.

The boy didn’t knock when they reached the healer’s house - he didn’t have to, not for a human - but simply opened the door and let himself in, while the guard took up position at the threshold.

It was quiet and peaceful inside, exuding that special kind of soothing atmosphere that all healers, human or simian, somehow infused into their surroundings together with the scents of herbs and resins. The only sound was the soft murmur of the healer’s voice, filtering out into the reception area from one of the sick rooms in the back. Taris’ room. Ennis drew closer, careful not to make a sound. Humans never spoke freely in the presence of an ape. He was curious what those two were talking about when they thought nobody was listening.

”... so the great Cesar declared that if they preferred the Wasteland, into the Wasteland they would go; and no ape would follow them there and lay a hand on them. But if they returned, Cesar would kill them all.”

Ennis smiled to himself. The legend of the White City was the humans’ favorite fairy tale. Even the apes liked it, and since nobody believed in it anyway - not even the humans - they hadn’t banned it. Ever since Laisa had begun telling the story to Taris, he had begged her to tell it over and over again. Ennis fleetingly wondered why he was so fascinated by it; maybe he remembered it, however faintly. Did wild humans tell that story to each other, too?

Well, at least it meant that Taris would be awake today. Ennis understood that the human needed the sleep, but watching him while he was getting it had begun to bore him.

He pushed open the door to the sick room, eager to talk to his human himself. Let Laisa continue that story later - it never changed anyway. “Hello, Taris,” he said, interrupting the healer mid-
Taris turned his head to look at him, and Ennis was again fascinated by the color of his eyes. They were as blue as the sky... well, when it wasn’t raining, anyway. He had never seen such a color in a human. Today, those eyes were a stormy blue-gray, much like the sky outside. But Taris smiled at him, that hesitant, lopsided smile of his, and struggled to sit up. “Hello, Master Ennis.”

The healer silently retreated as the boy crossed the distance to perch on the edge of the cot. “How are you today? Feeling better? Does the brand still hurt?”

A shadow crossed the human’s face at the mention of the brand, and his hand reached up to brush against the red welts at the side of his neck. “No... negligible,” he muttered.

“That’s good,” Ennis beamed, but the smile was gone from Taris’ face, and his gaze fell to his hands on the bedspread, then wandered to the window, avoiding him.

Ennis decided not to mention the brand in the future anymore.

“If the young master wants, he can take Taris out into the yard,” the healer’s soft voice spoke up from the door. “He’ll get some fresh air and sunlight - it’s rare enough at this time of year anyway - and that’ll speed up his recovery.”

Ennis jumped up from his seat on the bed. “That’s what we’ll do! Come on, Taris, we’ll go into the yard!”

“He mustn’t walk around, or do any exercises or games,” Laisa warned as he led the human through the door. “Just sit still and enjoy the light and air.”

“It’s just a few more steps,” Ennis encouraged Taris, “and then you can sit down again.”

It was nice in the yard; the healer had a little garden where she grew medicinal herbs, and the small patch of land was surrounded by walls on all sides. Three of them were the walls of the surrounding houses, while the fourth shielded their little abode from an alley. It was like a room without a roof, with a small table and two wooden chairs pushed against the wall of Laisa’s house; the sight reminded Ennis of his homework, and he hurried back inside to get his bag, feeling very mature and virtuous for his conscientiousness.

But apart from spreading out the scroll and wetting the nib of his quill, he didn’t get much work done; just as Zatis had feared, today he was distracted.

“Why do you keep asking Laisa for that story all the time?” he asked Taris, who had turned his face towards the sun, eyes closed.

“I don’t know,” the human murmured without opening his eyes. “I just like hearing it.”

Ennis pondered that. “Do you still have nightmares?” he asked after a moment.

This time, the silence stretched between them. Finally, Ennis had enough. “You can’t know it, because you’re a wildling,” he said, “but if an ape asks a human something, the human must answer. Always. And he mustn’t lie. That’s the law.”

Taris drew a long, measured breath at that, and exhaled just as slowly. “I... yes,” he said quietly. “I still have nightmares. Laisa... tells me that story to distract me. It works, for some reason.”

Ennis sucked in his lower lip and started chewing on it. The human’s bad dreams worried him; he
had no idea how to stop them. “Can you remember what you dreamed about?” he asked, but Taris shook his head. “Is it because of the branding? What was so bad about that? It was just a tiny moment of pain...”

“It’s not the pain,” Taris interrupted him. “It’s... I don’t know. It feels... feels... wrong.” He opened his eyes and tiredly rubbed his face. “All wrong. As if it should never have happened.”

“But it’s just to tell other apes that you belong to us,” Ennis said helplessly. They’d had that conversation before. “Otherwise, anyone could just claim you. And some apes are... not so nice. They wouldn’t treat you as well as I do.”

Taris gave him a quick, tired smile. “You treat me very well, Master Ennis. I do appreciate it.” Ennis smiled back. That probably meant that Taris wouldn’t try to rip his throat out, as Zatis always feared. “I’ll take good care of you,” he promised the human. “And I’ll teach you all the things. Nobody will dare to take you away - my father is the most powerful man from here to the badlands. Have you been to the badlands? They are up north.”

Taris thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. “If I have, I don’t remember it.”

“That’s too bad.” Ennis absently doodled on his scroll. “Because then you could’ve told me what it’s like there. People just tell these stories about wild humans and monsters that live in the ground and come out to kill you... what?”

Taris was staring at him, his face suddenly pale. Ennis stared back in alarm. “What? What’s wrong? Did you remember something?”

Then he saw that Taris was staring at something behind him; and now the human was leaning forward, trying to stand up...

Ennis twisted around in his seat to see what-

A human stood in the yard. Ennis hadn’t heard him climb over the wall, or land in the patch of peppermint. He stared at the beast, his breath caught in his throat.

This one was a wildling. There was no doubt about it. Ferocity leaped from the tension of his lean body, from the hard line of his mouth, from the gleam in his dark eyes - eyes that were fixed on Taris as if he was seeing an apparition that would vanish if he so much as blinked.

“Al,” the human said hoarsely. “You’re alive.” He gulped a breath, a quick rising and falling of his shoulders, and took a step towards them. “C’mon, let’s get outta here.”

Ennis swiveled his head to stare at his human, a terrible fear gripping his heart. Nobody could just claim Taris - he had his father’s brand now!

But a wildling wouldn’t care about a brand.

The dark-haired human took another step towards them and held out his hand. “C’mon, what are you waiting for? We’ve been looking for you for more than a week, we thought...” Another quick breath, as if the human was drowning. “I thought you were dead, Al,” he said, and now his voice wavered a bit. “I thought you’d left me behind on this shithole of a planet.” He swallowed and rubbed the heel of his hand over his eyes.

“Who... are you?”
The words were spoken slowly, hesitantly, as if Taris was trying hard to place this stranger; and suddenly, Ennis feared that of all the things his human had forgotten, this would be the one thing he remembered. He had to do something... he had to save his human.

Ennis jumped up and screamed.

"Guards! Guards!"

"Dr. Kova."

The lean Chimpanzee behind the desk let his gaze linger maybe a moment too long on Galen’s freshly-minted papers of identification, and Galen forced himself to keep his hands still and his breath regular. The district chief had a certain sharpness about him, from his gaze to his movements, to the lines in his face, and Galen was sure that not much would escape this man.

Such as holding one’s breath, for example.

The sheet had been immaculate when he had gently separated it from the molding block of what had once been official council paper - one of only two sheets that had survived the onslaught of the elements during their trek through the mountains. It had been a difficult decision to make, but in the end, Galen had decided that the papers of identification for himself and Zana had to have priority; ownership papers for the humans were worth exactly nothing if the owner couldn’t legally identify himself.

He hadn’t told Peet about it.

Voltis pushed his papers across the desk towards him with one of his quick, sharp smiles. “A pleasure to meet you, doctor. My apologies for letting you wait for such a long time, but my schedule is rather tight.”

“I completely understand, District Chief,” Galen said politely. “I appreciate that you still took the time to meet with a foreigner.”

“Of course I would.” Voltis leaned back in his seat. The pose didn’t make him look any more relaxed; he was as alert as when Galen had entered his office, a wide, almost empty room, whose only decoration were two crossed flags covering the entire wall to Voltis’ left - one for the Iron Mountains, the other for the Northern Borderlands, proudly declaring that Voltis was ruler of both.

“Chubla is the most important trade hub north of the mountains,” Voltis continued. “It owes its wealth to the foreigners passing through it and exchanging goods here, so we regard them as honored guests and make sure that their needs and worries are being addressed, too. So what can I do for you?”

Galen smiled thinly and slowly rubbed his hands over his knees. He was absolutely certain that Voltis knew exactly why he was here - they had been asking around for Alan ever since he had fallen into the river, and yesterday, Peet had caused a riot in the human quarter when he had taken matters into his own hands again. Galen was sure that his sudden appointment in Voltis’ office today was no coincidence.

“I lost my orderly to a landslide on our way here,” he decided to get straight to the point. “His appearance is fairly unique, so we had no difficulties tracking him to Chubla - a light-colored male with some distinct scar markings on his chest. It’s my understanding,” he bowed slightly in his seat, “that your son found my human washed ashore at the riverbank, and took him back to Chubla to see a healer, for which I am eternally grateful. I would like to take him back into my own care,
however - I’m a veterinarian myself - and of course I’d recompense you for all your expenses for your own veterinarian..."

He resignedly trailed off when Voltis held up a hand; he hadn’t expected that this would be resolved without complications - one complication being that he didn’t have any paperwork for Alan anymore.

“My son did bring home a half-drowned human,” Voltis admitted with raised brows, “but that human had no brand anywhere. Dr. Ropal thinks it’s a wildling, and after having inspected it, I’m inclined to agree.”

“We didn’t brand our humans,” Galen said. “My wife is very involved with the human protection movement, and she thinks that it’s an unnecessary cruelty to inflict on them.”

“I see,” Voltis said without inflection. “Well, let’s go over its papers then, and I’ll send for it.”

“I’m afraid those papers fell into the river together with our wagon and almost all of our possessions,” Galen confessed.

“Well,” Voltis said, and Galen grudgingly admired him for not smiling triumphantly, “then we have a problem. How are you going to prove that this human is really your property?”

“As I said, he has scar marks on his chest,” Galen repeated. “Very distinct markings, not from some badly-healed injury. My other human has the same markings - they are a pair, you see? They belong together.”

Voltis skeptically pursed his lips and slowly shook his head. “Maybe they came as a set - maybe their breeder decorated them, or a former owner, if they aren’t wildlings - or maybe they underwent some heathen ceremony together, if they are wildlings. But in no way does this prove that you own both of them.”

“My other human can confirm that they have been living with us all this time,” Galen said helplessly.

Voltis didn’t even acknowledge that. The word of a human was worth less than nothing. “Maybe write to their breeder or former owner to confirm that they sold them both to you - have them send a copy of the receipt.”

“They came from my wife’s household,” Galen muttered. “As far as I know, they’ve been raised on their estate.” Zana would never let him hear the end of this; she hadn’t mentioned the Book anymore since that one time immediately after the accident, but Galen was under no illusions that she wasn’t still holding him responsible for Alan’s fall. Returning to the back of the wagon a second time had cost them precious moments, he couldn’t deny that.

As it was now, he couldn't force Voltis to release Alan. Not without papers. And it would be foolish to aggravate the most powerful ape north of the Iron Mountains.

“Well, then a copy from the breed registry,” Voltis said curtly. “I’m sorry, doctor, but we’re doing things by the book here. This far from the City, it would be all too easy to slacken the reins - and before you know it, corruption and nepotism would run rampant. I’m keeping my people on the straight and narrow, and I have a duty to conduct myself accordingly. I won’t demand what I don’t deliver.”

“I understand,” Galen murmured, and rose. “And I respect you for your integrity, Chief. I’ll see what I can do to procure those papers. In the meantime... would you allow my other human to visit
his friend? He is very distraught by his absence.”

“The human belongs to my son,” Voltis said with a slight shrug. “It’ll be his choice, once Dr. Ropal has cleared the human for light exercise. I'll relay your request to my son, and let you know about his decision.”

Galen bowed and turned to leave.

“Dr. Kova.”

When Galen turned back to the desk, Voltis oddly light-colored eyes rested contemplatively on him. “Chubla is a good place to hibernate until the storm season has passed. You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.”

Galen bowed again. “Thank you for your hospitality, vetes. We will indeed need some time to regroup.”

He softly closed the door behind him and slowly walked back to the inn, deep in thought. There was no way he could forge any of the documents Voltis had demanded - he lacked the official paper that was mandatory for all of them. And even if Alan got his memories back and declared that he belonged to them... or to Peet, at the very least, Voltis could just ignore it.

And he probably would, if what the Gorilla back in that village pub had said was true. Voltis’ boy had latched onto Alan, and wouldn’t let him leave, not voluntarily. And Voltis would protect his son’s wishes.

They would have to break out Alan, and run... again. The question was where they would run - Voltis was the master of all the lands from the mountains to the northern wilderness, just like Urko ruled the South. It was not what Galen had planned for his and Zana’s future; they had wanted to finally settle down, live a bland and unimportant and peaceful life, free of very special humans and their quirks that alarmed every official in a five-mile-radius...

Not to mention that this plan assumed that Alan would want to flee with them. But Peet had said that he hadn’t even recognized him.

Galen raised his face heavenwards. We were so sure that all our problems would be behind us, if we’d only reach the North’s safe harbor.

Welcome to the North, Atiba. Enjoy a whole new set of problems.
Even though Galen wasn’t able to write him new “ownership papers” anymore - and Burke couldn’t say that he was too sorry about that - he could still send him around town for errands, including into the human ghetto, because a grocery list for herbs and concoctions didn’t need to be written on a fancy scroll.

The chimp could have come out with that information a bit sooner... would’ve saved Burke the effort of climbing over walls and outrunning the town guard. But maybe Galen had needed that incentive. “I know you’ll go there anyway,” he had remarked when he handed Burke the list for the healer. “I simply prefer not having to collect you from the watch house every day.”

“Thanks anyway,” Burke had muttered. Every time he settled on Galen being a stuck up, upperclass, arrogant sonofa... the ape turned around and surprised him with an act of seemingly genuine decency - only to undercut it with some dry remark that turned the act into one of self-interest again. Burke just couldn’t figure him out.

“I don’t have any experience with this kind of head injury,” Galen had said. “But if I may still give you a piece of advice - don’t try to force Alan to remember. I don’t think he’ll react well to pressure. You know how stubborn he is... he’ll just dig his heels in.”

Burke snorted softly. Galen would know all about digging one’s heels in - in his own way, the ape was as stubborn as Virdon, though the colonel wasn’t as prone to nursing a grudge.

An’ good thing he isn’t, or I’d never have heard the end of it after setting off Jonesy...

Thinking back to that last day on the ship now felt strange. Burke could still call up the layout of the Icarus, the blinking displays of the computers on the bridge, Jones’ tantrum after he discovered that Burke had rigged the bike in the gym...

But those memories didn’t feel real anymore. They weren’t solid, like checking shoulders with the humans in the streets of Chubla felt solid, or that trembling rage simmering in his gut while he waited for the chimp to check his papers at the gate to the human ghetto.

We’ve already been here for too long, Al...

The thought slowed his step; Burke gazed at the low-crouching houses, the tiny windows, the humans in their coarse clothes, with a sudden awe. This is real, and the other thing isn’t. Not anymore.

Maybe you made the right decision when you got rid of those memories, Al. I dunno... maybe you got it right this time, an’ I shouldn’t mess with it... the way I messed up with Jones.

But what kind of life would that be? Virdon wouldn’t be a man anymore - not even a slave. He’d be that chimp’s pet. An animal...

You ain’t no animal, Al. An’ I’ll make sure you’ll remember that.

This time, he knocked at the front door like a well-behaved servant. He clasped his hands behind his back and bobbed on his feet as quick steps approached behind the door, and put on his most charming smile when it opened. “Evening, ma’am...”

“Your friend isn’t here anymore,” the woman cut him short. “Master Ennis took him to his father’s
estate, after you frightened the daylights out of both of them.”

Burke sniffed and threw a quick glance down the street to mask his dismay at the news. “Wasn’t my intention,” he muttered.

The woman raised a brow. “What was your intention when you climbed the back wall to my garden?”

Burke ducked his head. “There was a chimp at your front door…”

“So you figured that since he wouldn’t let you in, you’d find another way.”

Burke smirked. “Yeah.”

The woman’s lips twitched, although she managed to keep a straight face. “Well, as I said... he’s not here anymore.”

So maybe Virdon didn’t sleep in her house anymore, but Burke bet that the woman was still tasked with bringing him his teas and exchanging his poultices... or whatever a healer did in these cases. She would be in regular contact with Virdon.

“Yes, that’s... damn bad luck,” he said. “Cause he’s my friend, you know? We’ve been through a lot together... But actually, I’m here to buy some herbs for... for Dr. Kova.” He couldn’t say the word. One would think the whole ‘master this and that’ business would get easier with time, but for him, it got worse.

He quickly pulled Galen’s list from the inside pouch of his vest, and handed it to her. The healer scanned it, nodded once or twice, and handed it back to him.

“Most of the herbs on this list I have in stock,” she said, “and the rest I can get in a few days.”

“No problem,” Burke smiled. “I don’t mind coming back here.” He deepened his smile as he held her gaze. She was quite pretty - paler skin than most people here, and jet black hair. Maybe distant Asian ancestry? From what Galen had said, mankind had put aside ethnic concerns for the greater good of species survival for a time, so there probably was everything else mixed in, as well. She reminded him a bit of the healer in the fever-stricken village back in the southern swamps - or maybe it was just because they shared the same profession. The same professional serenity making them appear similar.

They had entered the apothecary room of the house while he leisurely followed that train of thought; Burke casually leaned against the door frame with folded arms, and watched as the healer filled the requested herbs into cone-shaped paper bags, closed them with a neat fold, and scribbled something in the apes’ paw-script on them.

“I knew a healer, down South,” he remarked. “She almost convinced my friend to marry her.”

The woman didn’t look up; she was folding another cornet closed. “He turned her down?”

“He’s already married.” Burke inspected his fingernails. “Has a son and a baby daughter back home.”

The movement in his peripheral vision stilled; Burke flicked a glance in the healer’s direction and saw that she was staring at him with an unreadable expression. He raised his chin a bit, fully meeting her gaze.
"'Course, he’s forgotten them now," he said, keeping his voice casual. "Maybe I should send word south, tell her to take another stab at marriage. Who knows, maybe they’ll make some cute cubs for Master Ennis."

The healer resumed her task without uttering a word.

"That healer learned her stuff from the old village witch," Burke broke the silence after a moment. "As far as I could tell, neither of them could read or write. Few humans can. Where did you learn it?"

"My master taught me." The healer scooped the cornets into a basket and handed it to him. "So that I could take orders from the simian doctors, too."

Burke made no move to take the basket. "So how does this work? My... master is paying your master?"

"Yes." She gestured at the basket. "I’ve enclosed the bill."

"And you get a share?" He took the basket; no need to annoy her.

She looked at him with a slight frown and a smile. "Me? I get this here." She gestured at the house. "I can live by myself, work at my own schedule, accept human patients... and they pay me with food and useful things..."

But no money. Still, Burke supposed she had struck a better deal than most humans in this world. No wonder she was so mellow about the whole situation.

"Seems fair," he murmured. "When can I come by for the rest of that stuff on the list?"

"Two days, I think - I should have everything by then." She smiled at him, and Burke forced himself to return it. He needed to stay friendly with this woman - she was his ticket to meeting Virdon, eventually.

She accompanied him to the door. "Well, see ya in two days then," Burke said.

"I look forward to it." Her smile became more sincere. "I’m Laisa - I’m sorry, I’m normally not that rude..."

Burke didn’t feel like making one of his usual jokes about women routinely forgetting everything including their names at the sight of him. He merely dipped his head. "Danny. Have a quiet day - I know how hectic it can get for healers..."

"Then you should know that wishing us a quiet day is bad luck," she called after him.

He flicked a grin to her over his shoulder, but didn’t break his stride. He’d drop his grocery basket at the inn and then...

... no idea. Maybe have a run along that damned river. He urgently needed to let off some steam. It was still an hour or two until sundown. And running was better than finding a fight, here.

Running and fighting. It was as if his whole life had been reduced to that.

An’ here I thought I’d escaped that when I got accepted to flight school. Guess I never got out of Jersey City. Not really. It just changed costume.

And now it was just him again. Only him.
The mornings were the best part of the day - silent, peaceful, just him and the silvery light of the low winter sun through the window, glinting on the blade of his carving knife, his fingers throwing small shadows on the piece of wood in his hands. Right now, it still looked like a slice from a branch; one could still feel the tree it had been a part of - the endless sky above it, the wind ruffling its leaves, the sap coursing silently through its veins. Did trees have veins? Or were these tiny canals called something else? He couldn’t remember.

But that didn’t matter.

Soon, this piece of wood would have forgotten that it had once been a tree. It would become a cog wheel - something new, something useful.

The door burst open all of a sudden, and Master Ennis came rushing in, the metallic smell of winter fog and woodfires clinging to his fur. “Ooh, what’s this? A new machine?”

Taris looked up with a smile. Yes, mornings were best, with their blissful silence and calm, but the afternoons were good in a different way, spiked with Master Ennis’ energy and enthusiasm. The young master kept Taris’ thoughts from wandering down strange and somber paths, a tendency that got stronger the later the day grew.

“A part of a machine, yes,” he said, and held the piece up for inspection. “I haven’t gotten far with it yet, so it’s not quite visible what it’ll become.”

“I can wait,” Ennis declared, and threw his bag on the table. Something clacked, and the young ape flinched. “Oi! I hope that wasn’t the ink pot...” He dug into the the bag to save his scrolls from being doused with ink, and Taris bent down to scoop up the scrolls that had tumbled to the floor during that maneuver.

He grabbed the edge of the table and blinked when he came up again. His head was still not quite right and reacted with a sharp pain and dizziness to all sudden changes of position.

Ennis took the scrolls from his hand. “You mustn’t dive for the scrolls, Tir. Your head is still sore.”

“I... forgot for a moment,” Taris murmured. “It doesn’t hurt anymore, only when I make sudden moves...”

“Well, then don’t make them.” Ennis flopped down on his bed and reached for the bowl of apples on his nightstand. “I want to go hiking with you soon, I don’t need you to hit your head again or something.”

He bit into the apple with gusto. “How does that flying thing work that you made for me yesterday? It’s just a wooden... bend. How does it even fly, and how in Cesar’s name does it come back when you throw it? And does it have a name? What’s it good for?”

So many questions... Taris settled for answering the easiest one. He limped to the bed and sat down beside Ennis, who had taken the toy from its shelf and was now turning it over in his hands. “See how it’s shaped when you look at it from the side? One edge is rounded, and a bit thicker, and the opposite edge is flat and sharp. That’s why it flies - the form gives it lift.”

Ennis held the toy up at eye level and squinted along it. “But how?”

“The air moves more quickly over the top of the wing than along its bottom, because it has to go a longer way in the same time. And the quicker the flow, the lower the... the pressure.”
Ennis frowned at him. “What pressure?”

Taris rubbed his forehead that was beginning to ache. How to explain this? “You like to walk along the river - do you also go swimming in summer?”

“Yes, but not in the river,” Ennis nodded. “The water always flows too fast. There’s a small lake to the East...”

“And do you just swim at the surface, or do you also swim underwater?” Taris interrupted him.

“I also swim underwater... why? What does that have to do with this... curve-wing... thing?”

“The deeper you go, the more pressure the water puts on you,” Taris said. “You can feel that pressure in your ears. I just meant to say that everything can exert pressure, not just solid things. Water can put pressure on objects that are submerged in it, and so can air. You can’t feel it, but it’s there. And it’s what makes a wing rise.” He pointed to the toy in Ennis’ hands. “The pressure on top of that wing is lower than under it, and as a result, the wing soars.”

Ennis stared at him, then at the toy. “How do you know these things? Who taught you that?”

The headache was getting worse. Taris squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “I, I... I can’t remember. I’m sorry, Master Ennis.”

“No, don’t be sorry,” Ennis murmured, still contemplating the toy in his lap. “I wish I could forget all the unimportant stuff, and just remember the important things, like you do.” He drew a long, slow breath and turned away to put the ‘bent-wing’ back on the shelf. “It’s really neat.”

“Is there something in particular you wish to forget?” Taris asked cautiously.

“My mom.” Ennis didn’t look at him; he had begun to dig around in his school bag once more.

“If you want to talk about it...” Taris offered after a moment of silence.

“It’s not important anyway,” Ennis muttered, and dug deeper into his bag.

“If it makes you unhappy, it is important,” Taris said. “And sometimes talking about it helps.”

Ennis tossed his bag to the side with a deep sigh. “My mother ran away last year. She lives in the western prefecture now, with the prefect there. His name is Aboro. The baboon-ass. Father should’ve kicked him out of his prefecture, but he didn’t. He said living with my mother wasn’t a crime.”

“That... I can understand that this makes you unhappy,” Taris murmured after a moment of stunned silence. “You must miss your mother a lot.”

“Yes...” For a while, Ennis said nothing, just picked at some invisible thread on his blanket.

“It’s just... she never comes to visit,” he murmured. “Or invites me to come visit her. Last year she sent me a letter for my birthday... but this year, she didn’t.” He looked up. “I found you on my birthday, you know? Everyone had forgotten about it, except for Zatis. I told him you’re my birthday present from the Mothers.”

Taris returned the boy’s tiny smile and fought the urge to ruffle his fur; to engage in that kind of familiarity towards one’s master just wasn’t done. “I’m glad I could brighten your day by almost drowning,” he joked.
“That’s not how I meant it,” Ennis protested with a snort.

“I know,” Taris said, smiling. “I’m grateful for your taking care of me. I would’ve died on that shore if you hadn’t found me.”

Ennis opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, then just shook his head. “I just don’t understand why she doesn’t want to have anything to do with me anymore,” he murmured, his momentary good mood gone again.

Taris wondered what he had actually wanted to say.

“She and my father fought a lot before she left,” Ennis continued. “But she and I never fought, and I thought...”

“She still loves you,” Taris tried to assure him. “Maybe she’s still hurt by the fights with your father, and tries to forget... everything that happened back then.”

“But it wasn’t my fault...” Ennis protested, and before Taris could remind himself that touching his master was bad manners, he had reached out and had ruffled the boy’s hair. Fortunately, the young master seemed to be too surprised to scold him for his faux pas.

“No, it’s not your fault,” Taris said. “And it’s not fair of your mother to ignore you like that, but parents are just people, too, you know? They make mistakes, and they aren’t always their best selves. But that says nothing about you, Ennis... Master Ennis. You’re a good son, a good master. Never doubt that.”

The boy smiled at him, and this time, the smile did linger. “And you’re a good human. What are you working on now? What’s that piece of wood for?”

“It’s going to be a cog wheel,” Taris said, and reached for the workpiece. “But the machine it’ll go into is a surprise - you need to be patient for another day, if you can manage that...”

Before his master could protest, the door opened, and Zatis stuck his head in. “Time for your lesson, young man.” He nodded at Taris. “The healer is here for Taris’ appointment, so he won’t have time to play with you anyway.”

“I’ll be here when you return, Master,” Taris said cheerfully to the groaning boy. “Then I’ll explain to you how the crooked wing returns to the thrower.”

“Or maybe you can sit through the interpretation of Scroll 58, Verses 8-13 for me,” Ennis moaned, and dragged his feet to the door. “I’ll drink that tea of yours in exchange.”

“The tea tastes horrible,” Taris said with a smile. “I think reading those Scrolls is the better deal for you.” He and Zatis exchanged an amused look. After a period of wary supervision, Zatis had obviously come to the conclusion that Taris wasn’t a danger for his protégé; the old orangutan had even allowed him to have a carving knife so he could make toys for Ennis.

Zatis was the boy’s tutor and something like a surrogate father, tasked with giving him lessons in subjects that the public school didn’t provide - things like philosophy and history, and an introductory class on how to run a prefecture... or a district. Taris had no idea if he had just forgotten the details of how the apes handled their political and administrative succession, or if nobody had ever bothered to teach him these things in his former life; but somehow he had assumed that those positions weren't hereditary. Maybe he had been wrong... or maybe Ennis was just being groomed for a political career in general. So far, he hadn't shown much enthusiasm for it.
Taris’ heart picked up a bit at the human entering the room after the apes had left. Laisa had assured him that they had never met before Ennis had dragged him across her threshold, but Taris could never shake that first, involuntary shiver of recognition when she came to visit him. It was the only time he fervently wished he could remember something - remember who she reminded him of, why her face, her slender form, her light steps, electrified him with their familiarity.

He felt attracted to her. Maybe it was as simple as that. But just as one didn’t hug one’s master, so one didn’t desire one’s healer. It was... It just wasn’t done.

So he stayed where he was, perched on the edge of his master’s bed, and tried to keep his face bland and relaxed. “Good afternoon, L... Laisa.”

But then she smiled, “Hello, Taris. How are you feeling today?”, and he found himself grinning back like a fool.

“I’m feeling great.”

“That’s probably because you tense up while you try.” The healer opened the canister with his healing tea and peeked inside. “Don’t try so hard, Taris. With time, the memories will come back on their own. I see you’ve been drinking your tea like a good patient.” She flicked him a quick smile, and Taris valiantly fought down the urge to sit up even straighter at her praise.

“I don’t try to force them. It’s only when Master Ennis wants to know something... and I try to give him an answer...”

“Master Ennis knows that you’re not trying to be wilful, Taris - you’re not refusing to answer him, you sincerely don’t remember. There’s no reason to panic and grasp around for a memory to satisfy him.” She came over to him and began to gently brush her hands over the bumps on his head, and Taris closed his eyes and focused on keeping his breathing even. Her fingers were cool from the wintry air outside. Cool and soothing, her touch more like a caress than an examination.

“The swellings are gone,” she said, and the cool touch vanished. Taris opened his eyes and smiled up at her.

“Does that mean I don’t need to drink that tea anymore?” he asked.

She quirked an eyebrow. “Is it really as horrible as you wanted to make Master Ennis believe?”

He laughed. “No, I just wanted to sweeten his Scroll lesson for him.”

She quickly brushed her hand over his hair. “In that case, I forgive you. And yes, you need to drink that tea for some time yet. It’s not just for your head, but for relieving the rest of your injuries, too.”

He would have to throw half of it away again, so that she’d have to come back sooner.

“Your friend visited again,” she said while she refilled the tea canister; the bitter scent of goldenseal and some unknown resin filled the room. “He was pretty devastated when I told him you were no longer lodging under my roof.”

She was referring to the man who had jumped over the wall of her garden - the one who had called him by a different name. Taris felt his mouth go dry. He hadn’t recognized the man, had just felt a sense of danger at the tension that had pulled the stranger’s body taught like a drawn bow.

Or maybe that was the wrong comparison; the man had been more like the arrow on that bow,
ready to come at him in a flash, a point of focused despair.

“I don’t remember him,” he just said.

“Well, he seems to remember you.”

“That... doesn’t change anything for me.” The headache was back in full force.

Laisa straightened, and regarded him thoughtfully. “Isn’t it at least possible that you knew him before? You don’t deny that you’ve forgotten almost everything - so why not him, too? Does the name Dehni sound familiar?”

“No.” Taris rose and wandered to the window, suddenly unable to sit still any longer. “And I don’t... I’m not...” He drew a deep breath and propped his hands on the window sill, leaning heavily on it.

“I’m a brand-new man now. Whoever I was, the water washed it all away. I’m washed clean, I’m... I’m made new.” He turned around to meet her gaze. “I want to stay that way.”

She regarded him warily. “What are you running away from, Taris?”

“I don’t know.” He smiled, though he didn’t feel like smiling anymore. “And maybe that’s for the best.”
“Wait here,” Laisa said under her breath, “let me see if Master Ennis is still in the room with Taris.”

“Told you, the name is Alan,” Burke whispered, annoyed, but the healer was already out of earshot.

He exhaled slowly, trying to look as if he belonged in this corridor. Maybe he should start polishing one of the wooden statues decorating the walls, in case some guard appeared around the corner.

But it was only Laisa who appeared a moment later and tugged lightly at his sleeve. “We’re alone for now,” she said, just as quietly as before, and Burke ignored his suddenly thudding heart and followed her into the room.

Voltis’ house reminded him a bit of Galen’s old home in the City - it wasn’t wedged into the crown of a tree, but built from the ground up like a human building, probably because no tree would’ve been able to accommodate its sprawling size. It went over two stories, and the room of ‘Master Ennis’ was on the upper floor.

The interior was pretty spare: a desk, a bed, a trunk, some shelves that were filled what had to be Al’s carvings - a boomerang, something with a lot of wooden cog wheels, and even something that looked like a miniature oil rig, though Burke didn’t study the contents of the shelf long enough to be certain. His eyes were drawn to the man who had been sitting on the only bed (and where did he sleep? In his own room? On the floor, like a dog?), and was now slowly rising, staring at him with a mixture of incredulity and... something Burke couldn’t quite put a finger on.

Virdon turned to the healer. “Why did you bring him here?” His voice was a little rough, maybe from shock, but otherwise, it sounded like always, just like the man himself looked like he had before, now that all of his bumps and bruises were fading.

... save for some red welts peeking out from his collar, on the left side of his neck. Burke couldn’t remember if Virdon already had them in the healer’s garden; he had been too distracted by the fact that his friend was alive against all odds. But now he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the wound. It looked like...

Shit, Al, what’ve these sick monkeys done to you? His own hand involuntarily crept to his neck.

“I asked her to,” he forced out.

“Did Master Ennis allow this... visit?” Virdon asked. He was still talking to Laisa; after that first glance, he now studiously avoided even looking at him.

Burke let out an exasperated sigh and scratched his jaw. “Look, Al-“

“My name is Taris,” Virdon said evenly.

“No, it’s not!” Burke snapped. “Goddammit, Al...”

“Dehni, calm down.” Laisa’s soft voice stopped him.

Burke moistened his lips and drew a measured breath, remembering Galen’s admonition not to put
too much pressure on his friend. “Before you fell into that river, your name was Alan,” he said, fighting to sound as calm as the healer.

“I don’t remember this ‘before’,” Virdon said, and demonstratively turned away from him and towards the healer. “Why did you bring him here, and without Master Ennis’ permission, to boot?”

“For two reasons,” Laisa said lightly; she began to take her cone-shaped paper bags out of her basket and piled them on the table. “The first is that no matter whether you remember your past or not, it has happened. It’s real, and it’s not healthy to run away from yourself, no matter the reason.”

She stopped rummaging in her basket, and straightened to calmly regard Virdon, who froze under her gaze like a rabbit before a snake. “Those memories haven’t been destroyed, Taris - they aren’t lost. You just put them away somewhere in your mind and refuse to turn around and go looking for them. Dehni here wants you to look, and he wants to show you what exactly you need to be looking for.”

“And the second reason?” Virdon said hoarsely.

“The second reason is that Dehni is your friend, and you were his friend,” Laisa said gently. “And he’s grieving the loss he’s suffered.”

Burke felt heat rising into his cheeks at that calm diagnosis. So what if he wasn’t okay with Al playing A Boy And His Dog with that monkey? Everyone still in their right mind wouldn’t be okay with that!

“I’m a healer,” Laisa was saying, “I cannot just stand by idly and watch people suffer.”

*Well, lady, last time I looked, it didn’t say ‘shrink’ on your door plate. Stick to your herbs, and leave the psych eval to ANSA!*

“I feel fine,” Virdon said, though he sounded a bit pained now. “I have a good life here - and if he were my friend, he’d be happy for me.”

*Now that’s enough bullshit for one day.* Burke suddenly didn’t give a damn whether he was being too pushy with Virdon. Let the healer fuss over the man, but this was just too, too...

“Listen, Al,” he growled. “You’re not in a position to judge whether playing house with a monkey constitutes a ‘good life’ or not. You’re out of your fucking mind, Colonel, ‘cause when you lost your memories, you also lost a world of context, and I literally mean a world!”

He gestured towards the shelves. „You have a son of your own back home, Al! You told me how you’d make these machines and stuff for him, to teach him about physics, and it’s what you’re trying to do here now, too, with this monk... with that ape kid. But you can’t be his father, Al. You can’t even be his fatherly friend. All you’ll ever be is his pet. You two will be a boy and his dog. That’s... that’s beneath you.“

“Serving the apes is a human’s place,” Virdon murmured.

“But it’s not your place, don’t you get that?” Burke clenched his fists in helpless rage.

Virdon was just shaking his head at his outburst, looking at him with those hazy blue eyes, and smiling one of his painfully familiar half-smiles. “I’m nothing special... Dehni... it’s my place like it’s every other human’s place in this world.”

*But you an’ I ain’t from this world, Al, an’ we know, we know that it’s not our place.* But he
couldn’t tell Virdon that, he couldn’t give away their peculiar origins while the native healer was in the same room with them.

Not that it would’ve made a difference - if Al didn’t believe him that he’d had a life worth remembering in general, adding starships and wormholes wouldn’t make it more believable to him, either.

“What about your family back home?” Burke said desperately. “You think it’s fair to just forget them?”

At the table, Laisa was biting her lip. She looked stricken, all of a sudden, and Burke fought down his surprise - took a liking to your patient, eh? - and focused on Virdon, who was now frowning, and looking more alert than he had been for all of their conversation.

“You could just be making that up...” he said doubtfully.

Burke spread his arms. “Why would I do that? You have a wife, lovely lady, an’ a son who’s got your hair, an’ your eyes, looks like a miniature you, an’ a baby daughter, but you’ve never seen her ‘cause you had to leave before she was born...”

“I’d never leave my wife while she was pregnant,” Virdon declared. “Unless... unless my master gave me an order...” He looked deeply worried for a moment, and Burke allowed himself a moment of hope - maybe ‘Taris’ had suddenly realized that his place under the monkeys’ table wasn’t as comfortable as he had been made to believe.

“Was that the reason?” Virdon wanted to know. “Did my master send me away?”

Burke stared at him. Could he sell ANSA as, technically, their master? But if he started camouflaging everything in ape costumes, he’d just confirm Virdon’s misguided assumption that they were natives of this time. Maybe he’d even develop false memories.

If he wanted to get Virdon to remember, he’d have to remind him of their real origins, however fantastical they might sound. But for that, he’d need to catch him alone.

He breathed out heavily. “No, Al. It’s a bit more complicated than that, an’... maybe we should continue this talk at another time. Don’t wanna get Laisa here into trouble for bringing me here, if your master turns up all of a sudden, an’ sees me chatting with you.”

“Yes, that’s... you’re right.” Virdon looked way too relieved for Burke’s taste.

“Yeah, I guess it’s better we go now,” he murmured, trying not to feel defeated. Laisa had told him that he couldn’t expect instant results. Galen had told him, of all people! But he couldn’t stop brooding about it.

“You’re unusually quiet,” Laisa remarked as they passed the outer gate of Voltis’ estate.

“’m doin’ some thinkin’,” Burke muttered.

“Oh. Well, then I won’t disturb you,” Laisa said solemnly, but Burke could hear her amusement underneath.

“Just because I’m not crackin’ jokes all day...” he grumbled. “Y’know, I didn’t really expect him to remember anything. I... I know it’s not that simple. But I hadn’t expected him to be so... so against even trying. It’s like he doesn’t want to remember! ”
“Yes, that’s my impression, too,” Laisa agreed, to his surprise. “Did anything bad happen to him recently? Something that frightened him deeply, for example? Sometimes people can’t remember because there is a memory that is just too monstrous to cope with for them.”

“Not that I’d know of,” Burke murmured, but his thoughts wandered involuntarily back to Etissa. He had been attacked in the street there, and had been forced to fight and kill in illegal manfighting matches. By all rights, he should be the one with amnesia!

But Virdon had been oddly... withdrawn since then, too.

And Burke had seen oddly... rope marks around his wrists.

Something had happened to his friend in Etissa.

“Not that I’d know of,” he repeated absently. “But I’m sure as hell gonna find out.”

“I am so grateful that you agreed to meet with me, Chairwoman,” Zana said, and bowed.

The Orangutan sitting regally in a plush chair across from her gestured for her to take a seat, too. “Well, the case is quite outrageous,” she said. “Of course I’m interested in the details. If I can help you with your human in any way, I will.”

“Your help will be invaluable, Zorya,” Zana said, relieved, and sat down. She almost vanished in the soft cushions - a sensation that was completely unfamiliar after almost a year of sitting on wooden benches, wooden chairs, or around a campfire with nothing but a blanket between her behind and the naked earth. She wasn’t sure if she’d ever get used to plush cushions again.

“I’m sorry that your journey took such a disastrous turn recently,” Zorya said, and reached for her teacup. “But the roads are treacherous at this time of the year. I cannot imagine traveling at all in this weather. How did you deal with all that rain?”

“The canopy of our wagon was waxed,” Zana said, forcing herself not to twitch with impatience. Orangutans never tackled a subject head-on; there was always a round or three of seemingly meaningless chit-chat, although in most cases, it wasn’t as meaningless as most Chimps thought.

You grew up with this, Zana - you can navigate small talk, even if it drives you crazy. The ape across from her was not only the founder and de facto leader of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty against Humans in Chubla, her organization was the origin and the hub for all human protection societies in the north. If anyone knew how to deal with Alan’s strange predicament, it would be her. And if Zana had to humor her by engaging in Orangutan small talk, by Cesar, she would!

“But the fog! And the wind! I would’ve been miserable all the time.” Zorya took a sip from her cup, and Zana reached for her cup on the table, and followed suit.

“I’m certainly relieved that we’ll stay in a solid house with walls on all sides for the rest of winter,” she admitted. And it was true - the inn was lovely, or would have been, if Peet hadn’t been prowling it like a caged bushcat. Watching him despair was painful - even more painful than the knowledge that healing Alan meant losing them both.

Zana took another gulp of her tea and focused on the burning pain as the hot liquid ran down her throat. She needed to distract herself from the grief that always pounced on her when she remembered their talk after Galen had returned from his futile audience with Voltis. Galen had been sensible as always, laying out all the reasons why releasing Alan and Peet into the Forbidden
Zone was their only option for freeing Alan; and Peet had been relieved, although he had taken pity on her when she had teared up...

“Chubla is a good place to hibernate,” Zorya interrupted her brooding. “The best place north of the mountains, or so they say. We have a lot of amenities here - restaurants, theaters, there is a monastery to the north of Chubla that offers retreats for laypeople - I go there several times a year, to replenish myself. Working for the Society is taxing for the nerves...”

“I can imagine,” Zana said, seeing her opening. “You must see a lot of abused humans... traumatized humans...”

Zorya flicked her a wry glance that was uncannily reminiscent of the glares she had always received from Zaius, and Zana hastily took another sip from her tea.

“Why, yes,” the Orangutan said, and put her cup back on the table. “Though I’ve never come across a case where a human lost all of its memories. It is quite intriguing, apart from the personal tragedy. What happened, exactly?”

“A part of the road broke away right under our wagon,” Zana said, and put her cup on the table. She wasn’t sure that she wouldn’t break the delicate china if she kept it in her hand - she could already feel her body tensing up at the memory of how Alan...

“The wagon sagged, of course - two of its wheels were hanging in thin air all of a sudden, and all of our belongings were skidding to one side, adding their weight and shifting its balance even further. The... the wagon began to slide off the edge, and the road was muddy, so it was very slick, and didn’t offer any resistance to that motion...” She took a deep breath, rubbing her hands in her lap.

“What a nightmare,” Zorya murmured sympathetically.

“I’m still having nightmares about those moments,” Zana confessed. “I always dream that I’m plummeting into that abyss, but in reality, it was, was Nait - he stayed in the wagon after everyone had already jumped off, to cut the horses from their harness. The wagon would’ve dragged the poor things with it otherwise, but... but I still wish he’d jumped off in time, too.”

“So your human fell into the river, together with the wagon,” Zorya mused. “It’s a miracle that the wagon didn’t strike it to death when they both hit the water.”

“That’s the real tragedy,” Zana said with a trembling voice. “My husband had managed to grab Nait’s hand, and he and Dehni were about to pull him onto the road again, when he... he slipped out of my husband’s grip. He... Kova swears that Nait let go of his hand,” she added in a whisper. “Nait wanted to save him and Dehni from being dragged over the edge by his weight. He sacrificed himself to save them.”

“That would’ve been an extraordinarily noble gesture,” Zorya said. “What does your husband think?”

Zana felt her fur bristle. Did Zorya believe that humans were devoid of nobility and selflessness? Shouldn’t the founder of the Human Protection society be more open about human potential? Did this woman, despite all her efforts towards a better treatment of humans, still believe that they didn’t have souls?

“Humans are unique, in that they are the only animals able to grasp the concept of death,” Zorya said. “That is the reason you won’t find suicidal horses, or cats, but occasionally, you’ll find a human who finds its situation so unbearable that they overcome their natural survival instinct and
try to kill themselves. I wonder if there could’ve been something that made life seem unbearable for your human - yet stayed completely hidden from you.”

“That’s quite a damning verdict on our aptness to keep humans,” Zana muttered, but Zorya’s words had struck her to her core. Alan had wrestled with something dark and terrible since they had left Etissa. Something that... something that had made his life seem unbearable? Galen had insisted that Alan had let go of his own will. That he had *wanted* to fall to his death.

“It’s not a verdict at all, Mila,” Zorya said evenly. “I’m not judging you - you were in a demanding situation, traveling in this weather... you were probably distracted and overwhelmed. It happens - none of us is perfect. But it seems to me that in order to move forward, you have to trace back your steps, and find out what threw your human so out of balance.”

“I’ll do that,” Zana vowed. “Now that you mentioned it... But as you said, traveling at this time of the year was gruelling.” She sighed. “I just can’t shake the fear that if I let too much time pass, Nait will have settled into his new life as Ennis’ human...”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that.” Zorya poured them some more tea. “As far as I’ve heard, he’s being treated well... even indulgently... and a safe and friendly environment actually provides the best conditions for a spontaneous reemergence of his memories. He would still need friendly encouragement, and if possible, cues that would prompt a memory. But no aggressive probing - that would be detrimental.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Zana murmured, “although it’s a bit difficult to even see him at the moment. Voltis’ son is very protective of his new human - he's probably aware that if Nait regains his memories, he’ll be no longer willing to stay his pet.”

“Voltis should never have colluded in this farce,” Zorya said sternly. ”He knows perfectly well that your Nait isn’t a wildling, and to ask for *papers*, after you barely saved your very lives, is just unconscionable!”

“Well, he told my husband that he is doing things strictly by the book,” Zana said faintly.

Zorya allowed herself a tiny, ladylike snort. “If that was true, he’d have rooted out the *Kobavasa* a long time ago.”

Zana frowned. “The what?”

“The *Kobavasa*. A gang of reprobates that terrorize the humans in the district. At first they just preyed on lone humans they could catch away from the villages, but over time, they grew bolder. They have laid waste to a number of human settlements, killed humans in their huts... whole families vanish overnight without a trace. The humans are terrified.”

The tea cup clattered on its plate as Zorya put it on the table. “They smear sick paroles on the walls of upstanding citizens - all in all, they are an embarrassment for the district, not to mention the financial damage that the prefectures are suffering, with their workforce too terrified to go out into the fields anymore.” She rose and stepped to the window, the usual Orangutan serenity gone. “I don’t have to tell you that the Society has been strongly advocating for increased security for the humans, as well as for a vigorous investigation of the *Kobavasa*.”

She turned away from the window to face Zana. “But neither has happened yet.”

“But... why not?” Zana wondered. “This is a serious threat to the wellbeing of the humans... or, as you said, at least a threat to the financial wellbeing of the prefectures. Surely Chief Voltis would at
least admit that the latter is a problem?”

Zorya threw up her hands. “I have no idea what’s holding him back. The humans are scared, the prefects are livid, and the guard is annoyed, and, well, getting restless. And Voltis is coming more and more under fire for not getting this problem under control. Instead, he’s wasting his time and energy on indulging his wayward son with a human that he knows is rightfully yours! The man has lost sight of the right priorities ever since... ah well.” She exhaled heavily and flapped her hands. “Forgive me for wasting your time with this gossip.”

“You didn’t waste my time,” Zana said, and rose. “My other human is fond of running along the river every day. He was a racer once, and... well, but he’s all by himself. I can no longer allow these runs, after what you’ve told me.”

*Voltis should’ve told Galen about these Kobavasa. What is wrong with this man? Peet won’t like this at all. He’ll go insane if he’s cooped up inside all day.*

*Mothers, I will go insane, cooped up with him all day!*

And then there was the problem how to get Galen to open up about Etissa. Zana had the distinct feeling that it wouldn’t be advisable to have their explosive human in the same room with Galen when the truth about Alan’s employ finally came to light.

She wasn’t sure if *she* wanted to be there to hear it, either.
“The doctor isn’t here. Is it an emergency?”

Galen shifted the leather bag on his shoulder, and smiled nervously at the old housekeeper, who had opened the door just wide enough to squint at him with one eye. “In a manner of speaking, yes. Will he be back soon?”

It was hard to tell through the small crack between door blade and frame, but Galen thought he saw the old woman shrug. “That’s always difficult to say, but the doctor tries not to skip his lunch.”

“Is it, uh, possible that I wait for him here?” If the good doctor was also seeing his patients in his town practice, there had to be a waiting room that was open to visitors. Galen wasn’t sure if he’d be able to gather his courage again to come back if he let the woman send him away now.

The door blade didn’t move. “What is this emergency of yours? Coughing horse, pig with diarrhea...?”

“Actually, I wanted to apply as doctor Ropal’s assistant,” Galen said demurely.

“Why didn’t you say that in the first place?” The housekeeper yanked open the door and pulled a surprised Galen inside. “Come in, come in, you can wait in the kitchen. Tea?”

“Uh, yes, ah, thank you,” Galen stuttered, and followed the old Chimpanzee into a white-tiled kitchen whose windows looked out to a wind-swept vegetable garden.

The housekeeper sat him down at the table and poured him a cup of tea. “I’ve long told the doctor that he needs an assistant. He’s not getting any younger, you know? And all those calves insist on getting stuck in the birth canal in the middle of the night, and in the farthest possible prefecture! It’s getting harder and harder for him, but do you think he’d ever admit it? Men!”

She turned away and puttered around at the oven. Galen inhaled deeply as the aroma of grilled meat and spices tickled his nose. A hot lunch in this cold weather sounded good... not that he could hope to be invited. He was here strictly for business.

“Well, it would be a mutually advantageous arrangement,” he said, and took a sip from his tea. It was barely more than hot water, but he was careful not to grimace as he set down his cup. “I studied veterinary medicine in the City, but their focus is unfortunately more on the theory than on practice. I was hoping to learn a lot under the supervision of the esteemed doctor. He must be a fount of knowledge and experience.”

“Oh, he is, he is,” the woman said proudly. “There’s not much Dr. Ropal can’t make better. Have you heard of that human that lost all of its memories? Poor thing.”

“I’ve heard about the case, yes,” Galen said dryly, and took another sip of his watery tea. The ‘poor thing’ was the main reason he was sitting in the veterinarian’s kitchen - as Ropal’s assistant, he would accompany him to every patient, including Alan. “Is he still treating it?”

The housekeeper shrugged. “He’s visiting once a week, but so far, the beast’s condition seems to be unchanged. At least it’s docile - Chief Voltis took a grave risk when he allowed his son to keep it, if you ask me. Not that anyone ever does...” The pan and pots were being rattled with a bit more force now.
Galen wisely refrained from commenting on Voltis’ decision. “Well, I took a few courses in human anatomy and physiology at university,” he just said, “and I copied some chapters from a new book on human surgery, so maybe I can contribute a bit of useful information for this case...”

“Dr. Ropal isn’t too fond of book knowledge,” the old woman said with a sniff. “He says it’s just one idiot copying from another idiot, both feeling validated by each other. Not that I meant you’re an idiot for copying that book,” she added hastily, and Galen chortled.

“No offense taken,” he said with a grin. “And he’s right, mostly, but maybe he’ll at least have a look at the scrolls I brought,” he patted the bag in his lap, “and tell me if I was, in fact, an idiot to waste my time with them.”

“I’m sure he will,” the old woman assured him, “he’s always willing to teach the young—“

A loud knock at the front door cut her short. She exchanged a frown with Galen. “Another patient? I always says, when they come, they come in flocks. I’ll be right back.” She pushed the pan to the edge of the stovetop and hurried outside. Galen let his gaze wander around the kitchen, trying to find a flower pot to stealthily pour away the rest of his tea.

The voice at the entrance was deep, young, male, speaking in a cadence that made Galen’s fur rise.

A guard. What does a guard want at Dr. Ropal’s practice? Mothers, did Alan have a seizure, or attack the Chief’s son?

Then the old woman started screaming, and all speculation dropped from Galen’s mind as he sprinted from the kitchen to the entrance, where a guard was propping up the housekeeper who looked as if she’d faint any moment. The old Chimp was still wailing, her words an inarticulate burble.

“Mothers, what’s going on here?” Galen gasped.

“He’s dead, he’s dead, he’s dead, oh Mothers,” the woman cried out. Galen stared at her, then at the guard.

“Who’s dead?” he asked, confused.

“Dr. Ropal had an accident,” the guard said gruffly. “He’s being brought to the morgue as we speak. Can you...?” He gently pushed the sobbing housekeeper into Galen’s arms and turned to leave.

“Uh, just a moment of your time, lieutenant,” Galen said hastily, stumbling a bit under the woman’s weight. “As far as I know, Dr. Ropal was out to treat a patient. What... what kind of accident befell him?”

“I’m not authorized to give you that kind of information, unless you’re a relative.” The guard’s voice was cool; Galen decided that it would be wise to back off.

“Who’s... who will take over Dr. Ropal’s duties now?” he asked instead. “Not to sound heartless, but the people here still need a veterinarian for their animals...”

The guard shrugged. “They’ll send for a replacement, I guess. In the meantime, farmers will treat their animals themselves, same as they’ve always done. And shoot the ones that are beyond help.”

“I’m just asking because I’m a veterinarian myself,” Galen explained. He felt the old woman stiffen in his arms. “I’m just traveling through, so I’m not, uh, speculating on Dr. Ropal’s
practice,” he lied. “But until a replacement has arrived, the farmers wouldn’t be without medical assistance.”

The guard raised a brow. “Well, you’d have to ask Chief Voltis to officially appoint you, but I can’t imagine he’d send you away. Finding a replacement could take all winter...”

“...and we had decided to hibernate in Chubla anyway,” Galen interjected, careful not to show too much relief.

Inside, he was jubilating, though. As the only and official veterinarian, nobody would be able to deny him access to Alan. And who knew, if he avoided major blunders, Voltis might even decide to give him the position permanently, and an unremarkable and uneventful life to go with it.

“I’ll go to him right away,” he told the guard. “But we need to take care of this poor woman first. She’s understandably distraught.”

“I’ll send her daughter over,” the guard offered, and Galen nodded gratefully.

“Come now,” he said, “let’s go back into the kitchen, and then you’ll sit down and have a cup of tea... I can imagine that this must be a shock for you...”

“I told him not to go alone,” the old woman sobbed. “I told him and I told him, but he’d never listen to me!”

“It’s really tragic that I came here a fraction too late,” Galen murmured. He’d still have liked to know what kind of accident exactly had claimed the good doctor’s life, but well, gossip traveled fast; he’d learn about it sooner or later.

He led the woman to the table and had her sit down. She grabbed his sleeve when he turned away to fetch the tea pot. “Promise me that you won’t drive out to the villages alone! It’s too dangerous!”

“I, I have an orderly who is very proficient with weapons,” Galen assured her, wondering if he should ask her what kind of dangers were lurking in the prefectures. But the woman was sobbing wildly again, covering her face with her apron, and it just felt cruel to insist on gory details. He already felt like a dirty opportunist for having wedged himself into that replacement position.

So he just poured her a cup of tea, and awkwardly patted her shoulder. “Your daughter should be here any moment,” he murmured. “And I have to go and make the arrangements with Chief Voltis... and I’m sure you’ll want to make arrangement for the doctor’s burial...”

A new bout of wailing erupted upon his last words, and Galen opted for a hasty retreat. “I’m really so sorry for your loss, ma’am,” he said from the door. “I hope that you’ll find some solace in the knowledge that he died doing what he, uh, loved. I’ll see myself out.”

He almost collided with a Chimpanzee woman in the hallway, murmured a hasty apology, and stumbled into the street with a deep sigh. What a morning! He wasn’t sure if he should feel proud of himself for his quick thinking, or ashamed for his ruthless exploitation of another ape’s tragedy.

Still the son of a Councillor. We’re just a bunch of bloodthirsty bushcats, every last one of us. Father would be proud.

For a moment, that last thought almost made him turn back towards the inn instead of going to Voltis’ office.

But then Alan’s face blinked up in his mind - a pale face, staring up at him with a look of utter
defeat in his eyes. The grip on his hand loosening.

Galen quickened his step.

“No fucking way!”

Zana threw her hands up, but Burke was having none of it. “I don’t give a damn about your laws - you have no right to lock me up in here! Of all people, Zana...” He stabbed a shaking finger at her.

“It’s for your own safety, Peet, don’t you understand?” Zana didn’t shout, but just barely. “There’s a band of murderous apes on the loose in this whole district! They are armed, and they are dangerous, and how do you think you’re going to defend yourself with your knife against their guns? They could shoot you from behind a tree, and you’d never even know what hit you!”

“A gang of murderous apes is out for my hide?” Burke scoffed. “Wow, that’s a new and worrying development!”

“These aren’t guards on patrol,” Zana said, clearly exasperated. “They don’t respect the law. They aren’t even bounty hunters, they’re just criminals targeting any human who is alone and, and... unprotected.”

“Y’know, I’m really trying to appreciate all those subtle differences, but it all sounds like ‘ape kill man’ to me. And I’ve dealt with that kind of ape before just fine, ‘cause face it, Zana, that kind of ape is almost the only kind there is!” Burke turned away and raked his hands through his hair, trying to calm down. Zana was... she was just afraid for him. After they had lost Al, maybe she was just... clingy.

The thought made him shudder.

“Look.” He clenched his fists, trying to divert all this stormy energy inside him to them, and keep it out of his voice, before he turned back to her.

“Look, Zana, you an’ Galen - you’re an anomaly. You’re the exception that proves the rule, an’ the rule is that apes are deadly for humans. It don’t matter if they kill us quickly with a bullet, or slowly by breaking our backs out in the fields. I had to deal with that fact ever since I crashed here, an’ the solution can’t be to hide me under your bed, ‘cause I’d never ever see the light of day again!”

She looked stricken. “And how are you going to help Alan, after they lynched you in some remote clearing?”

Burke laughed, incredulous. “That was a low blow, Zana. A low, low blow. Damn!” He shook his head. “Trust me, I can look out for myself - had to do it all my life.”

But she didn’t budge. “Etissa proved that you’re not invincible, Peet. I know you’re... alert, and well able to defend yourself, but sometimes, the forces you’re up against are just overwhelming. You’re right, in general, that this world isn’t exactly hospitable to humans - but there are apes who are trying to change that, Peet, it’s not just me and Galen! - but here, in this special case, it’s even more dangerous than usual! You have to take that into account!”

It was no use - she wouldn’t change her mind, and neither would he, and he’d probably just climb out of the window anyway, and...

“You know, now that you mentioned Etissa - seems like that shithole did a number on Al, too. He
hasn’t been the same since we left there.” Burke pulled his upper lip through his teeth, watching her face. “You know something about that?”

If Zana was surprised at him suddenly changing tack, she didn't show it; she just sighed and rubbed her palms against each other, a nervous gesture Burke had never seen on her before. “No. I noticed it, too, of course, but Alan insisted that he was just tired from whatever work he had to do for that ape.” She turned away to fiddle with the water kettle. “He did eventually concede that he was ‘not okay’, as he put it, but he still wouldn’t tell me why.”

She threw him a worried glance over her shoulder. “And it seems he hasn’t told you, either.”

Burke shook his head. “No, but I didn’t pester him about it... there’s some things I don’t like to talk about myself, either, so I figured... But maybe I should’ve asked him.” He stared morosely out the window. The sky was gray, as always. “I’m just not good at this sort of thing.”

Zana carried the tea pot over to the table and sat down. “Neither am I, it seems. I visited Chairwoman Zorya of the Human Protection Society this morning, and she suggested that some traumatic experience in Alan’s recent past could be the cause of his amnesia.”

She gestured invitingly at the chair across from her, but Burke shook his head and wandered to the window instead. He felt too tense to sit down, and he didn’t care for tea. A beer, yeah, he’d have gladly accepted a beer now...

He leaned against the window frame, facing her. “Well, now that he’s forgotten whatever shit went down in Etissa, asking him is a bit moot.” He smiled wryly. “Do you wanna ask Galen, or should I?”

“I think it’s better if I talk with him,” Zana muttered, and poured herself a cup of tea. “All things considered.”

Burke just snorted, but said nothing.

Just then the door opened and Galen entered, with a certain urgency in his step that either announced great news, or another crisis.

“Speak of the devil,” Burke murmured.

Zana flicked him a glance that hovered somewhere between dry amusement and a stern warning, and rose to get another mug for Galen. “Where have you been in that dreadful weather all morning, dear?”

“Oh, I, uh, had actually intended to visit Dr. Ropal,” Galen said, and plopped his leather bag on one of the empty chairs. “Alan’s, uhm, physician, you know?”

Well, at least he had stopped himself from calling him Al’s veterinarian, Burke thought, and settled more comfortably against the window sill. Any moment now, Zana would start grilling Galen about Etissa, and he had basically a box seat.

This would be good.

“Yes, I know,” Zana said, and poured him tea. “What did you discuss with him? Has Alan made any progress in his recovery?”

“The doctor, ah, he wasn’t there.” Galen sat down with a peculiar look on his face. “He was out treating a patient, but his housekeeper assured me that he would be back soon, so I waited for him
in his kitchen.”

Yep, the nose was beginning to twitch. Burke narrowed his eyes. “What happened?”

Galen flicked him a glance as if he was only now becoming aware of his presence. “A, a guard came by instead. Dr. Ropal is dead, he... he had an accident in that human village.”

“Mothers!” Zana pressed her hand over her heart. Then she glared at Burke. “What did I tell you? Now they don’t even shy away from killing apes!” She stared into space. “Maybe they targeted him because he’s helping humans, as a veterinarian... Zorya mentioned that they were vandalizing the houses of some apes... Maybe even her own house, though she didn't say that, exactly...”

Galen stared at her. “What are you talking about? He had an accident...”

“Ha!” Zana rose and began to pace the room. “That was no accident, mark my words. That was the work of the Kobavasa!”

“Are you... are you sure?” Galen asked; he suddenly looked ill.

“I spoke to Chairwoman Zorya this morning,” Zana said, still pacing. “She said that a band of apes has been terrorizing the district for more than a year now, killing humans, and that Voltis is either unable or unwilling to get it under control.”

“My bet is on ‘unwilling’,” Burke muttered. “What’s a dead human to him? Or a dozen?”

“Well, maybe he’s motivated now, with the Kobavasa no longer being content to just smear slogans on the town walls,” Zana said, her voice sharp with disapproval. “Or he will have trouble finding a replacement for his murdered veterinarian.”

“I... I’m afraid he already found a replacement,” Galen said weakly.

Both Burke and Zana gaped at him.

Then Burke began to laugh.

He couldn’t help it, he couldn’t stop laughing, even when Zana glared at him. It was just too... too...

“Oh my gawd, Galen, ol’ buddy,” he wheezed, and wiped the tears from his eyes. “That’s brilliant. Jus’... brilliant.” He turned away to bury his head in his arms against the window frame to muffle his laughter.

“What were you thinking, Galen?” he heard Zana’s voice behind him.

“I was thinking that as Voltis’ veterinarian, I’d be able to visit Alan every day, without anyone being able to stop me,” Galen said heatedly. “I was thinking that I could bring Peet along, as my orderly, so he wouldn’t have to sneak into Voltis’ estate and endanger himself anymore. I was thinking that we would have a chance to help Alan! I, I...”

Burke drew a deep breath and turned away from the window. The hysterical laughter inside him
was gone. He felt...

... surprised. Yeah, surprised.

“That was a good plan, actually,” he said. “An’ you couldn’t know that the KKK is out an’ about around here.”

“The Kobavasa,” Zana corrected him; she was still standing at Galen’s side, one hand on his shoulder. “But Galen, Alan won’t be your only patient - you’ll have to drive up and down the prefecture, or even into other prefectures, if there is a complicated case... just like Dr. Ropal did. And the roads are lonely... for miles and miles...” She sounded as if she’d begin to cry any moment. “You have to go to Voltis and retract this deal!”

Galen patted her hand, his nose twitching violently. “I can’t, Zana - if we want to help Alan, we must be able to visit him; and Voltis’ son can deny us those visits... unless I visit in my role as a veterinarian. It’s our only chance.”

“You’re risking your life, Galen!” Zana turned away and wiped her eyes, and Burke felt bad for her, but he couldn’t come to her aid - couldn’t ask Galen to drop the veterinarian act. It was their only chance to gain access to Al.

“I know,” Galen said quietly. “But so did Alan, over and over again. And I... I owe it to him.”

Damn you, Galen. Burke tiredly rubbed his face. Do you have to be so damn honorable all of a sudden?

“I’ll go with him,” he said. He shrugged when the apes stared at him. “What? He needs someone who actually knows how to handle a gun, an’ I need to get out an’ get some fresh air once in a while. That idea of yours to lock me up in here wouldn’t have worked anyway, Zana, an’ you know it.” He pointed at Galen, then at himself. “Win-win all around. We’ll pretend I’m your orderly, but lemme tell you right away, I won’t stick my hand into a cow’s ass or something.”

“No, that would be my job,” Galen murmured. “Well, I... I think that’s a good solution. You’re very proficient with weapons.”

Burke nodded. “So it’s a deal then? I’ll protect you against the KKK, an’ you’ll get me to Al.” And I get to grill you about Etissa once we’re on that lonely road, ‘cause I don’t think Zana will get a word out of you, you wily bastard.

Galen nodded, and emptied his cup in one draw. “It’s a deal.”

Burke pushed away from the window and ambled towards the door. “Perfect.”

“Where are you going, Peet?” Zana sounded equally alarmed and exasperated.

Burke graced her with a sunny smile, “Stables, Missus,” and closed the door before she could utter a word of protest.

It was still drizzling when he sneaked out the back door, but he didn’t mind. It made the air cool and fresh, just fine for clearing one’s head...

... on a nice, long run outside of town.
“As soon as your head hurts, or you get dizzy, or your leg hurts, or... or anything, you tell me, understood?”

Ennis cast a quick glance over his shoulder to his human, who was slowly following him through the underbrush. Even further behind him, Ennis’ bodyguard was crunching dead twigs under his boots. When Zatis was with him, they often watched birds or other wild animals - that wouldn’t be possible with this guard in tow.

Well, Ennis hadn’t planned to go birdwatching with his human. He hadn’t really planned anything, except for taking him outside. After two weeks, he was impatient to finally do something with Taris.

His human smiled at him. “I’m fine, Master, no need to worry.”

“Yes, but I’m responsible for you,” Ennis said pompously. “And Dr. Ropal said you mustn’t overstrain yourself. So you have to tell me at once.”

Taris dipped his head, still smiling. “I will, promise.”

“Good.” Ennis turned away again, and pointed ahead. “It’s not far anyway. It’s that little grove, see? I used to go there with my mother when I was little. I liked it, but I haven’t been there anymore for a long time.”

Not since his mother had left their home, and he wouldn’t have gone there today, either, but it was the only place that didn’t require climbing a steep slope; climbing would’ve been too demanding for Taris and his poor head.

Well, the river didn’t require climbing, either, but Ennis didn’t want to go there. Who knew if something there would stir Taris’ memory, and then he’d remember... whatever.

Ennis determinedly put his mind to something else. “Why are you limping, actually? Dr. Ropal says it’s not from your plunge in the river. He said it’s an old injury.”

“I don’t know,” Taris said after a pause. “It’s part of the life I’ve lost.”

Of course he wouldn’t know. Ennis felt stupid for asking, but couldn’t stop speculating. “Dr. Ropal said it’s a gunshot wound. Maybe a hunter shot you... or a farmer, when you tried to steal something to eat... I wonder how you got away, I don’t think you were able to run with a bullet in your hip...”

“Like I said, I don’t remember anything about it,” Taris said, but now the smile was gone from his voice.

They were slowly crossing a meadow now, the wilted grass swishing against their legs, and Ennis turned fully around, walking backwards, to watch Taris’ face. The human seemed pensive, a faraway look in his eyes.

Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to talk so much about his Before.

“What’s in your bag?” Ennis pointed at the canvas bag slung across Taris’ back. “We’re almost there, so you can tell me.” He could’ve ordered the human to tell him, but Taris had said it was a
surprise, and Ennis didn’t want to spoil his fun.

“Well, I could almost tell you,” Taris smiled, but his voice still sounded absent-minded. “The doctor also said that the other scar looks as if I had surgery,” he mused. “Simian surgery, nothing a human could do. So maybe I did belong to another ape once? One who brought me to a doctor after I was shot?”

Now this was a notion that Ennis didn’t want him to pursue. “Or it was someone who found you, like I did. Madame Zorya from the Human Protection Society runs a shelter, and they take care of abandoned and abused humans there. And sometimes they bring her wildlings, too... cubs who lost their mothers in a hunt, for example. They call for Dr. Ropal if the human is injured or sick.”

Taris frowned. “Do you think that Madame Zorya could tell me about my former life?”

Ennis shrugged. “If they brought you in from the wild, what could she tell you? She doesn’t live with you wildlings in the woods. And she’s the chairwoman of the Society, I don’t think she takes care of the humans herself. She’s just the administrator. She sometimes meets my father for lunch, and they talk about all kinds of things.”

“What things?” Taris wanted to know.

Ennis puffed up his cheeks. “Boring things.”

Taris laughed, and Ennis secretly let out a sigh of relief. “Alright, but now we’re really there.” He pointed to the treeline ahead of them. “Now you can show me your surprise.”

“You remember the crooked wing I made?” Taris reached into his bag and pulled it out.

“Yes,” Ennis said. “You threw it in the yard, and it came back to you, for some reason.”

“The trick is in how you throw it,” Taris said, and winked at him. “I’ll show you how.”

It wasn’t as easy as Taris made it look, and Ennis had to run and retrieve the toy whenever he tried to throw it himself - he didn’t allow Taris to go fetch it, because the human was still in recovery. But Taris was a patient teacher, full of praise for anything Ennis did right, and he found something to praise in every single throw; and thus Ennis didn’t break off their lesson, for fear of hurting the human’s feelings, although his own excitement had given way to frustration a long time ago.

But then he threw it just right.

He could already feel it when he let go of the wing - could feel the rightness in the fluid motion of his arm, of his whole body; in the humming tension that arched through him from his feet through his chest, into his arm and into the wood, and felt like lightning pushing it from his hand; felt it in the smooth flow of the wing’s flight, away and up, and up, and back, back in a bold curve, a whirring blade coming straight at his head-

His hand shot up, and the wood smacked against it, nested in his palm like a wild and joyous bird, the impact sending a prickling pain down to his elbow, a burst of energy he had never felt before.

“I did it!” he screamed at a grinning Taris. “Did you see that? It came back, and I caught it!”

“I saw it!” Taris called back, and clapped his hands. “Well done! Do you want to try it again?”

“Yes, I...”
And then another figure stepped into the clearing behind Taris, slowly clapping her hands, too, and the toy fell from Ennis’ numb fingers. Taris, alarmed by his reaction, spun around to face her.

Behind Ennis, the guard uttered a sharp command.

“No, don’t!” Ennis held up his hand. “It’s alright, it’s... she’s... she’s my mother.”

The woman came closer, a sly smile on her face as if she and Ennis were sharing a joke. “I’m glad you still know me - for a moment, I was afraid your bodyguard would shoot.”

“What are you doing here?” Ennis said slowly.

She spread her arms, still smiling. “Visiting my son. Or isn’t that allowed anymore?”

“How did you know I’d be here today?” She looked exactly as he remembered her, which was strange, for some reason. After all this time, Ennis had thought she’d be different somehow - wilder, maybe. Running away to live with another man, leaving him and Father, was the wildest thing he could imagine.

But she looked as she always had - the only thing different were her clothes: trousers and a tunic like a guardsman, a poncho on top. She had thrown back the hood, but if she pulled it up, she’d just melt into the woods again, as invisible as she had been until just a moment before.

“Well, this was our special place, remember?” His mother turned her head and surveyed the clearing, and Ennis involuntarily followed her gaze. Wilted grass, naked trees, the sky hanging low and dark above the treetops.

In his memory, it had always been summer, and the wind had rustled the leaves above their heads, and his mother had played ball with him, or read him stories. Ennis swallowed heavily and bent down to pick up his crooked wing. “I actually never come here anymore,” he murmured.

“What a lucky day this is, then, when we both decided to come back here,” his mother said softly.

Ennis flicked her a glance. “You’re not really coming back, are you?”

She averted her gaze, and bit her lip, and Ennis fought the urge to hurl the wing at her head.

“I wanted to give you your birthday present.” She smiled wryly at his expression. “You thought I had forgotten your birthday? What kind of mother would I be? But I didn’t want to send it through the mail. One never knows what your father deems inappropriate for you. So many things can get lost in the mail.”

She pulled a leather strap over her head, and Ennis realized that she had been carrying a bag, just like Taris had, but her bundle was long and straight, and he couldn’t suppress a bout of curiosity at its contents.

His mother nodded encouragingly at him. “Take it. It’s yours. See if you like it.”

Ennis let the wooden wing drop into the grass and stepped forward to take the bundle; and suddenly, his mother had caught him in a fierce embrace and planted a kiss on his forehead. “Mothers bless your years,” she whispered. “May many lie before you.”

She released him just as suddenly, and he stumbled back, the leather bundle heavy in his hand. He just had to look what it was - how could she have carried it all the way from Aboro’s prefecture to here? He hastily untied the leather straps and unwrapped it.
It was a telescope.

It was beautiful.

Ennis gently brushed his fingertips along the brass cylinder and the polished rings that were glinting golden in the weak light of the winter sun, admiring the delicate work of the eyepiece. It was the most amazing thing he had ever seen. He turned to Taris.

“Zatis will go crazy, Tir! He’ll use it for bird watching, wanna bet? As long as he drags it out into the woods himself, I don’t mind...”

“You could watch the moon and the stars with it, from the rooftop,” Taris suggested after a moment. He rubbed his head, as if it was hurting again. “The, the moon has dark spots on it... you could see them more clearly...”

“Oh, good idea! And you could show me the stars again, the one that tells you where north is that you told me about!”

“I can do that,” Taris murmured, still staring at the telescope.

“Do you have a pet now?” His mother’s voice was neutral, and her face betrayed nothing as she let her gaze wander over Taris, from his head to his new moccasins.

Still, Ennis felt a stab of guilt lancing through his gut. His mother had adamantly been against using humans as workers, or pets, or anything, really. Humans didn’t belong in simian settlements, she had always said. If anything, they belonged into the wild, to run free with the other animals of the woods and mountains.

“I found him at the riverbank,” he said defensively. “He would’ve died if I hadn’t taken him in.”

“But he’s not dying now, is he?” His mother gestured at Taris, who had quietly picked up the crooked wing, and was now stuffing it into his bag. “He looks healthy enough to me.”

“Yes, but...” Ennis could feel his fur bristle. “He’s lost his memory - he can’t remember anything, not even his name. He doesn’t know where to go, he needs a home!”

“A human’s home is the wilderness, not the living room of an ape,” his mother said sternly. “You know that, Ennis.”

“Didn’t you listen?” Ennis snapped. “He doesn’t remember anything, he’d die out there!”

“Animals die all the time in the wild, Ennis, that’s the circle of life!” His mother shook her head, exasperated. “It’s the way of nature - what is born, must die, and the weak feed the strong. If you interfere with that, you’ll just upset the natural balance!”

Ennis gaped at her, at loss for words. She was wrong, wrong, and he wouldn’t give up his human, not to her and not to anyone, but Mothers, he wished he knew how to prove her wrong!

“So you are against taking medicine, and calling a doctor, too?” Taris’ calm voice cut in.

Ennis whipped his head around, too stunned to reprimand him.

His mother flicked Taris a disdainful glance, but couldn’t ignore the challenge. “Of course not. We aren’t animals.”

“But certainly you won’t deny that you’re also a part of nature? Part of that natural balance?” If
Taris was mocking her, it wasn’t noticeable; nothing in his face or voice betrayed ridicule. He seemed to be nothing but eager to understand.

His mother didn’t say anything. Maybe it had occurred to her, belatedly, that as an ape you didn’t discuss philosophy with a human.

“Well, be that as it may,” Taris said briskly, “I prefer to be alive, and I’m grateful that Master Ennis saved me from my certain death.”

“No creature wants to be enslaved by another creature,” his mother said softly. “It pains me to see how your head injury robbed you of your most basic instinct - the longing for freedom.”

_He’s not my slave_, Ennis protested silently, _he’s my friend!_

“If Ennis here had followed your logic, I’d be dead,” Taris said. “He treats me very well, I have a good life now.”

“Freedom is the highest good of all.” Ennis felt his mother’s eyes on him, but found it impossible to meet her gaze. Hot shame filled him... and anger, equally hot. “Higher even than life, no matter how comfortable,” his mother continued. “Many have chosen death over slavery.”

“We all die someday,” Taris said calmly. “Ape or human, it’s the only certainty in life. But I’m not eager to hasten that day’s arrival.”

“We need to go,” Ennis decided. He had to get away from here, right now, before his mother persuaded Taris to follow her into the shadow of the trees, into the wild, away from him. “I have Scroll study, and it starts in less than a quarter farewell. Come on, Tir, let’s go.” He turned away from his mother and grabbed the human’s sleeve. “I can’t be late for my lesson.”

“Don’t forget your telescope,” Taris murmured, and bent to pick it up.

“You carry it,” Ennis murmured back. “Thank you for the telescope, I really like it,” he called over his shoulder. “I gotta go.”

“Think of me when you reach for the stars with it,” his mother called after him. Ennis waved back in acknowledgment and lengthened his stride.

He’d give the thing to Zatis. His teacher loved birds. Zatis would put it to good use.

He felt like crying.

It seemed to be always raining in the damn mountains, which meant that Burke was more slipping in the mud than running, especially since every damn square foot of ground was angled either up- or downwards.

But worse than the mud under his feet was the water on his face. It wasn’t enough that the rain was pouring down in buckets, the twigs and branches hitting his face doused him with it, too, as he fought his way through the underbrush. Uphill, then downhill again, the cursed routine Marpo had beaten into him, back in Sapan, when he hadn’t been more than a racing horse... and then a...

Another branch with dripping, leathery leaves hit him square in the face, and for a second, Burke felt as if he’d throw up. He couldn’t breathe, he was-

_NOT drowning in a bucket. Snap out of it, for fuck’s sake!_
Burke stopped, bent over with his hands on his thighs, and forced himself to take slow, measured breaths. He stayed like that even after the nausea had receded, eyes squeezed shut against the memories threatening to peel off from the edges of his awareness and swim into focus.

_Not going there. Not going there. That was then, and this is now..._

Maybe it had been stupid to insist on his runs. Maybe it was stupid to try to get his flashbacks and panic attacks under control like that. He was no shrink; maybe he was doing it all wrong, this kind of aversion therapy he was inflicting on himself, and maybe he shouldn’t try proving to Zana that he was still his own master by defying her wishes that he stay inside Chubla’s walls, safe from those KKK monkeys.

But maybe he wasn’t trying to prove anything to Zana. Maybe he was trying to prove something to himself.

_Yeah, you’re doing a shit job with that, Master Burke._

He straightened and drew another deep, defiant breath. Since he had promised their freshly-minted veterinarian that he’d ride shotgun - literally - on his doctor rounds, he soon wouldn’t have time for these runs around Chubla, anyway. Right at this moment, Galen was buying a new wagon and outfitting it - with taxpayer money, since he was now working for Voltis - which meant that this was Burke’s last day in what counted as freedom in this world. So he’d better enjoy it.

It was pretty clear that Galen hoped to keep that position permanently; and why not? It was the apes’ best shot at having that normal life they were both craving. Burke couldn’t really fault them for it; he’d have loved to get his old life back, too, but contrary to him, Zana and Galen had a realistic chance of making their dream come true here. They had finally reached the fabled North; Urko was off their backs (except his back, he was carrying the damn gorilla with him, in his dreams, and in his bones, and maybe the crazy devil would haunt him for the rest of his days...)

Anyway. They had made it, and now the apes wanted to settle down. Chubla was nice enough, Burke supposed, as he slowly walked back towards town - for an ape, anyway. They could find a place for themselves here, and he was happy for Zana, he really was, she deserved it, but it also meant that Galen would have to play nice with Voltis.

And that meant that Galen couldn’t push too hard for Al’s release anymore. Burke batted at another wet leaf in frustration, and muttered a curse when the plant retaliated with a spray of water.

On the other hand, what could Galen really do? He had sworn up and down that he had tried to buy Virdon back, but that Voltis had flat out refused. His son wanted to keep the 'wildling' as his pet, and the chief indulged his son.

Plus there was the tiny problem of Virdon wanting to be the little monkey’s pet, too.

Movement and voices ahead of him jolted Burke out of his ruminations; he frowned and slowly approached the clearing, careful not to make a sound. He still wasn’t as silent as Virdon - and would probably never be - but with everything soaked and unable to crunch, he managed to get to the edge of the meadow without alerting the people standing in the middle of it.

It was Al and his little monkey, playing fetch with a boomerang. Of course; most apes hated getting their fur wet, but the kid apparently had a penchant for wandering around in the rain, otherwise he wouldn’t have found Virdon that day. It irked Burke to think that he might have come just minutes too late - if that ape had been wired normally like all his fellows, he’d have stayed home, and they wouldn’t be in this trouble now. Maybe Virdon would’ve even gotten his memory
back by now, if he’d seen his old team first, and not some foreign monkey telling him that he belonged to him.

But as it was now, getting Virdon to remember his true self seemed almost impossible, with the kid restricting their access to him. He also seemed to have lost the data disc - at least Burke hadn’t seen anything hanging around Virdon’s neck - so the only piece of evidence that they didn’t belong to this ape-ruled world was gone, too.

The little monkey froze all of a sudden, Virdon spun around, alarmed, and Burke felt the same jolt of alarm jumping from his heart into his limbs when the guard yanked his rifle to his shoulder and aimed at his friend-

No, at another ape stepping out into the clearing. The kid waved the guard to stand down, and the new ape came closer. Burke could see that it was a woman, wearing something like ape camo; she was smiling, but the little group facing her stayed tense. None of them smiled back.

Burke began to silently make his way around the clearing, closer to where the apes and Virdon were talking now. Anyone who made the little monkey that uneasy was someone he wanted to know more about.

By the time he had reached a spot where he could overhear the conversation, Virdon had begun to debate with the ape woman. Burke raised his brow - don’tcha know that us animals aren’t allowed to talk back to our gentle masters, Al? Or is that your old self peeking out under all that faulty reprogramming?

Apparently, Virdon had taken the ape woman by surprise, too, because she was now addressing him directly. “No creature wants to be enslaved by another creature,” Burke heard her say. “It pains me to see how your head injury robbed you of your most basic instinct - the longing for freedom.”

Behind his shrub, Burke blinked. Maybe Zana had been right, and there really existed other apes like her? Apes who wanted humans to be free? Maybe she wasn’t such a singular anomaly as he had thought...

“Freedom is the highest good of all,” the ape was saying now. “Higher even than life, no matter how comfortable. Many have chosen death over slavery.”

You’re my kind of ape, lady.

The kid and Al didn’t seem to think so, judging by their hasty retreat. Burke didn’t know if he wanted to grin about the little monkey’s discomfort, or frown about Virdon’s, but those deliberations dropped from his mind when he saw the ape woman turn around and head for the underbrush. In her ape camo, she’d melt into the vegetation in no time, and if she was as good at moving silently as Virdon, he’d lose her in seconds.

He quickly stepped out into the clearing, and clapped his hands in sardonic applause.

“That was a damn fine speech,” he said when she whirled around to face him. “I almost believed you.”

The ape frowned at him, but didn’t seem surprised at his sudden appearance. “How long have you been listening in to my conversation with my son?”

Now it was Burke's turn to hide his surprise. This ranger ape was the kid’s mother? And she had to sneak up to him in the wild, and risk getting shot by the kid’s guard?
“Long enough to learn that they kicked you to the curb, Mom,” he gambled, and hid a grin when the ape’s frown deepened. So he’d been right - the chief and his wife had some divorce thing going. And Voltis had guardianship of the kid. Well, he was the top dog around here...

Sucks to be a politician’s ex-wife, huh?

“Hey, I know what it’s like,” he added. “I’m in the same boat, my friend doesn’t know me anymore, either. Prefers to spend his life as your kid’s pet now.”

Now the chimp did seem surprised. “That was your friend?”

“I liked to think so,” Burke muttered.

The woman chuckled. “You seem to disapprove of the new arrangement.”

“Hell yes!” Why he was chatting with that monkey was beyond him. If he’d had a plan when he’d stepped into the clearing, Burke couldn’t remember it anymore.

“So you don’t think it’s a human’s natural place?” The woman asked slyly. “How does that go over with your master?”

“We’ve had our disagreements,” Burke admitted, remembering Galen’s exasperated face that seemed to be his standard expression when the ape was dealing with him. “But you’re one to talk - you don’t think it’s our place, either.”

“I don’t think you have any place at all in our society,” the ape said, her voice suddenly cold.

Burke grinned, unfazed by her show of tough attitude. “Whaddaya know, we’re on the same page... scroll here, lady.”

“Then why aren’t you getting your friend out of this situation? The longer he stays in Voltis’ household, the more this wrong belief will settle in his mind.”

Burke laughed, incredulous. “How in hell do you imagine I’d do that? In case you hadn’t noticed, your kid always has an armed guard nearby. And Al... my friend wouldn’t cooperate, either - he’d probably knock me out an’ call the guards himself.”

It pained him to talk shit about Virdon, but... but it was probably the truth. Al would call the guards. The damn monkeys had thoroughly brainwashed him.

“I see,” the woman said slowly. She began to pace, her face drawn in deep thought. “In order to regain his memory as a wildling, he needs to be exposed to the wilderness first - but as long as he doesn’t remember, he’ll vigorously resist going back there. Quite a conundrum.”

“In a nutshell,” Burke scoffed. The ape threw him an unreadable glance, and he wondered if he had used some ape proverb without meaning to. Apes and nuts sort of went together, right?

“Maybe I can help you,” the ape said suddenly. “I have means to... facilitate a transfer to a remote location.”

Burke narrowed his eyes. “Why would you wanna help me?”

“I don’t want my son to keep a human as a pet,” the chimp said curtly. “And you don’t want your friend to be my son’s pet. It seems to me that we have a common goal here.”

“Alright,” Burke admitted grudgingly. Not that he trusted her more than any other monkey, which
was as far as he could throw them... but she had seemed to be pretty pissed off at the sight of her son playing with Al.

“I gather you’re not from around here?” the ape interrupted his brooding.

“There’s a Forbidden Zone to the west of this district - perfect for escaping the grasp of a simian master,” she continued when he shook his head. “A number of humans have already done so. Once I get your friend out of Voltis’ house, you can meet us at the border, and then take him deep inside, and...” she spread her arms, “… work on restoring his memory.”

Burke had a fleeting vision of an enraged Virdon, insisting that he was really Taris and demanding to be taken back to his master. “I’d have to tie him down for god knows how long,” he mused. “But... yeah, seems it’s our best chance. But how do you wanna get him out of the house? It’s heavily guarded.”

The woman smiled. “I once lived there, remember? Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

Burke didn’t bother to share his philosophy about trusting an ape with her; he resolved to find out everything he could about the woman, starting with her name, as soon as he was back in Chubla. It shouldn’t be too hard, unless Voltis had divorced more than one wife. “Fine with me. When?”

The chimp casually flapped her hand. “I’ll let you know,” she said. “I just need to know who your master is, so I can find you.”

“Doctor Kova.” It grated on him that she was calling all the shots, but... he couldn’t let this opportunity slip. Considering Galen’s conflicted loyalties, he’d be stupid not to have a plan B running in the background.

The chimp casually flapped her hand. “A doctor? I’m impressed.”

“Yeah, he’s taking over from the old vet,” Burke muttered, and the ape’s brows managed to rise even higher.

“Interesting,” she remarked. “Well, I’ll contact you when it’s time for you to run.”

She turned to leave. “You really shouldn’t roam these parts on your own,” she added over her shoulder. “It would be regrettable if you’d get yourself killed before I can return your friend to you.”

With that, she vanished into the underbrush, her green-flecked poncho disguising her perfectly, just as Burke had known it would.

He left the meadow in the opposite direction, back to Chubla. He wasn’t overly concerned about the woman’s warning; once his job as “Dr. Kova’s” orderly began - probably tomorrow - he wouldn’t have any opportunity to get himself killed on his morning runs anymore, anyway.

What was more exciting was the chimp’s promise to bust Virdon from Voltis’ gilded cage. Her call would be on short notice, so he’d better start building a stash of survival gear now. Provisions... and enough rope to tie Al down for at least a year.

The only thing Burke regretted was that he had never bothered to learn the apes’ script. Zana would’ve deserved a farewell note, and an explanation.

He hoped she’d still understand.
Chapter 10

As soon as Ennis had vanished for his class with Zatis, a guard appeared to lead Taris to Chief Voltis. He didn’t tell him why the most powerful ape of the North wanted to see a mere human, of course, but Taris thought that he knew the reason, and it made him wary. He hadn’t seen his master’s father since the day he had woken up in Laisa’s hospital, but he remembered him as stern and forbidding, able to discard a human’s life in a heartbeat if he thought the human to be dangerous... or useless.

He wondered what use Voltis had in mind for him now.

The guard led him to a wide, bare room that was dominated by a massive desk, which in turn was dominated by the gaunt, severe ape signing a scroll.

Several scrolls. Taris folded his hands behind his back and waited.

“I understand you met my son’s mother today,” Voltis said without looking up. His quill was moving across the scroll in swift, sure strokes, the scratching of the nib the only sound in the room for a moment.

“That... yes, vetes,” Taris said slowly. “She seemed to have been waiting for Master Ennis in a grove he often visited when he was younger.”

“What idea was it to go there?” Voltis set the scroll aside and reached for another.

“It was Master Ennis’ idea, vetes,” Taris said, hoping this piece of information wouldn’t spell trouble for his young master. “He chose this place because it was easily accessible. He had been warned by Dr. Ropal not to overstrain me.” For some reason, he suddenly felt guilty, as if his condition had been responsible for a meeting the chief apparently disapproved of.

“I see. What did he and Aelia talk about?”

“Should... shouldn’t you ask Master Ennis about that?” He was treading on dangerous ground now - a human couldn’t refuse an ape’s command, ever.

Voltis’ quill stilled on the scroll. “I’m asking you, Taris,” he said calmly, without the slightest hint of a threat.

But then the threat was always implied, anyway.

Taris drew a cautious breath. “You're asking me to spy on your own son for you, vetes. Doesn’t that strike you as... as...” He desperately cast for a word that wouldn’t anger the chief... well, more than he probably had already angered him. ”... unusual?”

Voltis laid scroll and quill aside and regarded him for a long, uncomfortable moment. “You are aware that I am your actual master, Taris?” he asked mildly. “Ennis is too young to legally own anything, including you.”

“You gave me to him, though, vetes,” Taris insisted, silently cursing his strange stubbornness that didn’t allow him to simply bow to Voltis’ demand. “And I’d betray his trust if I talked behind his back, even... even to you. Even though you’re my master... technically.”

“Technically?” Voltis leaned back in his seat with a smile. Taris didn’t feel relieved at the ape’s
amusement - it could still end with a whipping for him, or worse.

But Voltis didn’t look as if he’d call the guards in the next moment. His gaze rested thoughtfully on him, as if Taris had only now become more than a piece of talking furniture.

“How do you two spend your time when you’re not outside?” he asked, and Taris blinked at the sudden change of subject.

“We... talk... about the machines I build for him...” They talked about the sky and the stars a lot, too, but for some reason, Taris was shy to reveal that to the ape across from him. He didn’t want to deal with raised eyebrows and inquiries about his motives. Wastes, he didn’t know himself why the stars fascinated him so - or how he knew names for them that Ennis had never heard of before... and Zatis hadn’t, either.

“Yes, he’s talking about nothing else, lately,” Voltis mused. “If anything, you’ve awakened an interest in engineering in him, Taris. I had actually hoped to interest him in politics, but I suppose one field of interest is better than none at all... or bird watching.”

Taris dipped his head to hide a smile. “I’ve been told that this was more Master Zatis’ hobbyhorse.”

Voltis huffed a laugh. “It is. And I was never certain if Ennis was simply indulging his old teacher, or if the obsession had indeed infected him. But now I’m relieved to know that the boy was just being kind.”

“Kind he is,” Taris said softly.

“Do you have offspring, Taris?” Voltis asked, his gaze still trained steadily on him.

Taris opened his mouth to remind him that he wouldn’t know if he did, but a strange sensation choked his voice - a soreness behind his breastbone, as if his heart had rubbed itself raw against it. He was surprised at that physical pain, so unconnected to anything else... except maybe to Voltis’ question. Did he have children? Dehni had claimed so. A son and a daughter.

“If I had children, I don’t remember them,” he finally forced out. “They’re gone, like everything else.” They’re gone... the words filled him with a melancholy he couldn’t explain any more than he could explain the pain in his chest.

“You’d be a doting father, I’d wager,” Voltis said without any hint of sarcasm. “If children aren’t in your past, maybe they’ll be in your future.”

“I don’t wish to sire children, vetes,” Taris said quickly. Voltis’ words filled him with dread, a feeling as intense as the pain a moment ago, and just as inexplicable.

His master - and Taris now felt acutely that Voltis wasn’t just technically his master, but in a very real, frightening sense owned his life and his body, and everything his body could do - raised his brows at that outburst. “You’re a strange specimen, then - humans procreate rather enthusiastically. I heard they introduced a castration program in the South now because of it.”

He briskly leaned forward, and Taris flinched at the sudden movement. “Be that as it may,” Voltis said, “the fact remains that you’re not Ennis’ father, Taris. It’s not your place to decide which information to withhold - information that could put my son in danger.”

“You think his own mother is a danger to him?” Taris kept his voice neutral, but the memory of the smiling chimp woman in her spotted green cloak didn’t spark alarm in him. She had just been a
mother, yearning to see her child. How could anyone not relate to that anguish?

“I don’t need to explain my reasons,” Voltis said with a hint of steel in his voice. “But seeing how devoted you are to my son, I’m willing to make an exception today. My wife has a forceful personality, she’s very... engaging; maybe because she feels very strongly about certain ideas.” He smiled, but his eyes were fierce. “And since Aelia’s mind is as strong as her emotions, it is able to simultaneously hold on to ideas that are mutually exclusive.”

That sounded like a description of an unhinged mind, but the woman hadn’t sounded delusional or raving. Well, except for the sudden intensity when she had praised death...

“Ennis is young and impressionable,” Voltis continued, “and he’s still longing for his mother, but now he’s old enough for her to try and draw him to her side - and I won’t allow that. And if I suspect that you’re interfering in this matter...”

“I don’t wish for Master Ennis to be harmed in any way,” Taris assured him, a wave of protectiveness for his young master welling up inside him. It was true, he didn’t know anything about Master Ennis’ mother; and if his master’s own father was so suspicious of her, he probably had a good reason for it.

And a human shouldn’t try to be smarter than an ape, anyway.

Voltis nodded. “So what did she want from him?”

“She told him she wanted to give him his birthday present in person, and she... well, disapproved of him having a, a pet human.” Taris smiled wryly at the memory, and at his own reaction. He was still amazed that nobody had disciplined him for his insolence of talking back to an ape.

Voltis snorted quietly. ‘Of course she would.”

“She was very empathetic about the importance of freedom for humans, even at the price of one’s own life,” Taris added. “She called death a gift. Master Ennis disagreed, though.”

“He’s very fond of you,” Voltis remarked. “But Aelia won’t give up so easily. And Ennis is... he’s too soft for this world.”

“He doesn’t just miss his mother,” Taris said softly. “He also yearns for his father.”

“If Aelia shows up again, you will inform me without delay.” Voltis voice was sharp and dry, and Taris found himself snapping to attention as if by reflex.

Human and ape stared at each other for an endless moment.

“You truly don’t remember anything about your past?” Voltis asked finally.

“No, vetes.”

The ape nodded thoughtfully. “That will be all, then.”

Taris bowed and left, but he didn’t feel relief when he closed the door behind him. He wondered what Voltis had seen in him that he himself couldn’t. Something that made him so different from every other human Voltis had seen.

Something that was hiding in his Before.
I am completely calm. And. Cool. Zana drew another measured breath through her nose and released it just as slowly, through her nose.

It didn’t help. She was still angry.

When she had laid aside the scroll to go looking for Peet, he hadn’t been down at the stables. He also hadn’t been in his room, or in the inn’s guest room. None of the stable hands, or any of the human servants had seen him - or if they had seen him sneak off, they hadn’t told her; protecting one of their own against the wrath of his simian master.

Zana didn’t see herself as Peet’s master, but Mothers, hadn’t she explained the dangers of leaving the inn to him in so many words? It was as if Peet was challenging the Kobavasa to find him!

Zana wandered to the window and stared into the rapidly darkening sky. Was Peet seeking out danger? He had always been more ready to fight an ape than Alan, who preferred negotiation to battle, but she couldn’t remember that he had actively put himself in harm’s way like this. Maybe this separation from Alan, temporary as it was, had unsettled him more gravely than she had realized.

Or maybe Peet’s time in Urko’s dungeon was finally catching up with him.

It was possible - Zana had noticed that she was feeling more and more dejected herself since they had reached Chubla. Now that the immediate threat of Urko catching up with them was gone, older wounds, older scars were reacquainting themselves with her.

Last night, she had dreamed of her baby again.

Zana pushed away from the window frame with an impatient sniff. So maybe Peet was struggling with his ghosts, too, and a fight with - or a flight from - a troupe of human-hunting criminals was his distraction of choice.

A dangerous distraction. Getting himself killed was not a solution to his problems that she was ready to allow.

And if you hadn’t fled into your story scrolls, you wouldn’t have to fret now. You would’ve noticed him sneaking off, and you’d have sat him down at the table and had that talk that you’ve been promising yourself since the day you saw him lying naked and bruised on the floor of Melvin’s restaurant.

There’d be no more delays. She’d-

The door opened and Peet stuck his head in - dripping wet from the rain that was whipping against the windowpane behind her. He froze when he saw her; then he straightened and came in completely, projecting an air of nonchalant indifference. “Hi, Zana.”

“Did you fall into a bucket when you tried to water the horses?” Zana snapped.

He did have the decency to avert his eyes as he self-consciously raked a hand through his hair. “Bad weather today.”

“Today and every day,” Zana said. “We need to talk.”

Peet made a face as if he had bitten on something nasty, but he just said, “Lemme change into
“something dry,” and vanished into his room.

He came back before Zana’s ire could climb to combustion level and sat down at the table, hands folded on the tabletop, eyes wary. Zana slowly sat down across from him and laid her palms on the tabletop, too, trying to let the coolness of the wood seep into her.

“You didn’t go to the stables as you said you would,” she began.

He sighed. “No.”

“Why do you lie to me, Peet?”

He leaned back in his chair with a sudden movement, pushing against the backrest. “Why do you think you can order me around, Zana?”

She dug her fingertips into the wood. “I’m trying to protect you!”

“I didn’t ask you to!”

“I fear for your life, Peet! Excuse me if I care that much about you!”

He was clenching his fists now. “I know you care, Zana, but it’s still my decision. An’ I don’t want to have a discussion every time I go out the door!”

“Mothers, Peet,” Zana exploded. “Don’t you understand the danger you’re putting yourself in, or do you consciously seek it out? Do you have a death wish, like Alan?”

He stared at her in alarm. “Why do you think... Did you find out what happened to Al?”

Zana sighed. “No. I haven’t seen Galen in the last two days - he’s busy with outfitting the wagon, and going over Dr. Ropal’s scrolls, and learning his routes through the prefectures... When he comes home in the evening, he falls asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow. He doesn’t even eat dinner-“

“You’d have found the time if you really wanted to know,” Peet muttered.

Zana felt her fur bristle. “Since you agree with me how important it is not to let those old wounds fester in the darkness, you can put your semi-blesses where your mouth is right now!”

He visibly tensed in his seat. “What do you mean?”

“Why are you really insisting on running into the wilderness, Peet? And in this weather? I thought you hate getting water on your face?”

Peet wiped his hand across his face. “Yeah,” he admitted, “but I wasn’t born that way, an’ I... I want to get rid of that... that stupid...”

So it had something to do with the abuse from Urko. Zana felt her rage melting away. “I commend you for confronting your... issues,” she said softly. “How’s it going so far?”

He drew a deep breath. “It’s still driving me crazy. But I don’... get confused anymore. I can keep running. So that’s... that’s progress in my book.”

“It really is,” Zana agreed, trying to sound encouraging. “What about the nightmares?”

Peet shifted in his seat. “Whoa, are you trying to treat me, Zana? Didn’t know you’re a shrink now,
too.”

“‘You so urgently want to know what happened to Alan in Etissa,’ Zana retorted, ‘because you suspect it’s the cause of Alan’s current problems. What exactly are you intending to do with that knowledge? Are you a shrink, Peet?’

“No,” Peet muttered. “But I’m his friend.”

“So am I,” Zana said, “and I’m also your friend, Peet, and I want to help you. I’ve left you alone ever since you returned to us from Urko’s prison, because that was what you wanted, and because I respect your wishes; but I’ve come to realize that leaving someone alone in such a condition is the same as abandoning them. And I like to think that I don’t abandon my friends.”

Peet said nothing for a moment, but he couldn’t meet her eyes.

“Alan was so devastated by whatever had happened in Etissa that he sought out death,” Zana continued, “and now it seems to me that you’re engaging in similar harmful, risk-seeking behavior—”

“Al didn’t try to kill himself!” Peet exploded. “Galen let go, I was there, you weren’t, I know what I saw!”

“I know Galen,” Zana said calmly, “and no matter how exasperated he may be with you sometimes, he would never knowingly allow either of you to be harmed - or try to kill you. Don’t be ridiculous, Peet. You cannot deny that Alan changed since we left Etissa. *Alan* changed, Peet, not Galen. And you are so eager to put yourself in harm’s way... and that’s not normal, either. Not even for you.”

“You can’t keep me on a leash,” Peet snapped. “I’m not your pet, Zana.”

“I don’t regard you as my pet, I’m worried for your safety,” Zana snapped back, thoroughly exasperated. “If you want to get over your fear of water, you can let it rain on your face while standing in the yard - you don’t have to try to get shot by the Kobavasa on top of it!”

“They won’t dare to come that close to the district chief’s home base,” Peet said dismissively. “I’m not taking undue risks, Zana, I know what I’m doing. And it pays off, too - I found someone who’s willing to help us bust out Al. Since we can’t force the chief to give him back anyway, we’ll have to run, like Galen said...”

His face blurred, and Zana blinked rapidly. *I can’t give you up yet, either of you...*

When her sight cleared, she saw that Peet’s expression had softened. “We need to run, Zana, you know that. You can settle down here - looks like Galen is already working on that - but that’d mean that Al stays that kid’s pet, an’ you can’t want that for him. He needs to go home, to his own wife an’ kids.”

“No, of course I don’t want that for Alan,” Zana murmured, trying to keep her voice steady. “It’s just... I can’t imagine what it’ll be like, without you two around.” She smiled, although she didn’t feel like smiling. “You’re very dear to me, even when you insist on being a stubborn baboon like now.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” Peet said, and it sounded sincere. “But I think that chimp is right - there’s just no way apes an’ humans can live together in peace. Something has to give, an’ it’s always the humans’ side that does.”
“That Chimpanzee?” Zana forced herself to focus on the new information instead of the grief threatening to choke her again. “Who are they? Where did you meet them, and how do they think they can help you?”

Peet smirked. “Did you know the chief is divorced?”

Zana raised her brows at that. Of course, the existence of a son implied the existence of his mother, but there had never been any mention of her, so she had simply assumed that the woman was either dead, or content to stay in the background and focus on home and family. But a divorce?

Peet nodded at her expression. “Seems the chief kicked her out because he didn’t agree with her views on humans. His ex thinks that humans should be free, an’ she mightily disapproves of her son having a human pet. She told me she can bust out Al and get him to the border of the Forbidden Zone. I guess she still has connections in the big ape’s house.”

“But Alan doesn’t remember you - or any of us,” Zana objected. “Do you think he’ll voluntarily go with an unknown ape... probably in the middle of the night?”

Peet shrugged. “No - I guess she’ll need to drug him or something.”

Zana raised her brows. “And how do you think he’ll react once he wakes up?”

“Badly,” Peet grinned. “I’ll need to tie him up until he remembers.”

Zana didn’t think this was funny. “It’d be a highly stressful situation for Alan - he’d be in fight-or-flight mode, and not inclined to listen to anything you say to him. Or to be introspective. You’d just reinforce his current identity.”

Peet eyed her as if he suspected her to just come up with excuses to keep them around for a bit longer, but he only said, “So what do you suggest? I can’t just waltz into the chief’s house to visit Al whenever.”

“As Galen’s orderly, you’ll see Alan quite often,” Zana reminded him. “We need to find a strong reminder of his past that you can present to him then - something that will encourage him to retrieve more memories on his own.”

“Good luck with that,” Peet scoffed. “We didn’t exactly collect a lot of happy memories since we crashed here.”

“What about that disc Alan is wearing around his neck?” Zana asked. “I bet he wonders what it is, or where he found it.”

“He doesn’t have it anymore, ‘s far as I could see,” Peet shrugged.

“Oh no!” That silver disc had been Alan’s most prized possession, something like a key that would unlock the way back to his home, as he had explained to her. Zana remembered how he had pulled it out and contemplated it whenever they had set up camp. “How will he find his way home then?”

Peet shrugged again. “That’s something I’ll let him worry about, once he remembers he lost the damn thing in the first place.”

“Restoring Alan’s memory is the first step,” Zana agreed. “And until we accomplish that, we need to find out a bit more about Chief Voltis’ former wife. We need to know if we can trust her.”

“Seems like a no brainer to me,” Peet muttered. “The chief likes keeping humans as slaves, an’ the
ex likes setting them free. I know whose side I’m on.”

“Maybe you’re right, and it’s that simple,” Zana murmured, though she suspected that it wasn’t - few things ever were. “Well, let’s try and make a list of things that could stir Alan’s memory without upsetting him.” She rose to get a scroll and set up tea water. Peet stretched in his seat like a cat.

A smug cat.

Peet had distracted her again, with his news about Chief Voltis’ wife, and the reminder that he and Alan would leave her as soon as Alan had regained his wits.

*Damn him. He knows me too well.*

But now that list had precedence, and she needed Peet’s cooperation. Their talk about Urko and Vanda, and the wounds they had struck in his soul, would have to wait.

*Soon, Zana promised herself. We’ll have that talk soon.*
Chapter 11

“You wanted to see me?”

Voltis wasn’t signing scrolls today; his full attention was directed at Galen, the look on his face indicating the same polite interest as the tone of his voice. Still, Galen wasn’t fooled.

“I’m a bit surprised that you didn’t want to see me,” he said, equally politely, “to inform me of the hazards that your veterinarians have to take into account in this district. It has come to my attention that doctor Ropal didn’t die of an accident, after all.”

Voltis’ eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “Since you are, by your own admission, already aware of the particular... conditions of your position, what exactly is the point of your visit?”

“Ah,” Galen said, struggling not to show his surprise, “well...”

Voltis not only didn’t do anything to remedy that Kobavasa problem, as Zana had claimed, he seemed to be completely unapologetic about it, too… but maybe only to outsiders. Galen was under no illusion that he was still a foreigner, despite his temporary assignment.

Or maybe he was just regarded as the useful idiot.

“Since you seem to be aware of the problem,” he said, after he had found his voice again, “I’m a bit surprised that you didn’t mention it when I applied for the position. It’s a considerable hazard to my work... and my life.”

Voltis smiled sardonically. “We both know that it wouldn’t have changed your decision, anyway.”

Galen fleetingly thought of Peet, who was trying to get through to Alan somewhere on the estate in this very moment, and shrugged noncommittally. “Probably not. But it would have influenced my security measures. If my wife hadn’t informed me of the danger waiting for me, I probably wouldn’t have armed myself and my orderly as massively as I did, and we wouldn’t be as alert to signs of an ambush, either.”

Voltis dropped his gaze, and absently pushed the ink pot on his desk farther to the side. “Well. Arming yourself is a given up here. Despite our efforts at bringing civilization to the lands beyond the mountains, this is still a wild country - there’s a reason they call the northern border the badlands. But I’ll assign some of my guardsmen to accompany you on your visits outside Chubla. That should keep any... overwhelming... dangers at bay.”

And make me look like a fool, Galen thought, annoyed. A fretting, fussy coward from the South.

“It doesn’t solve the problem of the slaughtered humans, though,” he just said, careful not to let his annoyance lace his tone. “As a veterinarian, it is quite frustrating to see your work destroyed like that. Not to mention the financial loss for the prefectures...”

“I’m aware of the problem,” Voltis said abruptly. “Rest assured that it’s being taken care of.”

Not really, if Zana’s source was to be believed. But Voltis probably wasn’t the best candidate to discuss this with. “May I ask how this... problem... started?”

Voltis drummed his fingers on the table, his silence as solid as wall.
Galen smiled faintly. No use trying to engage that wall head-on. “Forgive my curiosity, Chief, but I need to navigate the prefectures if I want to do my job correctly, and since I’m not from here, common knowledge isn’t my knowledge. If I know what I’m up against, I can better prepare myself and my orderly, and not tie up your security when they have clearly more important things to attend to.”

Voltis drew a deep breath. “About two years ago, some apes appeared from the south. Old friends of one of my prefects - Aboro, of Sultok Prefecture. They spent the summer on his lands, hunting, fishing, and catching up on old times, or so I thought. When the winter rains came, they returned to their own prefectures in the south, and shortly afterwards, the killings started.”

“You are aware that correlation doesn’t necessarily equal causation,” Galen remarked.

Voltis smiled wryly. “Of course. But I did my homework, doctor. Those two friends are proponents of a rather radical ideology where humans are concerned - they want to wipe out the whole species. And one of them is quite influential in the south. Maybe you’ve heard of him, too, since you’re from Pendan - Chief General Urko.”

Galen kept his face carefully expressionless, although his heart was plummeting into his gut. “I’ve heard of him, yes,” he said blandly.

Voltis snorted. Galen ignored it. “And the other one?”

“A priest of Blue Eyes. Zafkis.”

“Never heard of him,” Galen said truthfully.

Voltis shrugged. “One of those who prefer to interpret the Scrolls a bit more narrowly. Apparently, those two - and their sympathizers - want to restore the true kingdom of Cesar in all its glory, which seems to demand that the beast Man is wiped from the face of the Earth first. A kind of purge to restore the primal holiness, or some such nonsense. My guess is that they found supporters here among the apes who can’t afford to own a human themselves, because nobody who does own humans would want to get rid of them. They’re just too damn useful.”

Galen remembered the light in Urko’s eyes whenever their paths had crossed - whenever the Gorilla had caught sight of Peet or Alan. He had always thought that the general held a very personal grudge against the two humans who had managed to slip through his fingers again and again, but maybe he had been wrong.

“Our entire agriculture depends on them,” he agreed. “Especially in the South, where it’s too hot for apes to work in the fields.”

“Man has served Ape for centuries,” Voltis said crisply, “and that’s not going to change, no matter if some dumbnuts terrorize a few human villages or not. Prefect Aboro knows that he’ll need to present me with some names soon, if he wants to keep his prefecture. In the meantime, the other prefects have begun to resettle the humans into their own towns, much like Chubla has. We’ll deal with the situation, doctor - you just keep your head on your shoulders in the meantime.”

He nodded at him, and Galen understood that he was dismissed. “How many of them are there?” he asked, ignoring the prompt. “And are they just operating in... Sultok?... prefecture, or is the danger spread out equally over your whole district? - Just so I know what to prepare for.”

“They seem to be especially bold in Sultok,” Voltis admitted. His face and voice were perfectly calm, but Galen thought he could detect a trace of annoyance in the chief’s demeanor. He probably...
wasn’t used to justifying himself to anyone. That said a lot about the council members here.

“They usually ride in packs of about a dozen members,” Voltis continued. “They are masked, so we haven’t been able to identify any of them yet - the guard doesn’t want to sin against Cesar’s first commandment.”

Ape didn’t kill Ape - at least not without a formal court decision that stripped the offender of his Ape-ness. Galen understood that the patrols would balk at the thought of shooting a fellow ape, and apparently, the Kobavasa exploited that taboo.

And thinking of Doctor Ropal, they didn’t have any problems with violating it, either.

“They call themselves Koba’s Army,” he pointed out. “Didn’t Cesar himself declare that Koba wasn’t an ape anymore? They have forsaken their souls without waiting for a council’s verdict.”

Voltis’ smile was devoid of humor. “Are you also a priest in your free time, Kova? It seems you’re an ape of many… talents.”

“Just what every child learns at school,” Galen murmured, struggling to keep his face and voice expressionless.

“Of course.” Voltis reached for a scroll, and Galen rose and bowed, suddenly eager to put as much distance as possible between himself and the chief.

“Oh, and you will accept that security detail,” Voltis added, not bothering to look up from his writing.

“As you wish, District Chief,” Galen murmured, and made a speedy retreat to the heavy doors.

He slowed his steps again as soon as he was outside Voltis’ office. He needed to give Peet as much time as possible, and he needed to think. Voltis seemed to suspect that something was off about “Dr. Kova.” His new bodyguards probably had orders to keep an eye on him, in addition to protecting his veterinarian hide...

... maybe they would have to run with the humans again, after all - and not just to escape Chief Voltis’ scrutiny.

Urko! It seemed there was no escaping the Gorilla. *We should’ve known that there is no safe haven as long as Urko is alive.*

This new development needed some serious thinking, preferably away from Zana, who had developed a sixth sense for his moods. Galen sighed. He had wanted to give her a home here, a quiet, peaceful life, safe from Urko’s crazed bloodlust. He couldn’t destroy her peace of mind with these news.

*But I’ll have to tell her something, if we’re forced to move on after all. I just don’t know what, yet.*

Burke had no idea how Galen had figured out the timetable of Al’s little monkey - had probably gotten it from that old orangutan - but coincidence or not, the young master was currently having some natural history class or scroll study, or whatever they taught the monkeys in their schools, and that would give him at least half an hour to pick the lock of Virdon’s data storage room.

He paused outside the door to Ennis’ room and wiped his sweaty palms on his pants. If this didn’t work, they were out of ideas. So he’d better not fuck it up.
Zana and he had sat at that table until the sun had crept over the horizon, trying to come up with things that would stir his commander’s memory. For all their efforts, their list had been miserably short. None of the triggers that Burke had been able to think of were available in this world - the smell of coffee, the taste of beer, the sound of shuttle engines during liftoff... and there hadn’t been a lot of happy memories since they had crashed on this version of Earth. None, to be precise.

The only thing that could’ve made a strong enough impression on Virdon was the necklace with the engraved portraits of his family, but that had gotten lost during their escape from the City. Burke wondered if someone had picked it up after that scuffle with Urko and his goons, or if it had just been stamped into the dirt between the cobblestones until it was gone for good. Just like the data disc, which was probably on its way to the Atlantic by now.

So he had to try something else. Something he didn’t exactly feel comfortable using.

He drew a deep breath and opened the door without knocking.

Virdon sat by the window, a piece of wood and a carving knife in his hands, as usual. The man always needed something to do. Burke wondered fleetingly what had possessed the apes to give a knife to a human who wasn’t exactly in his right mind, and who they claimed to be a wildling. It could only mean that they knew exactly that he wasn’t one of their “wild beasts,” that he did belong with Galen and Zana, and...

_Fucking slavers._ His gaze was drawn to the pink scars on Virdon’s neck. Burke stared at them, unable to look away.

He wasn’t going to mention it - Zana had repeatedly warned him not to put pressure on Virdon in any way. But damn, just looking at that thing made his insides twist with rage and shame. He felt as if the monkeys had branded him, too.

He drew a deep breath and forced himself to amble into the room. “Mornin’,” he said casually, and put Galen’s doctor’s bag on the table. “Doc’s gonna be here any moment. Hey, relax,” he added at Virdon’s wary stare. “I’m not here to harass you again.”

“Uh-huh.” Virdon wasn’t buying it. “So why are you here?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m Dr. Kova’s orderly, so it’s my job.” Burke smiled, although he didn’t feel like smiling. “But also... uh... ‘cause I wanted to, uh, give you something.”

“Give me something.” If anything, Virdon sounded even more suspicious than before.

Burke swallowed. “Yeah. Something... that belonged to you. I know... I know.” He held up his hands defensively, before Virdon could say anything. “You don’t know me, we’ve never been friends, there’s no way I could have something that belongs to you. An’ you’re right - I don’t have it, exactly. It’s not... not my thing. But it meant a lot to you, an’ I’m sure it still does, you just forgot...”

_Shit, I’m rambling!_ Virdon’s expression was unreadable now, but Burke was sure he was going to call the guards on him any moment.

He drew another deep breath. “Anyway, even if you don’t wanna come back to us, Za... Mila said you should still have it, so... here goes.”

He could do this! He had heard his mother say it often enough, he had _rehearsed_ it, on his way here. It didn’t matter if he felt self-conscious, it was just him and Al in here, anyway, and it was for a good cause. He awkwardly cleared his throat. “Our Father, Who is in heaven...”
Virdon blinked, and Burke clamped down on the sudden surge of hope in his chest. The man was probably just surprised by his sudden declaration of poetry, didn’t have to mean anything...

”... holy is Your name...”

Virdon dropped his gaze to his hands and resumed his wood carving, and Burke faltered for a moment.

It had to work, it had to! Even if Burke had never understood why his friend held on to his faith in the face of all the shit that had happened to them here, it had always been clear as day that it had meant a lot to Virdon, that it had given him the strength to weather all their troubles, and keep smiling. He must’ve said those words every day of his life, and have heard them from his parents even before he had been old enough to say them himself. If anything had lodged firmly enough in his brain to not be washed away by a dive into that damn river, it had to be this prayer. Burke clenched his fists and plunged on.

“Your kingdom come... Help me out here, it’s been a long time since I heard my mom say those words. Your will...”

...be done, and he was probably imagining it, but Burke could’ve sworn that Virdon’s lips had been moving, had been forming the words, even if he hadn’t heard them.

“On earth as it is in heaven,” Burke continued, softly, straining to hear if the words were being echoed by his friend. He wanted to ask Virdon if he remembered how they had traveled there, but he was pretty sure that the “heaven” in this part didn’t refer to space, so he didn’t.

“Give us this day our daily bread,” and now he was sure that Virdon was muttering along with him!

It’s working! It’s working...

“And forgive us our sins...”

“Stop it! Stop it!” Virdon jumped up, toppling his chair. His face was ashen. “I don’t know what you... I don’t know that language! Stop talking to me! Stop harassing me!”

Burke stepped back. Damn. Should’ve stopped while we were good. Or skipped that line. Shouldn’t have mentioned sins. “Okay. Okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Virdon was rubbing his head, eyes squeezed shut. Rubbing his eyes now, rubbing the wetness away. “Just leave me alone. I’m not who you’re looking for. You’re... confusing me with someone else.”

If you put him in fight-or-flight mode, he won’t be inclined to listen to anything you say. Zana’s words were echoing in Burke’s mind as he stared at Virdon. His heart was hammering in his chest. This had gone south so fucking fast...

“’m not confusing you with anyone, Al,” he finally said hoarsely. “You’re my friend, you’re still my commanding officer, even if that whole damn organization doesn’t exist anymore, an’ I’m not gonna play along with this... amnesia thing of yours. I mean... goddammit, Al, they branded you! Like a horse! Don’t tell me you’re okay with that! You’re not an animal! We’re not animals!”

“It’s for... protection,” Virdon mumbled, momentarily distracted from his anguish.

“Bullshit,” Burke spat. “That’s what you do to animals! We’re people, Al! Don’t tell me you’ve
forgotten *that*, too!”

“I’m Taris,” Virdon said, so softly that Burke almost didn’t catch it. “I have a good life here. Master Ennis treats me well. And I... I’m not...”

*Not your friend.*

”... not who you’re looking for.” Virdon turned away to stare out of the window, clearly waiting for Burke to take the hint and leave.

Burke stared at his back, unable to believe that this was really the end of it. *He freaked out when I came to the part with the sins. Does he think he did something bad? Does he remember what happened in Etissa?*

*What the hell happened in Etissa?*

“That god that you... that my other friend prayed to...” He moistened his lips. His throat was too dry suddenly. “He seemed to have been a pretty forgiving guy. Had lunch with whores and other riffraff. Y’know... I don’t think there’s much that could shock him. Not really. He’s been around a while, guess he’s seen some pretty wild stuff.”

No reaction. Burke backed away, towards the door. He didn’t think he’d be able to play assistant to Galen when the ape would examine Virdon in his role as Doctor Kova. “You might try talking to him, too - I heard it works even if you don’t speak the language. ‘Cause he’s a god, y’know? Doesn’t need a translator.”

He waited a moment, suddenly anxious if Virdon would ask him if he talked to that god that he had just praised so vigorously, and wondering how to explain that he didn’t really believe in the existence of the guy he had just offered him as an invisible shoulder to cry on, but Virdon kept silent, staring out of the window.

Burke swallowed hard and nodded. “I hope you find that peace of mind here that you wanted so much, Al - an’ I hope you won’t find that the price you paid for that new life of yours was too high.”

He softly closed the door behind him, and stood there for a moment, staring down the long, long corridor. He felt strangely light-headed, as if he was drifting down that corridor without actually moving his feet.

*Tomorrow’s our first doctor round... jus’ you an’ me, Galen.*

*Jus’ you an’ me.*
Chapter 12

The weather had apparently been unable to decide between fog and rain, and had opted for a soft in-between drizzle that clung to Zana’s fur and robe despite the umbrella Galen had bought her for this expedition. The thing shielded her from the droplets she was shaking from the leaves overhead as she struggled through the underbrush on a steeply upward-sloping path, but it couldn’t do anything against the wet leaves slapping her shoulders, or the bramble vines catching her sleeves. The path was so overgrown that Zana had almost missed it - and would thus have missed Ennis and Zatis - and Alan - on their bird-watching trip.

*If I’d known about the weather, and their choice of the densest, thorniest thickets for their excursion, I wouldn’t have volunteered for this,* Zana fumed internally as she untangled her robe from another bramble vine.

Even then, she knew it wasn’t true. After Peet had returned the other day, completely devastated from the results of his attempt to revive Alan’s memory, she had promised him to take the matter into her own hands. She had played up her professional expertise to a point where failure wasn’t even an option anymore, but standing on the rain-soaked path, fighting with both her umbrella and the aggressive vegetation, Zana admitted to herself that she felt as helpless as Peet had been, back in the inn.

“He remembered the words,” Peet had muttered. “An’ then he jus’ flipped.” He had stared at the table before him, a picture of misery, all of his usual energy gone.

Zana knew he wasn’t fond of being touched - at least not by apes - but she had gone and hugged him anyway. “He was just panicked,” she assured him. “Because it *did* work.”

“You don’t understand.” Peet had shaken his head, not looking at her. “It’s not that he *can’t* remember. It’s that he *doesn’t want* to.”

Peet was taking this too personally, Zana thought as she waded through another patch of tall, wet grass where the path should’ve been. Even though they both suspected that Alan had suffered through something horrible back in Etissa, Peet’s first, instinctive reaction was to feel rejected by his friend.

Zana had tried to explain to him that one couldn’t pick and choose what to remember and what to forget; once Alan recognized his former friends, the memory he obviously wanted to keep out of his mind would come back to him, too. On some level, he had to already sense its looming presence and was running away from it, like Zana was running from the shadowy figures of Urko’s patrols in her dreams.

But she wasn’t sure that Peet had even listened to her. He had nodded, but his face had been unreadable. Peet had his own share of bad memories that he was dragging around with him, and maybe he expected Alan to do the same.

*Oh Alan, my poor friend. I wish I could be certain that what we’re doing is the right thing.*

But Galen had been talking to Zatis, Ennis’ mentor, and the old Orangutan had agreed with Zana’s assessment - so much that he had scheduled this bird-watching excursion, and had given Galen the date and time, and a map.

*Privat* Zatis is more concerned about the consequences of the current arrangement for his young
warden than for Alan,” Galen had commented when he had handed her the map. “He doesn’t share Chief Voltis’ conviction that the most urgent thing Ennis needs right now is a pet.”

“What does he think Ennis needs most urgently?” Zana asked. She had yet to meet Ennis or Zatis - or Voltis.

“A parent,” Galen said dryly. “Zatis will play along with whatever story you come up with. He’s not actually hostile to Alan - in fact he thinks having him as a pet would be handy under different circumstances - but he was quite eager to resolve this situation as quickly as possible.”

Well, at least they had one ally in Voltis’ household, Zana thought as she peered through the underbrush. They needed all the help they could get.

She almost fell over Ennis after the next curve in the path.

The little group of bird-watchers had been so silent - and well-camouflaged in their spotted robes - that Zana didn’t have to fake her little shriek of fright and surprise. The young ape jumped up at her gasp, probably as startled as she was, judging by the wide-eyed look he gave her.

“Mothers!” Zana pressed her hand to her heart and stumbled back a step, almost falling over her dropped umbrella.

“What are you doing out here?” The youth scowled at her, his momentary surprise replaced by annoyance.

“I, I...” Zana stammered. “I got lost... I think I took a wrong turn a while ago, when I tried to find a shortcut...”

“Mind your manners, young Ennis.” Another heap of green-flecked shadows moved at the side of the path, and morphed into the friendly face of an Orangutan. The ape rose, too, and threw back his hood. “The lady was already frightened enough when she fell over your legs. You should apologize to her for blocking the path.”

“Sorry,” Ennis mumbled, though his tone implied that it was still her fault, for walking on one of his paths.

“No, it’s... I’m fine,” Zana said weakly. “You’re very well camouflaged.” She gestured at the young Chimp’s poncho. “I’ve never seen such a pattern before.”

Behind the apes, a third figure had risen and was staring at her with a tense, almost hostile expression. Zana pointedly ignored him; Alan was a human, and she was - for now - pretending she didn’t know him. He should be pleased with that - after all, it was exactly what he had been insisting on, ever since he had woken up.

“It’s hunting gear,” Ennis explained. His slightly dismissive tone, accompanied by an equally dismissive glance at her plain green robe, signaled his thoughts as loudly as if he’d spoken them: City ape, stumbling like a herd of cattle through the underbrush, chasing off everything we could’ve hunted today.

“Oh,” she said, consciously ignoring the youth’s scathing assessment of her, “what are you hunting?”

“We were hunting birds,” Ennis said pointedly. Behind him, Zatis held up a long tube.

“Ah, but we were only hunting the sight of them,” he said with a smile. “No birds were harmed on
our hunting expedition.”

“What is that?” Zana asked, her curiosity blotting out the actual purpose of her “accidental” encounter for a moment. The apes had wrapped whatever it was in grass, leafy branches, and vines, completely obscuring its sight.

“It’s a far-viewer,” Zatis beamed. “Do you want to try it?”

“Oh yes, please,” Zana said eagerly, and stepped closer.

“You look through this end,” Zatis explained, “and you can make the image sharper by moving the tubes against each other, and also by moving this little wheel here, see?”

The viewer was surprisingly heavy - made from metal, Zana guessed, which explained why Ennis and his teacher had camouflaged it with leaves and vines; otherwise, the gleam of light on its edges would’ve warned the animals away. She lifted the tube to her eye and peered through it.

At first, all she could see were dark, fuzzy shadows. Then Zatis gently steered the tube to the left, and the picture became lighter, if not clearer.

She remembered the Orangutan’s instructions about the movable tubes, and started experimenting. The fuzzy edges expanded, contracted, expanded again-

Zana gasped.

Suddenly, she could see a treetop at the other side of the valley - what had been a uniform cover of leaves a moment before was now a single tree. She could see its branches, the leaves gleaming in a single ray of sunlight poking through the low-hanging clouds. A squirrel was moving through the branches, and Zana followed it with the viewer, losing and finding it again, adjusting the tube to keep the animal’s contours sharp as it moved away from the tip of the branch and towards the trunk.

It was so close! As if she could just reach out and touch it. Everything was jumping at her eye through the tube, sharp and vivid... she could see the droplets of fog hanging at the edges of the leaves.

She put the viewer down and blinked. The world around her seemed darker and fuzzier somehow, even the expectant face of the Orangutan beside her. “What a... wondrous thing this is,” she murmured. “You are very lucky to have it.”

“It was a birthday present for young Ennis,” the Orangutan said when she handed him the tube back.

“It’s a magnificent birthday present,” she smiled at the young Chimpanzee, secretly adding a telescope to the typewriter on her wishlist.

Ennis didn’t return the smile - whether out of teenage sullenness, or because he suspected her of being yet another adult who was trying to rob him of his human pet, Zana couldn’t say.

“Young Ennis was generous enough to leave it mostly to me, since he knows of my unreasonable love for our feathered friends,” Zatis said with a tinge of regret in his voice. “Taris here has tried to excite him for the moon and the constellations, but with meager success.”

Ennis scuffed his toes against a knob of grass on the path. “He got me excited in his machines, so he mustn’t complain,” he muttered.
“Taris never complains about his master,” Zatis remarked mildly. “He’s a very well trained human... for a wildling.”

Now Alan was shifting on his feet, too; both Chimpanzee and human seemed to be eager to melt into the underbrush again.

Zana chose her next words carefully; she would have to tread lightly, so as not to startle her prey. “Maybe he’s just naturally sweet-tempered? I once had a human who was like that, and he was a wildling, too.”

“You don’t have him anymore?” Zatis provided her with the next leg of their conversation.

She drew a deep breath, fighting against a sudden surge of grief. “No.”

“What happened to him? Did you have to sell him?”

Alan was watching her; she could more feel than see his piercing gaze from the corner of her eyes. “He just... he drowned,” she said, and felt her eyes go wet.

In a way, it was true. And if Alan decided to stay with his new master, it didn’t matter if he remembered in his heart who he had once been - to her, he would still be lost, drowned in the wild waters of the river, on that cursed day. Zana hastily wiped her eyes, and smiled tremulously at Zatis. “I’ll never forget him. Humans like him are rare. One should cherish them as long as they share one’s life.”

“As love never dies, neither does the grief for our losses,” Zatis said gently. “But sometimes, the Mothers can restore what’s lost, and heal us from our sorrow.”

“Praise to our Gentle Mothers,” Zana said automatically. “My human believed this, too, even though he didn’t know the Mothers. He had lost someone he loved dearly, too... a son. But he never gave up looking for a way back to him. He told me he had made a promise...”

By now, Alan was fidgeting, and whispering to the young ape. Zana couldn’t make out the words, but she suspected that he was urging his master to break up the meeting and leave. Too bad that while Ennis could command him, he couldn’t command the adult apes around him. They would have to stay and listen what she had to say.

“And it seems he did a lot of things with his son before he had to leave him,” she continued, “similar to what you are doing here now, watching birds. My human told me a bit about it... he taught his son how to build cages for fishing... he called them fish traps. They dug around in the earth to find shells and bones from animals of times long past - so long that they had turned to stone. A bit like our archeologists, can you imagine? And apparently, his son loved to hear stories about the stars and the moon...”

She glanced at Alan’s face. It was pale and sweaty, his brow furrowed as if he was trying hard to remember that time... all those things he had told her about, at night, while Galen and Peet had already been sleeping. He had distracted her from her nightmares, only to get sad and pensive in return. Zana sighed a little at the memory.

He looked pained now, too - pain from a sudden flash of recollection? Or just one of his tension headaches that Galen had told her about?

*I’m so sorry, Alan, but I cannot stop now. Mothers, let this be the right thing to do!*
“He was often sad,” she added. “He missed his son and his wife very much.”

“Why had he left them in the first place, then?” Ennis suddenly broke his silence. He glared at Zana. “If he loved them so much, he should never have gone away!”

“He said he was told to go,” Zana said. Alan was looking chastised now, ducking his head. “You know that humans have no choice when they are under orders.” She hoped that was true in his world - Alan was already carrying enough unjustified guilt in his heart.

Ennis just scoffed. Zana remembered that his parents had separated. There was no mercy to be expected from the youth here.

She returned her attention to Alan, who was now rubbing his head with clear signs of distress. Zorya had warned her not to apply too much force, so maybe she should back off now. It had been enough for today, and she could always add more details when they would “accidentally” run into each other aga-

“What was the name of the wife?” Zatis suddenly asked, and Zana shot him an alarmed look. This was not a question that would arise naturally from this kind of conversation!

“Maybe I know the name,” Zatis amended hastily. “Before I became young Ennis’ teacher, I was resident in a number of monasteries, completing my studies... maybe I could help finding her, I have a lot of contacts...”

“Sehli,” Zana said quickly, before he could dig that hole any deeper. “Her name was Sehli, but that’s moot anyway, now that he’s gone.”

“Sehli,” Zatis mused. “Unusual name. I’m sure I’d have remembered it. And the son?”

Zana glared at him. Of all the Orangutans that she’d had the doubtful pleasure of engaging in small talk with - sometimes for over an atseht, before the damn bugg... the esteemed directors finally got to the point - now she had to meet one who crashed her carefully laid-out trap in his haste to get the human away from his warden!

Couldn’t be helped now. She forced a smile on her face. “The son’s name was-”

“Yes.”

“Chris.”

Zana closed her eyes for a moment, dizzy with relief. She’d forgive Zatis his rashness, he’d assessed the situation, had assessed Alan correctly, maybe it was true after all and Orangutans were intellectually superior to Chimpanzees...

She opened her eyes again and met Alan’s gaze. He was blinking rapidly, looking through her, not at her, looking at whatever memory had arisen in his mind’s eye. “The boy’s name...” he repeated, slowly, searchingly, ”... was Chris. Chris.”

“Yes,” Zana said softly. “His name is Chris.”

He looked at her then, and Zana thought her heart would break at the desolation in his eyes.

“No! NO!”

Everyone stumbled back a step as Ennis jumped into their midst, fists clenched. “You can’t have
him! He’s mine! Mine!” He was in Zana’s face all of a sudden, too quickly for her to react. “Everyone thinks they can do what they want, and I don’t matter! I never matter! Everyone always takes what I love, and I have nothing! I hate you!”

He pushed her, hard, and Zana tumbled back into the brambles, flailing, falling...

“Ennis!” Zatis grabbed the young Chimp’s arm and hauled him back.

“I hate you,” Ennis yelled at Zana, shaking off Zatis’ hand. “All of you, I hate you! Let me-” He spun around, pushing the old Orangutan away, and jumped off the path.

Crashing sounds of branches breaking, leaves rustling - rapidly retreating, then silence.

Alan had caught Zatis before the Orangutan could fall backwards into the brambles like Zana. He now shook off Alan’s hands and stepped forward to help Zana untangle herself from the biting vines that had poked through her sturdy robe as if it was made of nothing but flimsy silks. “I apologize on behalf of my student, Mila. I can honestly say that I’ve never seen him like this before. Not this badly.”

But approximately badly, Zana concluded silently. She let him pull her to her feet and winced a bit at the burning sensation in her back. Galen would have to apply one of his antibiotic ointments later, before the puncture wounds could get infected.

“He seemed very distraught,” was all she could think of saying.

“He’s got every right to be,” Alan said all of a sudden, and Zana blinked at the fury in his voice. “He lost his mother, and now he’s afraid he’s going to lose me, too!” He didn’t move - he was probably aware that Zatis wouldn’t be as understanding if he got in her face the way Ennis had a moment before - but Zana still shrunk under his icy glare.

“Why are you so intent on destroying what I have here?” Alan snapped. “I have a good life! A good master-“

“Oh Alan, stop it!” Zana snapped back, unable to keep a sudden flare of annoyance in check. ”You only had one master, and it wasn’t an ape!”

He blinked at that, taken aback for a moment, and Zana held her breath, waiting for him to make the connection between her words and Peet’s delivery...

But he just shook his head, as if he wanted to shake off whatever realization had threatened to creep up on him.

Zana pressed her lips together. Alan’s stubbornness was legendary, but Mothers, did he have to insist on using it now to keep up this wilful ignorance? “The father of Chris was also the most loyal man I’ve ever known,” she said. “He never stopped looking for a way home, no matter how hopeless that endeavour seemed, because he had made a promise to his son, and he knew that Chris was just as sad as he was, and because Alan Vere-donne never chose the easy way out.”

“Here is a boy who is deeply unhappy,” Alan retorted, and flung his arm out to where Ennis had broken through the bushes. “A boy who needs a friend, a boy you just devastated with your insistence that I be the man of your stories!”

“Oh Alan,” Zana said sadly, “You’re not what he needs, and he’s not what you need. You need to go home, Alan, to your own son. To Chris.”
“I’m not... I’m not the man of your stories,” Alan insisted, tearing at his hair. His headache had to be killing him, Zana thought.

“Then how did you know the name of that man’s son?” she asked simply.

He stared at her, wide-eyed, caught in her trap, finally.

She didn’t feel triumphant.

“I need to find Ennis,” he murmured, and turned away. “He’s... he’s prone to panic reactions, I need to... to calm him down.”

Zana watched him vanish into the underbrush. This time, no sounds charted the movements for her. Only a few trembling branches indicated the spot where he had vanished.

Alan was good at vanishing without a trace, Zana thought sourly.

“Well,” Zatis broke the silence after an uncomfortable moment. “We did make some progress with your human, I daresay.”

“As long as he so vehemently rejects his old identity, there’s no progress to be made,” Zana said with a sigh. Peet had been right, she admitted to herself - Alan actively fought against his memories. He didn’t want to come back to them.

“Now that the gates have been opened, they cannot be closed anymore,” Zatis tried to encourage her. “More memories will surface now, until Taris - no, Alann - can no longer deny his true identity.”

“No to himself,” Zana murmured. “But still to everyone else.”

Zatis silently folded up the telescope, apparently at a loss for words.

Neither of them spoke as he walked her home.

Laisa cast just one glance at him before she grabbed his wrist and pulled him inside. “Mothers, Taris, what’s wrong?”

“My... my head hurts.” He let her steer him into her apothecary, where the scents of many herbs - balsamic, bitter, pungent - blended into what he had come to think of as her scent... dark and soothing. “I need something against the pain.”

She sat him down on one of the chairs that were pushed against the only, tiny window - dried herbs needed to be protected against the sun, she had explained to him. Right now, Taris was grateful for the soft twilight in the room. He leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

“What happened?” He heard Laisa walk around the room on soft feet, but no sounds of drawers being pulled open, or jars being put on the counter, lids being opened...

When he opened his eyes again, she was sitting in the other chair, watching him with a worried frown.

“Nothing happened,” he said wearily. “Master Ennis and I were in the woods with Master Zatis. We were watching birds with Master Ennis’ far-viewer, and I... maybe I overstrained myself, or it was the light from the sun stabbing my eyes... it was already low over the horizon...”
He couldn’t bring himself to tell her about that encounter in the woods, about Master Ennis’ outrage and how he had stumbled through the undergrowth after the young ape, trying to catch up with him and calm him down...

It hadn’t been difficult to follow Master Ennis’ tracks, which led straight back to Chubla, but when Taris had finally arrived at Chief Voltis’ mansion, his young master had barricaded himself in his room and refused to come out, or to answer to Taris’ attempts to get him to open the door and at least let him in.

He had given up when his voice had gotten hoarse and his headache unbearable. His medicine was in Master Ennis’ room, but for some reason, Taris hadn’t thought of asking his master to at least hand him the tea canister through the door; he had only thought of coming here, to this dark and peaceful room, and Laisa’s gentle hands.

“I must’ve overstrained myself,” he repeated. “All that walking up and down the mountain sides.”

Or maybe it had been the flashes of an image in his mind - a boy, a human boy with sandy hair and freckles, and a broad smile... the way he had looked up at him...

The memory of that face sent another stab through his skull, and through his heart, and he vigorously rubbed his temples.

“You’re clenching your jaw,” Laisa observed. “That will make the headache worse. Turn around.”

Taris obediently shifted in his seat, and she rose to stand behind him. He let out a surprised - and pain-filled - groan when she began to massage his neck.

“You’re so tense, it’s no wonder your headache flared up,” Laisa remarked. “What put you so on edge?”

Noth-

It was already at the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t say the word. She wouldn’t believe him that nothing had happened on that hike, that all his muscles had cramped up ‘just because’. He had to give her an explanation... one that wouldn’t have her probe into his mind like that Chimpanzee woman in the woods had done.

“That man came to visit me again yesterday. Dr. Kova’s orderly.”

“Dehni?”

He didn’t know that name. Taris was pretty sure that he really didn’t know the name, even if the face wearing it was eerily familiar. “He said he had something he wanted to give me.”

That strange verse. It didn’t sound like one of the verses from the Scrolls - by now, Taris had heard a lot of them, since Zatis insisted that Master Ennis memorize them all - but it somehow reminded him of them. Something about the rhythm, maybe. What was more unsettling, though, was that the lines were stuck in his head now, repeating themselves over and over and over again. He had caught himself muttering them under his breath several times today. Taris hoped his master hadn’t caught him muttering to himself, too. If his master’s guardians thought he was losing his mind, they would take him away and...

He had no idea what would happen then. Better not to find out.

Laisa’s hands were still kneading his neck and shoulders, a gentle, rolling motion that soothed his
nerves despite the storm raging inside his head.

“Did you like it?” She didn’t ask what ‘Dehni’ had given him.

“It was just... just gibberish. He’s harassing me.”

“You’re tensing up again, Taris. Try to relax. Nothing is going to happen to you here.”

It was nonsense, gibberish, yes, just gibberish... but why did he understand the words? That verse was in a language no ape had ever spoken, nor any human from here to the Southern Sea, so why could he understand it perfectly?

Why did he know the lines that Dehni, or whatever his real name was, hadn’t said?

... lead us not into temptation... deliver us from evil...

It was the last line that got to him, every time. Taris jumped up from his seat, unable to sit still any longer. His heart was racing in his chest, and the room seemed to be too small all of a sudden, the walls leaning in, suffocating him.

“Taris.” Laisa was still standing behind his chair, hands resting lightly on the edge of the seatback. “What’s haunting you?”

“I remember a boy,” he blurted out, then turned away abruptly, cursing his lack of self-control. Why couldn’t he keep his mouth shut around her? Why couldn’t he guard his secrets against her?

“And that memory frightens you?”

He exhaled heavily, still frustrated with himself. “No. It... it just makes my head hurt. I don’t know why.” Well, he knew why - Laisa had told him often enough: he tensed up whenever a memory surfaced, and that tension caused the headache. It was all quite simple and logical.

She didn’t point it out to him now. Instead, she stepped into his path, forcing him to stop his frantic pacing. “You’re fighting a losing battle, Taris. Those memories are reasserting themselves, whether you like it or not.” She laid her hands on his chest, a light touch that still made him tremble. “Your body is healing from its injuries, and your mind wants to follow.”

“I like my new life,” he said desperately. He leaned into her touch, putting his arms around her. “I like you,” and Mothers, he felt like a boy again at that confession, all awkward and gangly and jittery.

She smiled up at him. “I like you, too.”

He had probably forgotten how to breathe for a moment, because he suddenly had to suck in air like a drowning man, so much air that it broke out of him again as laughter. “I, I... actually I more than just like you...”

Her smile became mischievous now, and he watched, fascinated, as dimples suddenly appeared in her cheeks while it deepened. “I actually more than just like you, too,” she said, eyes glittering with laughter... or something else.

”... really?”

The laughter slipped away and was replaced by something deeper. Softer. “Really.”

He leaned closer, drawn to the promise he saw in her gaze now; he wanted be caught in that soft
darkness, cradled in those quiet waters...

Her lips were warm and welcoming, and as she draped her arms around his neck to draw him closer, he let his eyes droop shut and let her carry him along, into her embrace, into the deeper shadows of her mouth, into the scent of moss and rain and mountain winds. He kissed her, and kissed her, and the torrent of memories and thought retreated until it was only a soft murmur at the edge of his mind.

“I shouldn’t...” Laisa whispered against his lips when they both had to surface for air. “But every time I see you, my heart jumps and I want to... just touch you... but not like I should, not like a healer should...”

Taris caught her in another kiss, and let his hands glide down her back and under the hem of her blouse, touching hot skin like he shouldn’t, but all the memories were gone now, drowned out by the smooth warmth under his palms, by her scent, by her kiss.

“How do you wanna touch me?” he murmured some time later, but she didn’t say, just stepped back, and back, her arms still around his neck so that he had to follow her - out of the herb room and through another door into a small chamber that held nothing more than a nightstand and a bed. A bed.

She turned around her own axis so that his back was to the bed, and pushed against him, and he tumbled backwards onto the mattress. The woman loomed over him, laughing, her teeth gleaming white in the twilight, and her hands were on his chest, on his belly, reaching into his pants, “I’ll show you how...”

Panic slammed into him, and disgust, and the absolute certainty that he couldn’t do anything to stop her, that he was tied down and poisoned and disgraced, just a thing to be used in Ramor’s stable...

Ramor.

With a strangled cry, Alan Virdon remembered.
“Broken bones or fever,” Peet muttered as he followed Galen into the hut. “Fever, or broken bones. Can’t we get somethin’ interesting for a change?”

“Fever is the body’s natural defense against most illnesses,” Galen pointed out as he put his doctor’s bag on the table. “And ‘something interesting’ in our line of work is ‘something deadly’ in most cases. Deadly and highly contagious, and I, for one, am completely happy with boring fevers and broken bones - and in most cases, it was just sprained joints, anyway.”

“Guess it’s just not my line of work,” Peet murmured. “You need me for something here?”

Galen suppressed an aggravated sigh and shook his head. “No, I’m fine. Go outside and, and take care that the horses don’t run off.”

“Gotcha.” Peet ambled outside, and Galen gestured for the woman huddled in a corner to come closer.

“You don’t know me yet,” he said friendly, and smiled at the little girl in the woman’s arms. “But I’m your new doctor. My name is Kova, and I’ve brought you a medicine against the fever and the coughing. Sit her on the table, I need to auscult... to put this to her chest, so I can hear where the illness is.” He held up his stethoscope. The woman nodded and untangled herself from the child that was clinging to her neck.

Contrary to Peet, Galen found the steady repetition of cases reassuring - they allowed him to get familiar with the symptoms and treatments, and to develop a routine of examining and interacting with the patients. In the few days between his appointment and his first day making the rounds as ‘Doctor Kova’, he hadn’t been able to sleep for more than an atseht before a new wave of panic had driven him out of bed and into the streets of Chubla. He hadn’t dared to visit a pub - if he started drinking to bolster his nerves now, he’d never stop. So he had gritted his teeth and fumbled through his first visits, secretly glad that animals were long-suffering and silent about his expertise, even if their owners weren’t.

These humans here were suffering from a winter fever that affected the chest - what Peet called ‘pneumonia’. It killed off the very young and the very old, but everyone else should recover nicely under his treatment with Laisa’s herbs, and so far, the humans had been nothing but grateful for his presence. Galen allowed himself some cautious self-congratulation. Maybe he wasn’t so bad as a doctor.

The girl’s chest rattled with each inhalation, and her hot face and glassy eyes told Galen that she was suffering from the same winter fever as the other three dozen humans he had treated today. This one was dangerously young - maybe she would conquer the illness, or maybe it would conquer her.

“The fever will battle the illness along with my medicine,” he told the mother, “but if she starts to convulse, or is confused or hallucinating, you need to bring it down with cold baths and cold poultices. Do you have vinegar? Very good - add some vinegar to that water for the poultices, it will draw out the fever even better.”

The mother nodded eagerly, and Galen dug for his medicine - a syrup of ague weed, hopefully sweetened with enough honey to offset its bitter flavor. “See to it that she takes it, and doesn’t spit it out,” he instructed the woman. “It tastes horrible, but is very effective to drive out the mucus that
makes it hard for her to breathe. Don’t let her lie on her back, or on any one side for too long when she’s sleeping, so that the mucus doesn’t congeal inside.” It didn’t really congeal, but it was always best to plant a vivid image in the humans’ minds, to make sure they would follow his instructions faithfully.

The woman made a suitably horrified face, and carefully stowed away the bottle in her apron. “Thank you so much, doctor,” she said shyly. “Will you come by here again?”

“I’ll be back in a few days to check on her and the other patients here,” Galen assured her, and tried not to think about the miles and miles of country roads he’d have to drive out there again. This village belonged to a prefecture to the north of Chubla; while he thankfully wasn’t the only veterinarian north of the Iron Mountains, he was responsible for the half a dozen prefectures surrounding the district capital.

I should’ve forged myself some papers for an administrative position while I still could.

Well, that was all dead leaves under the tree, and didn’t serve anything but to fill him with useless regrets. He was a country doctor now and, Mothers willing, would stay one for a long and uneventful - and Urko-free - life. If he didn’t commit a major blunder, Galen was pretty sure that Voltis wouldn’t even look for an official replacement. He’d have that position for good, and maybe he and Zana would be able to leave the inn come spring… he didn’t really want to move into Dr. Ropal’s town house, but maybe other houses were for sale, too… maybe in the country…

Something cracked outside, and again, followed by a rapid succession of cracks that sounded like fireworks, and people started to scream.

Galen found himself crouching under the table without remembering how he got there. The woman was still standing in the same spot, stiff as a statue, and stared at him with huge eyes. The child in her arms was just as silent - like rabbits under a hedge.

Galen reached out and snatched the woman’s wrist, and pulled her under the table. “Come here,” he whispered. “You need to put your heads down, in case something comes through the window…”

The space under it was too small for all three of them, so he crawled out again and turned around.

“You’re safe under there,” he assured them. “And my orderly has a gun. I, I’ll go and have a look what’s going on outside…”

“Don’t,” the woman whispered urgently. “Or they kill you, like they killed Dr. Ropal!” She pushed her daughter deeper under the table and crawed after him. “You need to hide, doctor!”

Galen huffed a humorless laugh. “I’m afraid your hut doesn’t offer many hiding places.”

The woman stumbled back a step and began to scream, and Galen spun around to see what-

A black-clad figure loomed in the doorway. Black boots, black trousers, black tunic with the hood pulled up. It had strapped a mask over its face, the bone-white color a stunning contrast to all the darkness filling the doorway.

It was a human skull. But the eyes glinting in the back of the empty sockets weren’t human. It raised its gun and fired.

The screaming behind Galen broke off. Only the faint whimpering of the little girl remained.

The Kobavasa worked the lever to reload, and Galen reached for his hand-gun and retreated to the
table, positioning himself between the girl and her executioner. “I would reconsider,” he said, and pointed the gun at the skull-face staring at him.

“Step aside and put down that toy, and I’ll let you go,” the ape growled.

“My confidence in the sincerity of your promise aside,” Galen said calmly, though he felt a bit wobbly in his knees, “I can’t stand by while you murder a child.”

“A ‘child,’” the figure scoffed. “That’s not a child. I’m culling a pest.”

“Your doing nothing of the kind,” Galen said. “Not here, not today. Now leave, before my ‘toy’ puts a bullet through your skull.”

“Well, you’re right,” the thug said jovially, “I really can’t let you walk away just like that, frog-lover. Seems we have to repeat our message a few times before Voltis gets it.”

“My gun is pointed at your head,” Galen said, and finally thought of cocking it. “Do you really think you’re faster to pull the trigger than me?”

The skull exploded in a spray of bone and blood, and the ape slumped to the floor, revealing Peet standing behind him.

“Honestly?” he said, and worked Betsy’s lever. “Yeah. You talk to much, buddy. If you know you gotta shoot, shoot, and don’t lecture the guy you’re gonna kill. Now let’s get the hell outta here, there are at least a dozen of them...” His voice trailed away as his gaze fell on the little girl behind Galen. He raised his brow. “You’re full of surprises lately.”

“I aim to entertain,” Galen said weakly. He crouched down again before the table, both to keep the child from crawling after him, like her unlucky mother had done, and to hide from any stray bullets coming through the windows. “Peet, we can’t leave these humans to their fate. We’re the only ones with weapons here, if we leave, these criminals will kill off the whole village!”

“We’re two against more than a dozen,” Peet pointed out. He stepped over the fallen body to take up position beside the door. “I’ve no idea how much ammo they brought to this little party, but I know how much firepower we have, or that Chief Voltis sent his guard with us... who I’m sure will catch up with us shortly.” The guard that Voltis had insisted on foisting on him was a good distance behind them, probably warming themselves up in the tavern they had passed half an atseht ago. They were as enthusiastic about their assignment as he was, so both parties had come to a silent understanding: they would give him some space, and Galen wouldn’t rat them out to the chief.

He exhaled heavily. “Are you, a human, really proposing we abandon these humans, while I, an ape, intend to stay and protect them?”

Peet stared at him for a moment. “Fine,” he said unenthusiastically. “I’ll stay and hold the fort with you until the cavalry arrives... under one condition.”

“Condition?” Galen said warily. He knew Peet didn’t really feel any fellowship with other humans except Alan; he despised their submission almost as much as he despised the apes for their dominance. It was sad, if understandable, but right now, Galen found his indifference deeply unsettling.
“Yeah.” Peet’s eyes were black pools in a pale face, hard and piercing. “You tell me the truth about Etissa, and what happened to Al there - or I’ll let you fight these goons with your little handgun and six bullets. And don’t try to pull any shit, ‘cause I’m fucking serious.”

Galen found it hard to believe that Peet would really abandon his fellow humans to these murderous thugs, all contempt for their submission to the apes aside; he was most probably just jumping on the chance to finally wrest Alan’s dirty secret from him.

But he didn’t feel secure enough in that knowledge to challenge the human on it. Maybe Peet would abandon him here - they hadn’t been on good terms since Zana had lost their baby. And Galen had no idea when his guard would eventually catch up with him.

_I don’t really know Peet anymore. He hasn’t been the same since Urko had him in his dirty paws..._

But the excuse sounded hollow somehow.

He drew a deep breath. “Alan swore me to secrecy - but I shouldn’t have agreed to it. It was my fault, even if it became his shame...”

“The short version, Galen,” Peet interrupted him. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder. “We’re in the middle of an ambush, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Ah, yes. Of, of course.” Maybe it was better this way. Short and... and painful, but at least short. “I hired him out to an ape called Ramor. He, he told me he was a rich businessman giving a big ball for his daughters and, and that he wanted Alan as a sort of, sort of exotic party decoration. Carrying a tray with snacks and looking good, with his blue eyes, and... you know.”

“Go on,” Peet said, his face like stone.

“He, he paid me in advance, very generously,” Galen stammered, his mouth dry, “and that should’ve alerted me that something wasn’t right, but I told myself that to a rich ape, it wasn’t really a lot of money, so I accepted his story and his money.” He drew a deep breath. “But as it turned out, Ramor wasn’t a... well, he was a businessman. That part was true. But he didn’t want Alan to serve snacks to his guests. Ramor... Ramor is a breeder.” He spread his arms, hoping the implications of that were clear.

“A breeder,” Peet murmured. “Like, like... An’ he... how long did he have Al?”

“Three days,” Galen said quietly, and dropped his gaze to the gun in his hand. Its hilt had become slippery during his confession, and he swapped the weapon to his left hand to rub his palm against his robe.

“I should blow your stupid head off, right here,” Peet said. He sounded more stunned than enraged. “Goddammit, Galen...”

“I would never have agreed to it if I’d known, I swear to the Mothers,” Galen said miserably.

“Yeah, I’ll grant you that, at least.” Peet drew a deep breath and raked his hand through his hair. “Jesus Christ, Al is married! He’s been trying to go back to his wife an’ kids ever since we crashed on this fucking shithole, this monkey _freak circus_...” He kicked at the door, making it rattle in its hinges, and sending the little girl into another bout of wailing.

A rapid round of gunfire had them all dive for cover, while the walls above them exploded in dust and chalk. Peet cursed, and robbed towards the window to return the fire. Galen shoved the girl deeper under the table and joined him at the window.
For a while, they were busy firing at the hooded figures on horseback that were racing up and down the village square. Their unexpected resistance seemed to draw almost all of the criminals’ attention, and gave the humans the opportunity to run or hide, so they were doing at least some good, Galen thought absently, while he crawled across the floor to get to the dead Kobavasa’s rifle. His own rifle was out in the wagon - in the future, so he’d have one, he’d carry his weapon with him wherever he’d go, yes, even into human huts, or into a cow barn. It was truly a lawless country up here, no matter if Voltis was doing things by the book, like he had claimed.

Voltis. He would have another word with Voltis about this Kobavasa matter. One more reason to survive this afternoon.

Peet had vanished at some point, and then the Kobavasa scattered and took cover themselves, suddenly under fire from another direction. Galen had no time to wonder how the human had managed to sneak into another position under their very noses while carrying a gun... he was too busy firing out of the window and jerking back to avoid the bullets that were flying copiously in his direction. His heart was hammering hard in his chest, and his shoulder was beginning to ache. He’d be sore tomorrow, but he’d gladly bask in his soreness if it meant there would be a tomorrow for him.

And then they were gone, as suddenly as they had appeared, and the village was swarming with guards. Galen hurried outside before one of them could shoot Peet in their enthusiasm, and squinted at the afternoon sun. How much time had passed? Half an atseht? It had felt like an eternity.

The leader of the squad was talking to Peet, who gave him a much more concise report than Galen himself felt able to give right now, and nodded at Galen with a grim smile when he approached. “Your human told me he was able to shoot a few Kobavasa, but they managed to take their dead with them... except for the one he shot in that human hut.” His smile deepened. “Finally we can identify a member - our first lead in months.”

Galen thought to himself that identification would prove difficult, with half of that ape’s face missing, but found it wise not to spoil the lieutenant’s good mood. He excused himself and went to continue his treatment of the humans - this time, for gunshot and knife wounds.

Their horses had been left unharmed, for some miraculous reason, he discovered afterwards; at least they would be able to get back to Chubla tonight. Galen leaned against the wagon, feeling completely drained, and watched the patrol herd the surviving humans out of the village. They were headed for the next ape town; the lieutenant had decided that it would be safest to house them in one of the public stables for the time being. It was only a temporary solution - the guard simply didn’t have enough men to protect all human settlements. If things didn’t get better soon, they’d have to corral all humans inside the towns, like in Chubla.

A real solution would be to find the leader of the Kobavasa, and to root out the whole organization. But according to Zana, Voltis didn’t seem to be really interested in that.

It was all very strange, and worrying. If Alan wasn’t insisting on his new persona, they would’ve already left Chubla...

... but where would they have gone? Their plans had never been much more specific than ‘cross the Iron Mountains to escape Urko’.

The wagon shook slightly as Peet climbed up to the passenger seat from the other side. Galen sighed, and forced his aching body to climb up there as well.
They slowly rolled out of the village and into the indigo shadows under the mountains. It would be night before they’d reach Chubla. A silent and chilly night, judging by the icy presence to his right.

“You gotta tell Zana,” was all that Peet said, after some miles of utter silence.

“I know,” Galen murmured.

“No, I mean you gotta tell her as soon as we get home.” In the pale moonlight, Galen saw Peet turning his head to stare at him. “Or I will, and you can bet your ass that you won’t look as good as in your own version then.”

They drove on in silence, the stars glittering cold and white high above.

The moon was bright and close tonight - after weeks of fog and rain, the sky had finally cleared up. It would’ve been a perfect night to climb on the roof and have Taris point out the wandering stars, name the constellations and the shadows on the moon... even without a telescope.

Only Taris wasn’t here.

Ennis hugged his knees closer to his chest and glumly stared at the bulging white orb hanging outside his window. In a few more nights, the moon would be full - if the nights stayed clear, he and Taris could have spent every single one of them up on the roof, without any of the adults interrupting to drag him away for some boring lecture, or for Scroll study.

But Taris had left a few atseht ago - had left to see the healer inside the human corral in town. His head had been hurting again, Zatis had let him know... through the locked door, because at that time, Ennis had still been too furious to let anyone come into his room.

He hadn’t even let Taris enter, although his human had tried for a long, long time. After a while, Ennis had simply tuned out the calm, deep voice on the other side of the door. It had become a soothing background rumble, like the river lapping against the shore.

And then it had been gone.

Well, he’d better get used to the silence. It wouldn’t be long before Taris would be gone for good, if that woman had her way.

The memory of Mila’s face as she fell backwards into the brambles made him grin; but in the next moment, he felt embarrassed at his meltdown in front of a stranger... and worse, in front of Taris. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to let the human into his room because he couldn’t look him in the eye after he had lost his self-control like that.

Or maybe he hadn’t wanted to see the human because, because... he had played along with them. With Zatis and Mila, had babbled about that other boy - Kris. A boy like Ennis, only closer to Taris’ heart, because he was his own child. Ennis chewed on his lip, trying not to feel betrayed.

It’s not fair!

That Kris hadn’t saved Taris - he had! He was here, and he was taking good care of Taris, so why was everyone trying to get the human away from him? He was doing fine! And now even Taris started believing them... started leaving him...

Everyone always leaves.
It would just go on like that - one day, Zatis would leave, too. Someone would tempt the old man with a rare scroll, or a lifetime residency in some monastery where he could study birds all day, and the Orangutan would pack up and leave.

Or his father. One day, he would die. Everyone died, sooner or later. Everyone left.

He would just have to learn to be strong on his own, Ennis decided. A vision of himself appeared in his mind’s eye - strong and stern and forbidding, a lonely warrior staring into the distance... or walking along a mountain path... or maybe he’d wander through the Forbidden Zone in the west, a lonely ape on a lonely road.

Other apes would want to follow him, to be his friend; humans would beg him to be their master, because his justice and mercy would be legendary. But he’d turn them all away. Everyone walks alone, he’d tell them. We live alone, we die alone. Only the strong prevail.

People would whisper stories of his adventures in the wasteland to one another...

What was in the Forbidden Zone, anyway? Why was it forbidden to go there? Were there really monsters in there? Maybe he could sneak away with Taris, go exploring a bit. He’d just have to find a way to shake off Zatis or whatever guard his father sent out with him.

And he should probably tell Taris that he wasn’t mad at him anymore. Ennis heaved a deep sigh. Actually, he hadn’t been mad at Taris - well, a bit, for trying to not be Taris anymore - but none of the others had tried to reconcile with him, so there hadn’t been an opportunity to let them know that he didn’t want to see or talk with them.

Poor Taris had caught all the fire. And now he was probably lying awake in that healer’s house, too sad to sleep because he thought that his master had cast him out for good. Maybe he was staring at the moon right now, too...

I’ll go and get him. He should sleep here, at home.

He hadn’t changed his clothes, just thrown off the rain-soaked poncho. Ennis jumped from the bed and felt around on the floor until his fingers touched the heavy fabric. It was still a bit damp - he hadn’t bothered to put it on a hanger when he had locked himself into his room.

The corridor was dark and silent; everyone was sleeping, except for the night guard prowling the estate somewhere. Well, Ennis would hear them long before they would hear him. And if they did see him, he could always claim that he had been on his way to the kitchen...

... he threw the poncho back into his room. It would be hard to explain why he wore it on his way to the kitchen.

“Ennis?”

“Whoa!” He jumped back and bumped his head against the wall.

A shadow shot out of the darkness, and a soft hand clamped over his mouth. “Quiet!” the shadow hissed. “You’ll wake up the whole house!”

The voice was familiar. Ennis sucked in air with a hiss and nodded, and the hand vanished from his face. He slumped against the wall, gasping, heart thundering, dizzy from the shock. “Mo... Mother?”

“Surprise!” his mother whispered. “Although you surprised me right back! What are you doing out
in the corridor at this time of night? Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

“What are you doing here... at this time of night?” Ennis shot back. Now that the initial shock was abating, the old annoyance was back. Couldn’t he do anything without an adult interfering? Even in the middle of the night? It was as if they could smell when he was about to start a, a project...

His mother hesitated for a moment. “I wanted to see you.”

“Now?”

“Well, I can’t just walk through the front gate,” his mother hissed. “Your father made it quite clear that I’m not welcome in his house anymore! I wouldn’t have disturbed you - I’d just have watched you sleep for a bit. I missed you... and you haven’t come back to our place since I gave you your present. Do you like it?”

“It’s alright,” Ennis muttered. He couldn’t bring himself to touch it - every time his eyes fell on the telescope, he remembered the conversation with his mother that day. What she had said about Taris.

“Did you even use it since you got it?”

“We went birdwatching with it.” Which was the truth; his mother didn’t have to know that Zatis had been the only one to use the telescope. He and that Mila woman. The thing was collecting bad memories like a magnet.

That reminded him - he needed to get Taris. “You’ve seen me now,” Ennis whispered. “You better leave before a guard turns the corner.”

“You’re awfully eager to get rid of me,” his mother whispered back. “Did I disturb you at something? Where were you going, young man?”

He didn’t want to tell her - not after what she had said about Taris. But somehow, he couldn’t defy her. She was his mother. And she had that certain mother tone in her voice.

“I was going to get my human back. He’s at the healer’s house, but he needs to sleep here. In my room.” He clenched his fists. She couldn’t tell him what to do anymore. She no longer lived here. And Father had allowed it.

He heard his mother suck in her breath with a sharp hiss. “So he’s not even here...” Then her whisper became louder, like a wind picking up. “You’d sneak into the human corral in the middle of the night? Are you out of your mind? Does your father know what you’re up to? No, of course not - he’s neglecting his parental responsibility, but of course he already did that when he allowed you to have a human as a pet!”

“Taris is my friend,” Ennis protested.

His mother grabbed his arm, steered him back into his room and closed the door. “Apes and humans cannot be friends,” she said in a normal voice. “Friendship can only exist among equals, not between master and slave. Don’t confuse your friendly feelings for the human with real friendship.”

“We are friends,” Ennis said stubbornly. If there was one thing he was sure about, it was this. Nobody would convince him otherwise, least of all his runaway mother.

“So tell me, when you give Taris an order, does he have a choice whether to obey you, or not?”
mother asked. “No, he has not,” she continued, without waiting for his answer. “He has no say in whatever you decide for him. If you decide that he’ll get the whip, he’ll get that beating; there is no court to appeal to for him, no laws to protect him. If you, or your father, one day decide to sell him, Taris’ opinion about that will be irrelevant.”

Ennis felt the blood throb in his temples. “I’ll never beat or sell him!”

“But that is still your decision,” his mother said. Ennis could see her face in the pale moonlight now, tense, agitated. It was as if he was his father, and they were fighting over the humans again.

“You decide to show mercy to your slave,” his mother continued, “but it’s still your decision, and you could as well decide differently, and in either case, Taris is completely powerless to influence that decision. You have power over him, he has no power over you. You are not equals, darling. You cannot be friends, even if you want to. I even believe you when you say that you want to be friends with Taris - you’re such a good child. But it’s not possible. You need to seek friendship among your own kind, Ennis.”

“You just don’t like humans,” Ennis spat. “I’m done listening to you. I’m going to get my human now, and you better go back to your stupid prefect, or I’ll tell father that you’re sneaking around our house at night!”

“Aboro is a really nice man,” his mother said gently. “You’d like him.”

“I don’t like him,” Ennis growled. “I’ll never like him.”

His mother huffed a laugh. “You haven’t even met him yet - but we’re going to change that. I think living among apes who don’t harbor confusing ideas about humans will do you good. There are a lot of children at your age where I live - you’ll make some real friends there.”

Ennis scowled at that. “What do you mean, I’ll make friends there? I’m not coming with you! You left us!”

“Leaving you behind was the biggest mistake of my life.” His mother turned away and brushed her hand over the telescope on the windowsill. “One that I’ve regretted every single day. But your father is a powerful man, Ennis, don’t you understand? He’d never have agreed that I take you with me. And I was... resigned to accept that I didn’t have the power to stand up to him.”

She let her hand drop from the telescope and turned back towards him. “That was my second mistake. I mean, look at you! You’re so unhappy... so unhappy that you bond with a human! And your father turns a blind eye to that!”

The moonlight illuminated the tips of her fur as she shook her head. “This has gotten so out of hand... I cannot stand by and watch how my only child turns away from his own kind and seeks love and guidance from humans as if he was one of their cubs. I didn’t dare to defy the mighty district chief until now, but there are lines that mustn’t be crossed. You’re coming with me, Ennis, and I’ll make sure to raise you right. I’ll make up for that year, I promise!”

Ennis stepped back, panic bubbling hot in his chest. “No... no, I’m not coming with you! I’ll stay here, with father and Zatis...”

But his mother crossed the distance like a ghost, a flitting night shadow, and Ennis wasn’t quick enough to get out the door. His hand grabbed the doorknob, but there was something cold and sharp and wet covering his mouth and nose, filling them with a sickly sweet aroma, like rotting fruit and damp scrolls...
His hand slid off the handle.
Chapter 14

The sky was clear when Zana threw open the shutters of her window; clear and calm after weeks of fog and low-hanging clouds, the Mothers’ Veil a brilliant curtain thrown across its indigo depths. She kept her gaze riveted on the myriad glittering sparks above instead of trying to pierce the soft darkness below her window; she would hear the wagon long before she’d be able to see it.

She should sleep.

She should sleep, and trust Peet to keep Galen safe, keep them both safe, but she knew that if the Kobavasa found them... when they would find them... they would outnumber her fiancé and his bodyguard, outnumber and outgun them; and the thought that the sound of hoofbeats wouldn’t signal their return, but the arrival of the guard bringing her the news (and the bodies, oh Mothers, she couldn’t bear thinking about this!) made sleep impossible.

Besides, it wasn’t as if she had any appointments to keep, or to turn up at work. Now that their frantic flight from Urko’s wrath had finally come to an end, Zana found herself unexpectedly adrift in those quiet waters. She wasn’t used to quiet anymore. Maybe she clung to her worry, she mused, because she knew it so well by now, like her old, often-mended shoes. You didn’t really walk well in them anymore, with their soles worn thin, but they knew your feet, and your feet knew them...

She shook her head. I’m rambling. I really should go back to bed.

She’d go to bed, she promised herself, after she had a last cup of tea. It would help her to warm up again after her chilly vigil at the open window, and help her to fall asleep faster. It wasn’t procrastination when it served a purpose, right?

The kettle was softly humming on the stove when the clapping of hoofbeats and the low rumble of cart wheels drifted through the window. Wheels of a wagon, so it was them, and not the guard. Zana rubbed her suddenly wet eyes, exasperated at her reaction. She should make more tea; the men would be frozen after the long ride in the cold.

They did look dead tired when they finally came up the stairs, too tired to react with more than dull surprise at her presence. The chill of the night air clung to their clothes, and the scent of woodsmoke.

Or gunsmoke?

“I made tea.” For some reason, Zana felt she had to explain why she was still up at this time. “I got chilly. Something hot before bed will do you good, too.”

Peet just shook his head at the offered tea, as always, and went to the stove to warm his hands there instead. It was when Galen declined as well that Zana caught on to the tense atmosphere between them.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Kobavasa,” Galen muttered, and went to take off his robe.

Zana looked from him to Peet, and back to Galen. Neither of them looked injured, or particularly shaken. The tension between them felt... different. “And something else?”

“Galen wanted to tell you somethin’,” Peet muttered from his place at the stove.
Etissa. It had been on both her and Peet’s mind for the last few days, and of course he would’ve cornered Galen about it sooner or later. Zana cast a worried glance at him as he shuffled towards the table and slumped down on the chair, but he seemed unharmed... not that she’d have thought Peet would harm Galen...

She wandered over to her fiancé, who sat hunched over at the table, a look of utter defeat on his face, and sat down beside him. “What did you want to tell me, Galen?”

Galen didn’t look up. “The ape in whose hands I gave Alan in Etissa was a breeder.” he said monotonously. “I honestly didn’t know, but of course that doesn’t mitigate the damage that was done to Alan.” He reached for the tea pot, but his hand fell on the table as if he didn’t have the strength to lift the pot. “I am... deeply sorry.”

I should be shocked, Zana thought numbly, horrified, enraged... why don’t I feel anything, least of all surprise?

The specter of a breeder getting his dirty paws on Alan had hung over her since the day she had broken him out of the institute. It had been the main reason she had insisted on dyeing his hair with walnut husks and woad, but the color never really took, and Alan had developed an itching scalp, and the further north they had traveled, the more sparse the wanted posters had become, and so she had stopped with it eventually.

“I never should’ve slacked off with coloring his hair,” she said faintly.

Both men gaped at her. “Nope, Zana,” Peet protested. “Don’t you dare take the blame for that. This wasn’t your fault-“

“I was too desperate after we had been robbed of all our money-” Galen began, but Zana waved him off. She jumped up from her chair, filled with a sudden energy that she couldn’t identify - panic, or rage, or grief, or everything mixed together, making her want to run from the room and not stop for miles and miles. It was prickling in her palms and her face, making her nauseous.

“Can you imagine what he must’ve gone through?” she asked. Her voice was shrill in her ears. “The helplessness, the... the degradation?” She stalked the length of the room, her heart hammering in her chest as if she was already running into the night. “How could you... how could you allow this to happen?”

“I only saw how destitute we were and I... I panicked,” Galen murmured. “It made me hasty and, and irresponsible. The blame falls fully on me, but I swear to the Mothers, I really didn’t know what he was until I went up to his estate to get Alan back!” He sounded close to tears. “I would never have agreed to this knowingly, no matter how destitute we’d be. You have to believe me!”

“I do believe you!” Zana realized that she was yelling, but she had no control over her voice anymore. She grasped for the nearest chair’s backrest to steady herself. “I believe you, but can you imagine the damage this has done to Alan... to Alan’s soul...” She could feel the tears threatening at the corners of her eyes, and forced them back with a titanic effort. It wouldn’t help Alan at all if she bawled her eyes out now.

“Good thing humans don’t have souls, eh?” Peet spat.

“You know that neither Galen nor I think that humans don’t have souls, Peet,” Zana said and dabbed at her eyes. The frantic energy had left her all of a sudden, and now there was only a humming silence in her head, a droning she could feel in her bones, swinging from numb to panic and back again. It really didn’t matter if Galen had given Alan to the breeder knowingly or... or just
irresponsibly. Some things were so devastating that the presence or absence of intent was completely irrelevant.

“I see now how this memory is too monstrous for Alan to deal with,” she said finally, and eased herself into the chair. She felt like moving underwater, as if she had to move with utmost care or she’d tumble and fall and never get up again. “No wonder he doesn’t want to recognize us. I... I don’t deserve his friendship anymore.”

She reached for the tea pot, but like Galen a moment before, she couldn’t lift it. It had become too heavy, and her arm was shaking too much. Galen moved to help her, but his hands were shaking even worse than hers. His own mug was still empty.

Peet left his place at the oven and came over to the table, grabbed the tea pot, and poured her her tea; then, to her dull surprise, he did the same for Galen. He set the pot down with a thump.

“How could they even do it?” he muttered. “You can’t force a man to sleep with a woman, that’s just not possible.”

“Isn’t it?” Zana murmured, staring into her mug. “Maybe they drugged him with Blaze, or maybe they just applied the right... the right encouragement... you know, touching him...”

“Okay, okay,” Peet said hastily. “Don’t really wanna go there.” He cleared his throat, and for a long moment, nobody said anything.

“But damn, three days...” he suddenly broke the silence again, apparently unable to stop his musing. “You mean they forced him to... I mean, nonstop? Now that’s not possible, I know that for a fact, an’ even if it was, he wouldn’t be able to produce, uh... offspring after a few... I mean, after a short while anymore.”

“Blaze,” Galen muttered darkly, and Zana felt new tears prick at the corners of her eyes. Three days... while she and Galen had been sitting in that tavern, talking about their future. While Peet had been abducted and abused by other upstanding citizens of Etissa. While she had slept in her warm, soft bed in that inn, completely oblivious to the horrors her friends were enduring in that very moment...

Peet stared at Galen, his knuckles getting white around his own, empty mug. “You mean Al did make a bunch of kids for that asshole? Al, the family man?” He jumped to his feet, scraping the chair over the floor planks, and began pacing the room, just like Zana had done - probably filled with the same mixture of horror and rage. “Goddamn... that’d really haunt him. Rape or not, he’ll feel that those are his kids. His, and now that monkey is gonna sell them like donuts... These mountains really need a herbicide run.”

Zana buried her face in her hands. Alan’s children... they were growing in their mothers’ wombs right now, and would be born at the height of summer, little fair-haired cubs who’d make their owner obscenely rich...

She clenched her fists. I won’t allow that!

Aloud, she just said, “That is a problem for another day. Right now, it’s Alan we need to help.”

“Is forcing him to remember his ordeal really helping him?” Galen murmured into his mug.

Zana stared at him. Peet stopped pacing

“Of course you’d prefer him to forget how you fucked up his life,” he growled.
Galen looked up. “How would that profit me, now that both you and Zana know what happened?” he protested. “And even when you didn’t know, I took Doctor Ropal’s position so you could see him, so that we could help him to remember. I could’ve stayed clear, and neither of you would’ve been any wiser!”

Peet continued to glare at him, but kept silent. Galen had a point, Zana admitted to herself.

“But you have to ask yourselves if you don’t just want him back because you miss him - because you feel bad now, and would feel better when he returned to his old self,” Galen continued. “From where he is standing, Alan is feeling good now, and would feel bad as soon as his memory returned. So whose need does this ‘healing’ really serve?”

Zana saw Peet’s Adam’s apple jump as he swallowed hard. “It’s not about who’s feeling good,” he muttered, “it’s about what’s true, and what’s real, even if it’s ugly. Al has a wife and kids…”

“You said it yourself often enough - there is no chance that he’ll ever return to them,” Galen pointed out. “Another pain he’s currently sparing himself. I’ve been told he’s very fond of Laisa - he would have a chance to have a family here, with her…”

“As a monkey’s pet!” Peet exploded, and Zana winced at the slur, but Galen was completely unruffled, a relentless persecutor nailing the human in a cross-examination that Peet couldn’t win. That she herself was losing along with him. *Am I selfish if I want to get our Alan back?* she wondered. She didn’t want to fool herself... didn’t want her help be secretly serving only her own needs without considering what was truly best for her friend.

Even if the best for him was not to be her friend anymore.

“This is your quarrel with us,” Galen snapped. “Seeing him in Ennis’ care is hurting your pride, not his!”

“That’s because he’s out of his fucking mind!” Peet yelled. “My commander lost his mind and went native, but I’m not gonna stand for it, do you hear me, Galen? I’m not gonna stand for it, and if I have to carry his amnesiac ass from here to, to…”

“There’d be only one way left,” Galen said, and now his voice had softened again. “To the west, into the Forbidden Zone. But this Zone isn’t like the other ones we traversed. Peet - there’s only desert out there, so hot that nothing survives in it. No water, no shade... it’s a death trap.”

Peet returned to the table and dropped into his chair. “Says who? I’ve heard that humans go in there to escape their monkey masters.”

“Escape doesn’t mean survival,” Galen murmured tiredly. “Maybe for some, death is preferable to a life in servitude.”

Peet blinked. “Yeah, maybe,” he admitted.

“But would it be for Alan?” Galen wanted to know. “And do you think you can make that decision for him?”

“I... agree with Galen,” Zana heard herself say, and winced at the look of betrayal on Peet’s face. “Sometimes, people choose to start a new life, and to take on a new identity. If Alan does that, I’ll accept it - but to make that decision, Alan needs to regain his wits.”

She reached across the table to grasp Peet’s fist. “That means I also agree with you. However
painful Alan’s past may be, it’s his past, and he has a right to know it, and to claim it, and to find a way beyond his shame and grief. Falling apart isn’t healing, and right now, he’s incapable of truly deciding if he wants to be Alan or Taris.”

She squeezed his hand. “Helping him means restoring his mind so that he can make that decision, no more and no less.”

Peet just shook his head.

“And how do you plan to do that?” Galen wondered. “He vigorously denies knowing Peet, and he’s known him the longest.”

“I don’t have a plan, other than to continue what we’re already doing,” Zana admitted. “Alan did remember the name of his son during Zatis’ bird-watching expedition, and Zatis thinks that more memories will surface, now that we managed to ‘open the gates’, as he put it.”

Peet looked up at that, and Zana immediately regretted her words. Now she had stirred new hope in him, and if Alan’s memories didn’t surface, that hope would be shattered. She wasn’t sure how many ups and downs of that kind Peet would be able to endure.

“When he remembers who he is, he’s not gonna stay with that kid,” Peet said, and Zana’s heart ached at the confidence in his voice. “No way he’s gonna be a monkey’s pet. Or slave. Or whatever. We’re free humans, Al an’ I, can’t take that out of us.”

All your ancestors were free humans once, Zana thought. But somehow, my ancestors managed to do exactly that.

I pray to the Mothers that we didn’t succeed this time.

For a world that had supposedly undergone some serious climate warming, the air was damn cold, Burke thought as he made his way through the human ghetto. Not that he cared - he had spent colder winters with crappier clothing in his youth. It just was a bit puzzling, because on the one hand, Florida was pretty much under the waterline - and good riddance, too - and he’d probably never see snow again in his life, but on the other hand, the weather still managed to be shitty as always.

And no idea why he was thinking about the weather so much. Probably because it was better than thinking about other things.

He knocked at the door to the hospital - or apothecary, he still wasn’t sure what it actually was, maybe both - and turned his head to watch the street behind him. Nobody would try to ambush him here - not at this time of day, and not in a purely human quarter - but it gave him something to do while he waited for the healer to wake up. It was a bit early in the morning, but Galen wanted to drive to that other prefecture later, and that meant they had to get going pretty early in the day, too.

And since they had all been a bit distracted last night, Galen had only discovered that they were all out of cough syrup right before breakfast.

The door opened behind him, and Burke turned around, faintly surprised that Laisa was already awake. By the looks of her, though, she hadn’t slept at all.

“Crazy night?” Burke asked by way of greeting.

She gaped at him for a moment, then cinched her robe tighter. “Very. Come in.”
She wasn’t wearing anything under that robe. Not that he was interested, he just... he tended to notice these things, was all. Burke cleared his throat and wrenched his thoughts back to business. “Sorry to bother you at this time of day, but the doc needs some, uh, *ague weed*, y’know, that stuff against the coughing...”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” Laisa said, and led him to her herb room. “I even have the syrup ready-made, I assume that’s what he wanted?”

“He didn’t say, but so far, he’s always given out the syrup, yeah,” Burke said to her back.

“I’ll give you the syrup, then.” She began to pack small glass bottles into a basket. “I’ll need the basket back - and the bottles, too.”

Burke leaned against the door frame and watched her. “Can’t make promises about the bottles. No idea what those peasants are gonna do with them, once they’re empty.”

“Well, at least tell them to give them back to you on your next round,” Laisa said absently. She sounded tired. She *looked* tired - pale and worn out.

“So, what kept you up all night?” Burke couldn’t resist asking. She probably wouldn’t tell him - healer’s confidences, and all that. But he was all out of small talk about herbs.

To his surprise, a bright crimson crept into Laisa’s pale cheeks. “Your friend came by with a bad headache,” she murmured. “I, uh, I gave him some tea, and a neck massage...”

Burke raised a brow. What was it with Al and the healers? Sally hadn’t been one, as far as he could recall. “An’ then?”

Her blush deepened. “He kissed me.”

“Huh.” Burke fought hard not to grin. “Was it good?”

She turned abruptly away and busied herself at the counter. “Yes.”

“He’s good with his hands, too,” Burke teased her. “Made some wicked tool belts while he was still with us.”

He heard her cough; her hands flew to her mouth to choke a giggle. It made him snort - that girlish reaction, and then they were both laughing, and Laisa stole a glance towards him, red-faced under tousled hair, that told him everything. “You really did it? All the way?”

She moistened her lips, avoiding his gaze. “No, we... that’s none of your business!”

He laughed and held up his hands. “Sorry.”

Laisa scoffed. “You’re not sorry. And Taris-“

“Name’s Alan.” They had decided to call Al by his real name, not ‘Nate’, to help him remember, and by now, Burke didn’t really care about aliases anymore.

She hesitated. “It’s not the name he chose for himself.”

“No,” Burke said, fighting to keep the smile on his face. “It’s the name his mom chose for him, an’ she’s got more right to choose his name than that monkey boy.”

Laisa looked scandalized. “Don’t call them that!”
“Why the hell not? They call us frogs!” His good mood was gone, as always when the conversation had shifted to the goddamn apes. And it always did, at some point, always.


Burke huffed a laugh. “No, it’s not nice.”

She nervously tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Still… if an ape hears you call them that, you’ll be in trouble.”

“Girl,” Burke drawled, “I’ve been in trouble with the damn monkeys ever since I… since I was born.” Well, not exactly, but he couldn’t let slip that he was not originally from this time.

“Is it worth it?” She wandered to the other side of the room, suddenly agitated, and leaned against a second door, mirroring his position.

Burke narrowed his eyes. “You think it’s better to crawl in the dust and kiss their damn paws?”

She hid her hands behind her back. “No, I… they don’t want you to kiss their feet.”

Right. That made everything better. “But if they’d want you to, you’d do it.”

Laisa tugged at her hair, visibly disturbed by this turn of their conversation. “That’s how the world is. Fantasies about how it could or should be are just… dreams. They don’t do anything, except make us unhappy. We need to accept the facts, even if we don’t like them! We can’t wish ourselves a different life into existence!”

“Every change in the world started as a vision, a dream!” Burke shouted back. “How can you know what to change, and what to make come true, if you don’t even allow yourself to have that vision?”

“But some dreams are destructive,” Laisa retorted, still in that too-loud, agitated voice. Had hit a sore spot, had he? “They destroy the good things we already have, all for an empty promise that we can get rid of the painful things in our life, too! Are you really sure that you’re not paying too high a price, for some foolish hope of a better life?”

“No, you know what too high a price is?” Burke snapped. “Being under the boot of a fucking ape, being treated like some piece of meat, hired out, sold, worked to the bone, being beaten to a pulp for their goddamn entertainment, never having a say in anything, except master this an’ master that, I’m done with this shit, you got me, done!”

He sucked in a deep breath, and suddenly realized that he was, in fact, done.

If Al really chose the damn monkey over him, chose to be Taris, a slave, a pet, there was nothing here to hold him anymore. Last night, he’d been sure that could never happen. But Galen had said that Al had taken a shine to this healer, and by the looks of it, he hadn’t lost any time to get better acquainted with her.

*Got a new wife, and a monkey son. What the hell am I still doing here?*
He froze, focusing on the familiar, half-forgotten feeling of being on his own again, free to go where he wanted, do what he wanted, not having to take anyone’s feelings or opinions into account anymore.

Not mattering to anyone.

He felt... dizzy. Exhilarated. Exactly like on the day he had left his home for good, left his dad boozed out on the couch, inhaled the frosty winter air...

Laisa was watching him from across the room, still leaning against the opposite door. “What are you going to do then?”

And all of a sudden, Burke thought of Katlin. He hadn’t been thinking of her in a long while, even though he still had her pendant - a reminder that there were humans who thought like him, who defied the apes like he did, even if they were as rare as goddamn unicorns in this world. His hand caught the wooden horse head, its mane smoothed down from rubbing his fingers over it countless times.

“There’s someone I know, down South,” he muttered. “Someone who doesn’t like to lick ape boots. She’s got a nice little resistance going, and they can use someone like me. An’...” He shrugged. “There’s nobody here who’d...”

Well. Zana would miss him. But right now, he didn’t want to acknowledge any apes. He couldn’t.

“Nobody here who’d miss me when I’m gone,” he continued, a bit hoarsely. “They’d probably miss their monkey master more than me. So I’ve got no reason to stay.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Laisa said quietly. “As soon as Taris... Alan... remembers who he is... or was, he’ll also remember his friends... and realize what a precious thing that friendship is.”

Burke snorted. “Y’know what I think?” He didn’t wait for her answer. “I think he remembered jus’ fine when I reminded him of that prayer he used to say every day. An’ the way Za... Mila told me about her encounter with him out in the woods, he even remembered his son’s name. He does remember, Laisa, he jus’ doesn’t want to. He wants nothing to do with us anymore. With me. So much for that precious friendship.”

She finally pushed away from the door and came over to him. “I understand that it hurts you, but Dehni...” she laid her hand on his arm, and he could smell her skin, a faint floral scent, really nice... “Can’t you understand that some things are just too bad to... to even think of them? And I don’t mean that you are the bad thing, but it’s all... maybe... tangled up in his mind, and as soon as he’d remember you, he’d remember that other thing, too.”

Burke stared at her. He could feel a headache coming, the blood throbbing in his temples, maybe it was contagious. He knew perfectly well, thanks to Galen, what Virdon desperately wanted to forget, but damn...

“Tell you what,” he said finally. “There were some crazy-ass apes, got their hands on me. They... they had me for weeks. An’ they did all kinds of bad things to me. I can’t have a single night without nightmares, thanks to them. I’m forced to think of the damn bad thing every fucking day.”

He swallowed, hard, but he couldn’t stop now. “In the end... in the end, I was okay with dying. I wanted it. But he dragged me back - got me out, hauled me into some goddamn monastery, and had me stitched back together. And made me carry on, day after day, after fucking. Day.

“An’ then he goes and drowns himself in a river ‘cause some ‘bad thing’ happened to him? He got
fucked over, okay, but that was just three days. I was in that cage for weeks!"

He shook off her hand. “He was my...” He faltered for a moment, casting for a term that could replace Virdon’s rank without tipping her off that he wasn’t a native of her world.

“He was a man I’d have followed into the white wastes and back,” he said finally. “Because I thought he’d do the same for me. Guess I was wrong. But jus’ like you said, we gotta face the facts. Even if we don’t like them.”

“You’re hurt, and bitter,” Laisa said. Her eyes were dark and sad and... understanding, and for a moment, Burke hated her for it. Understanding came dangerously close to pity.

“Give him a little more time, Dehni...,” she continued. “He’ll come around, I’m sure of it. And when he does... forgive him. We all hurt differently.”

He grabbed the basket. “You’ll get it back. The bottles, too. You’ll get it all back.”

She didn’t say anything; he didn’t bother saying goodbye, either.
Chapter 15

Virdon knew he was in trouble from the way Laisa crossed her arms before her chest; it belied the casualness with which she had propped her shoulder against the doorframe, and the smile playing around her lips.

Her next words confirmed his instinct. “You should really be ashamed of yourself, Alan,” she said. “I’m sure you heard every single word we spoke.”

Virdon raked a hand through his hair and sighed. “Yes,” he murmured.

Laisa shook her head and pushed away from the door to come over and sit down on the edge of the bed beside him. “I don’t understand you,” she said. “How could you listen to Dehni, and stay put on that bed?”

She couldn’t understand - unless he told her the whole story, the whole truth, from beginning to sorry end, and he couldn’t do that; it would only endanger her.

Still, he had to try. “Danny... needs to have a vision for his life. One that isn’t contingent on mine. Whenever I asked him what he had planned for his future, his answer was always the same - watch over me. Get me out of trouble.” He smiled wryly. “That from a man who has a unique talent for getting into trouble himself all the time. I saved his skin more often than he saved mine.”

“I believe that in a heartbeat,” Laisa murmured. “He’s filled with so much rage against the apes...”

“He suffered a lot of abuse from them,” Virdon said quietly.

Laisa looked up and reached for his hand. “So did you - and yet you'd rather want to stay with Master Ennis, instead of returning to your friends...”

“Ennis doesn’t know what happened,” Virdon said, and cursed the sudden roughness in his voice. “Nor does Voltis, or Zatis... and I like it that way. I don’t want that... that incident hanging over me for the rest of my life. I need to move on, and I’m not sure my old team would let me.”

The way Pete had dismissed what he had gone through had made him sick with shame, even in the privacy of Laisa’s bedroom. And Pete was right - something like this shouldn’t happen to a man. Couldn’t. Or if it did happen, the man should count himself lucky. Because that’s what being a man meant, right? Being happy about every opportunity to... fuck. No matter the circumstances.

*What happened to Pete was rape. He’s right, I have no right to compare myself to him.*

Although most of his memory had returned the night before, Virdon still couldn’t remember the moment he had fallen from the road into the river - if he really had let go of his own accord. Maybe he had. Maybe he had wanted to stop being ashamed.

“Alan?” Laisa hadn’t asked what the ‘incident’ was, and it looked as if she wasn’t going to. He was grateful for it.

“Danny and I can’t keep orbiting around each other like that,” he said, avoiding Laisa’s gaze. “It’s not good for either of us.”

She shook her head. “If you let him leave like this, he’ll never stop feeling betrayed and abandoned by you.”
“He's a master of living in the present,” Virdon muttered and pulled his hand away. “He’ll put this behind him, like he should.”

“This he won’t be able to put behind him,” Laisa protested. “And you know that.”

He didn’t know what else to say to her. She wouldn’t be swayed to his side with the little information he felt comfortable sharing.

After a long moment, she sighed. “I need to get dressed - I have to open the apothecary in half an atseht. There is some nut bread in the kitchen, if you’re hungry.”

“What about you?”

“I’m not hungry.” She didn’t look at him as she left the room and shut the door behind her.

Virdon stared at it for a moment, trying not to feel rejected. Laisa had seemed more disappointed than outraged, but from past arguments with Sally, he knew that either sentiment usually spelled trouble for the husband.

Sally. Another memory that had slipped into place, reminding him of yet another promise he had failed to keep. Not just in Etissa, but in this very room... almost. He couldn’t decide if the sudden recollection of his past at the last possible moment was a blessing or a curse. At least it had saved him from breaking his marriage vows yet again.

_A blessing, then. Even if it doesn’t feel like one._

His hand crept to his pendant by habit and found... nothing.

No disc, no leather string, just his bare neck, and the prickling sensation of shock behind his breastbone. The data disc, his talisman, his key, his only chance to find a way back home...

He had probably lost it in the river. Virdon slowly let his hand sink into his lap again. The torrent must’ve ripped it from his neck; by now, the disc had been carried downstream so far that it would be impossible to ever find it. His last connection to his own time had been snapped.

_Pete was right from the beginning. We’re stranded here for good._

No - not stranded. Marooned - kicked into the void by Hasslein, abandoned in a future nobody at home would ever be able to imagine. They had been nothing but lab rats in the professor’s experiment. Hasslein had never intended for them to reach Alpha Centauri. Burke was feeling guilty over nothing.

But now he couldn’t tell him - not if he wanted to stay Taris. Virdon stared at the floor between his feet, unsure of what to do. The familiar weight around his neck was glaringly missing, and he felt unmoored, as if he would drift away any moment.

He was truly widowed now. Sally had died a thousand years ago, and he had lost his only means to cross back over the river of time separating them. Chris...

... he couldn’t think about Chris right now.

He was free to court Laisa, if he wanted. But staying in Chubla meant he’d stay Voltis’ property. A human couldn’t force an ape to give him his freedom... the very concept of free humans didn’t exist. Wildlings were nothing but escaped slaves, even if apes like Ennis’ mother romanticised them.
And staying in Chubla meant having Zana and Galen around as neighbours. Virdon wasn’t sure if he could really turn a new leaf, bury that memory of Ramor, if he crossed paths with his old friends every other day - even if he pretended to be Taris.

The only thing he knew for sure was that he wouldn’t be able to face Burke ever again, now that Galen had betrayed his secret.

Virdon drew a deep breath, and rose. He had no idea what he wanted, but he knew that he couldn’t brood all morning about it in Laisa’s bedroom. Ennis was probably waiting for him - boys at that age usually were unable to hold a grudge for longer than a day. He’d figure out what he was going to do, and in the meantime, he could as well stay Taris. Ennis adored him, and he was fond of the boy, too... he reminded him of Chris a bit...

Virdon tiredly rubbed the bridge of his nose and forced himself to focus on the present.

As long as he was Taris, his place was at Ennis’ side. The boy needed a friend, isolated from his peers as he was, and with a father who buried himself in work, who was always absent...

*Sound like someone you know?*

The morning air was crisp when he stepped into the street, and the horizon glowed a deep crimson, promising more rain. After one glance at the sky, Virdon decided that this wasn’t a day for boomerang lessons. Maybe he’d show Ennis how that telescope worked instead.

He might have failed Chris, but he wouldn’t fail this time.

The air was cool enough now to turn the humans’ breaths into puffy clouds; Zana watched as a group of them slowly jogged around a pen, round after round. She couldn’t see an ape anywhere to urge them on, and wondered if this early morning exercise had been their own idea, or if one of the shelter’s overseers had decided that it was better to tire them out before fights could erupt. The group consisted almost exclusively of males - vigorous physical exertion was mandatory for their wellbeing. And everyone’s sanity.

“Mila! You’re early!”

Zana turned around, and felt her smile freeze a bit at the sight of the approaching ape. “Zorya... I hadn’t thought you’d still receive applicants yourself.” She forced a little laugh. “I’d have thought you had more important things to do with your time.”

Truth was that she had hoped not to meet the elegant Orangutan lady any time soon. After her dismal encounter with Alan out in the woods, Zana was inclined to agree with Peet: Alan didn’t want to remember his old life. Even if he did, in the privacy of his mind, he would probably continue to deny any recognition of his former friends.

His reaction confirmed Zorya’s theory about his accident - or not-accident, as it were; and Zana, berating herself for having been such a neglectful friend, wasn’t eager to see the damning verdict in Zorya’s eyes.

*Well, maybe I shouldn’t have come out to her shelter then. The probability to run into her here is pretty high, after all.* But she hadn’t known what else to do with herself, and when Galen had learned that the shelter was looking for helpers, he had encouraged her to at least consider it, now that it looked as if they would stay in Chubla for good...

“No, I usually don’t bother with applicants.” Zorya had reached the gate and pushed the key into
the lock. “But when I heard it was you who applied as a volunteer mentor, I snatched you up from poor Aska.” She swung the gate open. “Come in, I’ll show you around, and you can tell me about your progress with your human.”

Zana stepped through the gate, her cheeks aching from the smile she had fixed on her face. “I’m afraid there’s not much to report yet. He remembers bits and pieces, but they don’t add up to a meaningful whole.”

Well, it was true, technically.

“Ah, give it time,” Zorya said breezily. “It looks like you’ll be staying here for a while anyway. I heard your husband succeeded poor Doctor Ropal. I’ll have to schedule an appointment for the shelter with him some time. The yearly examination is actually overdue, but I wanted to let him settle in a bit first.”

“That’s very considerate of you,” Zana said, slightly stunned by the barrage of words. “He’ll appreciate that. He’s out in the prefectures a lot of the time right now, treating the winter fever in humans, and the occasional cough in horses...”

“Ah, the beasties always suffer from one thing or the other,” Zorya sighed. “He’ll never be out of work, that much is certain.” She gestured to her right. “That’s our exercise area - males and females train here separately, and the seniors have a separate slice of time for themselves, too. Aska has developed a special program for them that’s easy on the joints.”

Zana wondered for a moment if she should ask Zorya about her theory that the Kobavasa had killed Dr. Ropal. Surely the news about their latest attack on Galen and Peet must’ve reached the Orangutan by now, too.

“You keep humans permanently here?” she asked absently. Zorya was probably right - by the looks of it, they would settle down in Chubla...

... One more reason to get rid of this Kobavasa problem before it could claim Galen’s life like it had claimed Dr. Ropal’s.

*I need more information. I need to know why Voltis is turning a blind eye to all this.*

So far, Zorya was her only source of information, but as the Mothers would have it, her position in Chubla’s society meant that she’d be a fruitful one. Zana would just have to be subtle in her prodding.

“Yes. We only euthanize the incurably sick ones,” Zorya interrupted her brooding. “The rest - humans who are too old, or too... damaged to be rehomed, stay here for good. We had one human who was so traumatized that he had become mute. You wouldn’t believe the prices we were offered for him - apparently, mute humans are very attractive to a certain kind of people.” She scoffed. “Of course we didn’t give him away. He works as a janitor here. You’ll meet him sooner or later. He still doesn’t talk much, but he’s the sweetest boy you can imagine.”

“How do you keep them busy?” Zana wondered, momentarily distracted from her scheming.

“Humans are so intelligent, you can’t just put them out for grazing.”

Zorya laughed. “No, that would invite disaster! We let them work, which also bolsters the shelter’s financial reserves - not that we have a lot, considering the running expenses - and we also encourage them to engage in community activities. You know, storytelling, games, and so on. Humans are quite inventive when it comes to passing their time.”
“I saw something similar in another shelter,” Zana mused. “They had work houses there, too, and some arrangement with local artists...”

“Ah, yes,” Zorya nodded. “The Sapan shelter. Did you meet Felga? She and that other girl opened their own shelter after Felga had spent a year as a mentor here. Bright girl, that one, but oh, what a mouth!”

“I, I did meet her,” Zana stuttered, mentally slapping herself for mentioning Sapan. She hadn’t been ‘Mila’ there - she had traveled under the name of ‘Alta’, and had left town just in time to miss Nelva, Urko’s second-in-command, who had been tasked to hunt them down and bring them back to the City for... things she chose not to think about.

Nelva was also the brother of the late Felga, and while Zana didn’t believe for a moment that her own involvement in the clearing-up of Felga’s murder case would sway Nelva in the slightest towards mercy, it would’ve certainly motivated him to take a closer look at that travelling group of two apes and two humans... one of them with a pretty rare color, and an equally recognizable limp... and to connect the ‘Alta’ identity with Dhyendhye Zana, formerly a human behavioral analyst, formerly the handler of two fugitive as-tro-naut humans, now in cahoots with the traitor and fugitive Atiba Galen...

“Mila?” Zorya was gazing intently at her, concern written clearly in her face. “You’re bristling - is something wrong?”

News of Felga’s death clearly hadn’t crossed the passes yet. But if Zana kept silent about it now, she would be in deep trouble once those news did arrive in Chubla. She quickly pondered if she could claim to have travelled through before the murder had happened... but that wouldn’t add up with their time of arrival here.

“When I arrived in Sapan, the town was reeling from the shock of... of Felga’s murder,” she said, then quickly caught Zorya’s arm as the Orangutan stumbled in shock.

“Murder?” Zorya stammered. “But why... who...”

“They were accusing her affiliate,” Zana mumbled. “But we didn’t stay long enough to learn more details.” She sent a quick prayer to the Mothers that Zorya would be satisfied with her vague report.

“Halda?” Zorya still looked as if she would tumble over. Zana quickly led her to a bench that overlooked a curious construction - as if a squirrel’s nest had been dug halfway into the ground - and sat her down.

“I, I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t consider that you knew her personally. This must come as a shock... I’m so sorry.”

“Yes, yes... quite...” Zorya murmured, still looking dazed. She weakly patted Zana’s hand. “All my girls seem to get into trouble sooner or later. First Aelia, now Felga - I hope it’s not a curse, and you’ll be next.”

Oh, don’t worry about me, Zana thought. I’ve been getting into trouble long before I ever came into contact with you.

Aloud, she just said, “Aelia?”

“The wife of Chief Voltis. Former wife, I should say. I gather you’ve heard the gossip about her by now?”
“Actually, I haven’t,” Zana said, her mind racing. Aelia had to be the chief’s divorced wife that Peet had mentioned. The one who had promised him to extract Alan from the chief’s household, and bring him to the border of the Forbidden Zone. “I was too preoccupied with my own problem to give it much attention.”

“Yes, you didn’t strike me as a tattler,” Zorya said absently, and Zana resolved to be extremely subtle with her next questions.

But she wouldn’t leave before she had learned more about Aelia; she had to be sure that Chimpanzee was worthy of Peet’s trust.

“But let me show you something else,” Zorya said and rose. She pointed to the low dome behind them - the ‘sunken drey’, as Zana had dubbed it for herself. “You’ll love this - a whole room filled with cute human cubs. I need the sight myself right now.”

Zorya led her around the structure to a door that led a few steps down and opened to a round pen similar to the one where Zana had watched the males run earlier. The dome above them protected this pen from the elements, though, and the air was comfortably warm. The rising sun sent golden beams through the skylights and bathed the playing children in a warm glow.

There were almost as many Chimp girls sitting among the toddlers as there were toddlers, Zana noticed. Naturally, young animals were the biggest attraction anywhere - and just as naturally, Zaius had assumed that she’d prefer them, too, when he had created the ‘human behavioral analyst’ position for her. Back then, she hadn’t objected to his assumption - she had just been glad that she would be able to work with humans at all.

But a lot had happened since then, and now it rubbed her the wrong way... probably because she couldn’t see them as young animals anymore. They were children... children who were petted and groomed more than they were educated.

“You could give them colored chalk, or starch paint,” she suggested. “Young children love to paint and color.”

Zorya nodded thoughtfully. “That’s an excellent idea,” she agreed. “You’ll be a real asset for us, Mila.”

“Does... that mean I’m accepted for the mentor position?”

Zorya didn’t answer immediately; she was staring at the playing children.

“Aelia didn’t leave Voltis for Aboro,” she said abruptly. “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

Zana raised her brows, silently congratulating herself for subtly not asking about Aelia. I need to practice this pregnant silence more.

“And then you took her under your wing, and had her volunteer for the shelter, Zana thought, and suddenly that young girl was confronted with so much suffering...
“She... changed, over time,” Zorya said, and reached for a toddler that had gotten too close. She sat the little girl on her lap and started combing her hair with her fingers. The girl squirmed, but Zorya didn’t let her go.

“We need to train them to let us touch them everywhere,” she said when she noticed Zana’s stare. “Your husband will thank us when he has to examine one of them.”

Peet’s flushed face popped up in Zana’s mind before she could suppress it. Peet, yelling at her in his tiny room in Sapan, and then sleeping in a kennel down at the stadium to escape her grooming.

Well, of course, nobody imprinted him when he was a little boy. Or maybe we shouldn’t touch them when they don’t want to.

To Zorya, humans were still animals, she realized - even if the Orangutan dedicated her life to their protection.

*I’ll never fit in... anywhere.*

“Over the years, Aelia and Voltis clashed more and more over the question of how to deal with the human issue,” Zorya continued. “Voltis sees no reason to change anything, while Aelia has become convinced that keeping humans is wrong on principle. To her, they belong in the wild.”

That fit with what Peet had told her, at least. But Galen had said that the Forbidden Zone was a deadly wasteland... Surely Aelia would take that into account? She wouldn’t just... dump the humans in there?

“But most of them wouldn’t survive in the wild,” Zana said carefully. “They’ve never learned the necessary skills for that.”

Zorya heaved another sigh. “As I said, she’s still young. Young people tend to be more radical. I’m sure she’ll become more... realistic in time. I always say we need to work with what’s possible, not try to force what would be ideal. Anyway, I just wanted to make sure that you know that this young prefect didn’t play a role in her decision to leave.”

Of course not. Zana hoped her face didn’t betray her amusement.

“Well, I wouldn’t dare to speculate about her current living arrangements,” she just said. “But I understand that her son didn’t take their separation well.”

“Ah, yes, Ennis.” Zorya finally released the little human and rose. Zana followed her outside, strangely glad to get away from the pen.

“Ennis thinks too deeply, and feels too strongly, for a boy... and for his age,” Zorya said with a shrug. “Life will come down harshly on him, considering his position, and his father’s plans for his future. But that is something all young people have to go through, more or less. In my opinion, latching onto your human will only make that transition into adulthood harder for him, but Voltis isn’t interested in my opinion.”

No, I can imagine he isn’t - not when he thinks you’re responsible for his young wife’s radicalization.

Aloud, Zana just said, “Thank you for showing me around, Zorya. I hope your impression of me will let you decide in my favor.”

“Oh, you can start tomorrow, if you want to.” Zorya clasped her hand. “I’m very glad to have you
here, Mila. I think you’ll like our shelter very much. And I hope you’ll bring a lot of new ideas to it.”

Zana smiled. If this shelter was like any other organization ever, nobody would want to deal with new ideas. “I’m looking forward to it, too. Thank you again for your time - it was very interesting.”

Very interesting, indeed. She wondered what Zorya hadn’t told her about Aelia.

Maybe it was time for scheduling another bird-watching trip with Zatis.
Chapter 16

Voltis’ household was in uproar when Virdon arrived: servants were crowding in the corridors, muttering excitedly among each other; guards trampled up and down the stairs, pushing everyone to the side who didn’t squeeze themselves against the wall in time; and a grim-looking Zatis conferred with a tired and distracted-looking Voltis in the middle of the corridor leading to Ennis’ room.

Virdon waited until Voltis had broken up what looked like an impromptu war council to intercept Zatis. “What happened? Everyone is so... agitated.”

Zatis just flicked him a sideways glance as he pushed past him. “Taris. There you are. We thought you had joined your master.”

Virdon blinked. “Joined him? What do you mean?”

Zatis stopped and turned around to regard him with raised brows. “Master Ennis ran away some time during the night. Naturally, we assumed he’d taken his human with him.”

It was impossible to tell if the orangutan meant to express disapproval over his unauthorized nightly absence. Virdon didn't care. “Ennis ran away? Where to?”

Zatis frowned. “We’d have brought him back home already if we knew that. Unfortunately, Master Ennis has developed a proclivity for taking to the mountains when life here becomes too overwhelming for him. Not that we ever approved of that, but during the summer, it was not as dangerous as it is now.”

Virdon stared at him, too stunned to reply.

*I could’ve prevented this. I should’ve stayed here.*

It was pointless to ask Zatis to let him join the search party - as a human, he’d be considered as nothing but dead weight for the apes. Virdon could’ve told the orangutan that he was a pretty decent tracker himself, but that would’ve just prompted questions he wasn’t ready to answer.

But he couldn't just stay here and do nothing, either. *I swore to myself that I wouldn't fail again.*

Maybe he could still help, without raising suspicion. Maybe Ennis had left behind some clue that could point the search party in the right direction. Virdon was certain that despite this fit of rage, the boy still wanted to be found eventually - after the adults had suffered through their well-deserved panic for an appropriate amount of time, of course.

Ennis’ room was exactly as Virdon remembered it. The decision to run away must’ve come in a flash, because his damp coat still lay crumpled on the floor, his leather bag still drooped over the edge of the desk where Ennis had carelessly flung it when he had returned from school; and all the toys and machines were still crammed into their shelves, even the... the boomerang, that was the word that had eluded him all that time.

Virdon plucked the boomerang from the shelf and turned it in his hands. It had been Ennis’ favorite toy, especially after he had mastered the trick of throwing it so that it returned to him.

*He must’ve been pretty pissed off at me to leave it behind. Or maybe he was in such a hurry that he just forgot about it...*
Virdon put the boomerang back in its place and turned away. His gaze fell on the empty windowsill.

The empty windowsill.

The telescope was gone.

Well, maybe Zatis had it - as far as Virdon could tell, the old orangutan was the only one who ever touched it. Ennis treated it as if it carried the plague.

But it had been in the room when Ennis had stormed in and locked everyone out. It was hard to believe that Zatis had taken the telescope this morning when Ennis’ absence had been discovered. It would’ve been the last thing on his mind - which meant that it had vanished together with Ennis.

*It just doesn’t... doesn’t fit.*

Virdon strode from the room, determined to find Zatis or even Voltis, and to alert them to the missing telescope. He didn’t stop to ponder the meaning of his find himself, until Zatis was frowning at him.

“That’s all well and good, Taris, but I don’t have time to go looking for the far-viewer now, we’ll be heading out shortly... you go searching for it, I allow you to play with it...”

“No, *vetes,*” Virdon interrupted him, fighting to keep his annoyance out of his voice. “I don’t want it for myself. I just find it strange that En... Master Ennis would take it with him, but forget his poncho, especially if he really went for the mountains. The telescope is heavy, and he doesn’t even like it very much. I only know of one ape who’d take care not to leave it behind, aside from you - Ennis’ mother."

Suddenly, the pieces fell into place. "I think he didn’t run away at all. I think his mother took him and-"

“It’s not your place to think, Taris.” Zatis absently patted his arm. “A human doesn’t think, it obeys. Trust that Master Voltis and I have everything under control, and don’t waste my time with these wild stories.”

“Well, how do you explain the missing telescope?” By now, Virdon didn’t care anymore if Zatis could see his irritation.

“I’m sure there’s a perfectly rational explanation for it. Now off with you - you have an appointment with Dr. Kova now, if I’m not mistaken.” Zatis turned away and headed for the stairs.

Virdon stared after him with clenched fists, reminding himself that a human punching the wall would only catch the unwanted attention of a passing guard, and wondering who else he could spur into action on Ennis’ behalf.

Talking to Voltis would probably get him the same reaction as from Zatis, if he was lucky, or an intense interrogation, if he was unlucky. Unlike Zatis, Voltis would’ve noticed him dropping the honorifics, as well as his new lack of deference towards an ape. Virdon remembered his last audience with the district chief. He wasn’t eager to arouse the undivided attention of this particular ape.

As much as it pained him to admit it, he could think of only one ape who would not only listen to his theory, but also give it some serious thought.
He just wasn’t sure yet if he should still address him as ‘Dr. Kova’.

For once, Voltis wasn’t alone in his office; when Galen entered, he found the lean ape and his Orangutan advisor bent over a map that entirely covered Voltis’ huge desk.

“This better be important,” Voltis muttered without looking up. “As you can see, I’m rather busy right now.”

“I believe it is,” Galen said mildly. “And I’ll try not to take up too much of your precious time, District Chief. In fact,” he gestured at the map, “my reason to see you refers directly to your... ah, situation.”

Zatis did throw him a rather disapproving glance then, but refrained from commenting. He probably already suspected what this was about - Alan had tried to reason with Ennis’ mentor, to no avail, before he had asked ‘Doctor Kova’ for help. Galen couldn’t decide if Alan remembered his true self, and had asked him as a friend, or if he still thought he was Taris, and had asked him because as his doctor, he was a natural confidant.

He avoided probing the question of why he had agreed to indulge the human in either case.

Voltis wasn’t impressed. “Unless you saw my son, or have him with you, I doubt your usefulness, doctor. No offense, but I’ve been inundated with helpful ideas ever since we discovered Ennis’ absence.”

“And I have no doubt Privat Zatis shielded you from the most ridiculous or impractical suggestions,” Galen said with a forced smile. “But it’s a testament to people’s love for your son that they’re trying to help you.”

Voltis paused, then flicked him an ironic glare over his shoulder. “If you want to put it that way... So, what’s your idea? I’ll let Zatis here tell you if it’s ridiculous or impractical.”

“The information that has been brought to my attention gives me reason to believe that your son might not have run away on his own, but has been taken against his will,” Galen said.

Voltis scoffed. “I’m afraid your theory is neither new nor original. I’ve heard everything from Kobavasa, to wild humans, to ghosts being responsible for his disappearance.”

“Or disgruntled prefects trying to put pressure on their district chief to finally crack down on said Kobavasa?” Galen held up his hands when both apes turned around to glare at him. “Just something I heard on my way here, it’s not my theory.”

“My prefects are hand-picked by me,” Voltis growled. “They aren’t rogues.”

*At least one of them has gone rogue, or that Kobavasa problem wouldn’t have exploded like it did,* Galen thought, but was careful to keep his expression neutral. *And my bet is on that old friend of Urko and his extremist priest.*

Voltis had to harbour the same suspicion, but he probably lacked the evidence to start an investigation. Urko picked his allies carefully, too.

“But of course not,” was all Galen said aloud. “I told you it wasn’t my theory, but I thought you should know about it nevertheless.” He smiled blandly. “Rumors have such a nasty tendency to spread out of control if they aren’t contained at once.”
Voltis’ gaze became piercing. “You seem to have a keen eye - and ears, doctor.”

“Well, in my profession, good listening skills are helpful,” Galen shrugged.

“I doubt that the cows talk much about politics,” Zatis rumbled. It was the first time he had said anything. Another ape with good listening skills, Galen thought wryly.

“But their owners do,” he said with a slight smile. “Anyway, as I said, I don’t want to steal your time. I was wondering about that telescope that went missing along with your son, Chief. My source assured me that Ennis didn’t care at all about it, while the gift-giver apparently put much value in it. So we both find it highly unlikely that Ennis would plan to escape into the mountains and take nothing with him - no food, no weather-proof robe, no hunting gear - nothing but that telescope.”

“There are hunting cabins spread across the whole district,” Voltis said with a shrug, “and the hunters keep them well-equipped. If Ennis decided all of a sudden to go on a hike, he’d know how to find one and outfit himself there. And he’d have no problem getting there - he’s not a city ape.”

*Like I am,* Galen added silently, *which is of course the reason I wouldn’t think of these things.* But Alan hadn’t grown up in a city, as far as Galen knew, and he had still been convinced that Ennis had been taken by his own mother...

“So what would he have needed his mother’s telescope for?” Galen asked.

“For spotting our search party from afar, probably,” Zatis interjected, when Voltis hesitated. “I taught him how to use it, and practicality might have won out over his... shyness to try it out.”

Galen looked from Voltis to Zatis, and back to the District Chief, meeting two blank stares.

Finally, Voltis cleared his throat. “Thank you for your input, Kova. We’ll take it under consideration. Don’t let me keep you from your lunch, though - I heard you are out in the prefectures all day, treating the humans’ winter fever. A man has to take his lunch while he can get it.”

Galen bowed deeply to cover his sarcastic smile. “Indeed, Chief. I wish you success on your mission.”

*Whatever it really is.*

The thought niggled at him even as he trudged down the corridor. Galen had seen a number of incompetent, foolish, even corrupt councillors, but the lower ranks - police chiefs, and prefects, and district chiefs - couldn’t afford being those things. Competition for these positions was fierce, and every ape who had secured one for himself was acutely aware that the contenders were watching his every step, waiting for him to trip up and make himself vulnerable. That Voltis had held out for so long despite his Kobavasa problem was a testament to the man’s ferocity and competence. He wouldn’t fool himself into believing that his son had just gone for an unauthorized hunting trip in the middle of the night.

It was all a ruse.

The realization made him stop cold. Of course! Zatis and Voltis had brushed him off just like they had brushed off Alan, because they wanted to keep secret whatever they were *really* planning. They had no reason to take either a foreign doctor, or a human... an animal, in their eyes... into their confidence.
Galen threw a cautious glance over his shoulder, then casually turned a corner and circled back to Voltis’ office. He forced himself to pay no attention to the guards that had been positioned at various strategic spots in the corridors; his face was known by now, and as long as he walked with confidence, everyone would assume that he had a legitimate reason to prowl the halls of Voltis’ mansion.

He wondered if Ennis’ mother had used the same tactic. If she had, Voltis would have to update his men’s training.

The door to Voltis’ office opened just as he was about to turn the last corner, and Galen hastily retreated - to his eternal relief, there was no guard posted in the short section of the corridor he was standing in. He had to retreat some more when the voices drew in his direction; at this time of the day, though, most rooms lining that corridor were empty. He kept the door cracked open to let Voltis and Zatis pass, then followed them at a distance.

Both apes were engrossed in a murmured conversation and didn’t look back even once. Some of the guards looked in askance at Galen, but the doctor’s bag he carried alleviated any instinctual wariness - here was a doctor on some routine call, only accidentally walking down the same corridor as their superiors. Galen carried the bag with him only because he’d had that appointment with Alan, and he hadn’t known where to put it when he went to see Voltis; but now he came to appreciate that the bag had secondary uses, too.

They were moving into a part of the estate that Galen had never entered before; for some reason, there were no guards in the corridors anymore, a fact that should’ve relieved him. Instead, it filled him with vague concern. Those guards had to be somewhere else... but where?

He almost ran into his quarry when he turned the last corner, and hastily jerked back. When he was certain after a moment that neither Voltis nor Zatis had noticed him, he cautiously peeked around the corner again.

The apes had stepped out on a sort of balcony; but Galen could make out a stairway leading down into an inner courtyard at the far side of the platform.

A courtyard filled to the walls with black-clad guardsmen.

Galen tried to remind his suddenly galloping heart that the black mass down there wasn’t trying to take up his scent, but his body had been trained to recognize those uniforms as signs of immediate, life-threatening danger, and refused to believe his mind’s reassurances. He found it hard to breathe all of a sudden, hard to hear Voltis’ voice over the rushing sound in his ears.

This was what he had come here for, though - to find out what was really going on. Galen strained to focus on the words that Voltis was now directing at his men.

”... gone too far. I’d celebrate the fact that she finally provided me with actionable evidence against them, if the evidence wasn’t my own son. I don’t think I have to stress this, but I will: under no circumstances are you to endanger Ennis. I don’t care if you have a Kobavasa by the throat, my son’s safety has absolute precedence.”

Voltis’ voice was icy. Galen didn’t want to imagine what would happen to these men if young Ennis brought home so much as a scratch.

But... Kobavasa? Did Voltis suspect that his former wife was one of them? It would explain why he hadn’t lifted a finger against them until now, at least.
“Now,” the Chimp continued crisply. “We’re trying to catch them unawares, so you’ll file out in small groups - just regular patrols, if anyone dares to ask. Not that I think anyone would.”

Low chuckles branded up here and there, but overall, the atmosphere was tense. Galen brushed his gaze over the upturned faces, riveted at their leader, and only found a terrible, exhilarated anticipation in each of them.

They were lusting for blood. They had been waiting far too long for this day.

“You’ll ride to Sultok proper after nightfall, and we’ll rendezvous outside the gates at sunrise - help Aboro out of bed,” Voltis continued.

Galen quietly slipped away, no longer eager to hear the rest of his speech. So Voltis was planning to take down Aboro, too. Well, the abduction of a child was a crime, and if Ennis’ mother was indeed a Kobavasa, Voltis might be able to pin that crime on Aboro, too, even if the evidence for the prefect’s involvement in it was scant to non-existing. Galen remembered Aken, the prefect who had tried to execute him and the humans for their non-existing membership in the Human Liberation Front. If you desperately needed evidence, you’d find a way to make it appear.

I wouldn’t want to be Aboro’s neighbour tomorrow.

Or Aboro.

It seemed that Alan’s worries were completely unfounded; Voltis knew exactly what was going on, and was finally taking measures to not only get his son back, but to eradicate the Kobavasa problem in one fell swoop.

All would be fine in a matter of days - Ennis would be back home; Galen’s own work as a veterinarian would become a lot less dangerous; and Alan... Alan would be...

... Alan would be happy to have his master back. He had been so tense when he had told him about his theory that Ennis had been abducted.

He’d be happy. And that was the most important thing, wasn’t it?

But when Galen opened the door to Ennis’ room to bring Alan the good news, the human was gone.
Chapter 17

To Virdon’s relief, Laisa didn’t seem annoyed to see him again so soon. She just raised a brow at him when she opened the door. “Is your head aching again?”

“No.” He attempted a smile. “The pain has moved, for some reason, it’s sitting here now...” He poked his thumb against his breastbone. “I wanted to apologize.”

And he also wanted to kiss her again. Virdon fought down a stab of guilt - he was widowed, even if he didn’t feel that way, he wouldn’t break a promise this time...

Not that it made a difference anymore, with that trail of broken promises in his wake.

“Oh.” She seemed to be taken aback for a moment. “Well, chest pain could be something serious. Maybe you should come in and let me have a closer look at that...” She opened the door wider and smiled mischievously at him.

Her playful mood gave way to seriousness as soon as they were back in the herb room, though. She let him kiss her; but when he began to trail his kisses down her neck, she tensed. “As much as I enjoy your apology... we need to talk about Dehni.”

Virdon paused, his face still buried in the crook of her neck. He sighed against her skin; she had changed her soap, or whatever she used as a perfume, to some woody, slightly bitter note... completely different from the flowery sweetness that had choked him the previous night. “I’d rather not,” he murmured against her skin and smiled when his breath made her shiver.

She stepped back, breaking the contact. “I’d rather do something else, too,” she admitted in a husky voice. “But if you’re serious about that apology, you’ll go to their inn and apologize to him, too.”

Virdon huffed a humorless laugh, and turned away. “And what should I apologize for? For almost drowning, or for losing my memory... or do you think I faked that?”

“No, of course I don’t think you faked it.” Laisa walked around him so she could look into his eyes. “But you’ve recovered your memories since then, and Dehni suspected that you were remembering more than you admitted even before last night. You can’t just pretend to them that you’re still completely unaware that you’re... you again.”

Virdon clenched his fists in helpless frustration. “Laisa, we already talked about all that! I told you why I need to stay Taris and... and besides, I have other things to worry about. Ennis was abducted last night, from his own room!” He shook his head. “If I only had been there...”

Laisa gaped at him. “What do you mean, Master Ennis was abducted?”

“They claim he ran away.” Virdon started to pace. “Apparently it’s something he’s done before, when things got too rough for him to handle. But his telescope is missing, too, and he hates the thing! I told Zatis, but he didn’t believe me...”

Galen had seemed to believe him, but he hadn’t returned, and after a while, Virdon had been too antsy to stay in Ennis’ room and wait for him any longer. No matter if Galen believed him, or if Voltis believed Galen, nobody would bother with inviting a human to join the search, and if the choice was between sitting on Ennis’ bed and twiddling his thumbs, or getting some fresh air and talking this over with a fellow human...
... normally, that fellow human would’ve been Burke.

But even if there hadn’t been that little explanation in the way of how he wasn’t Taris anymore, and how long he’d known, and why he hadn’t said anything before... Virdon doubted that Burke would’ve lent him a sympathetic ear in this particular matter. The major had become more and more hostile towards apes in general, which was understandable after what they had gone through, but now he also didn’t seem to care about the apes’ age anymore, which was... worrying.

If he decided to keep his Taris identity, Virdon wouldn’t have the opportunity to talk about that with him anymore, either.

*I’ll deal with that later. After Ennis is safely back home.*

“Do you have any other proof save that tele... thing, that he was taken against his will?” Laisa asked hesitantly.

Virdon whipped his head around. “So you think I’m just a hysterical slave, too?”

“No!” She reached out and caught his arm to stop his pacing. “I trust your judgment, Alan. If you say he didn’t run away, then he didn’t. But... but surely the chief and Privat Zatis, and, and the guard are all looking for Master Ennis, aren’t they?”

Virdon scoffed. “They’re looking in all the wrong places. Ennis isn’t hiding somewhere in the mountains! He’s probably not even in this prefecture anymore. And as long as they all cling to that notion that he just ran away in some bout of teenager rage, they’ll just lose precious time!”

Voltis must’ve made a lot of enemies - it just came with the territory. The human house servants had been whispering about a band of rogue apes trawling the prefectures, killing every human they caught, even attacking whole human villages... even attacking any ape who took care of humans. Apparently, Galen’s predecessor had died in such an attack.

Maybe some disgruntled prefect had thought it was time to put a bit more pressure on the district chief, before their prefecture was completely ruined by... what were they called...? Koba’s Army. Galen had just raised his brows when Virdon had mentioned that possibility, but hadn’t said anything.

Or maybe Ennis had been abducted by one of those Kobavasa - to put pressure on his father not to persecute them too vigorously. In which case, there was no way of knowing if they would be content just to sit and wait for Voltis’ reaction. Maybe they’d want to forestall any rash reactions by sending him a warning...

Neither of these theories explained the missing telescope, though. No, Ennis’ mother was still the most likely candidate.

“This was my fault,” Virdon murmured. “I should’ve stayed put... even if that would’ve meant sleeping outside the door. At least that way, nobody would’ve been able to sneak in and steal him from his own bed.”

“And maybe they would’ve just killed you so you couldn’t raise the alarm!” Laisa snapped. “I’m glad you weren’t there, Alan - you’re not Master Ennis’ bodyguard. It’s not your place to protect him from attacks like this one.”

*It’s not your place to think, Taris...*

Not his place to protect, either. Just to... play fetch and be cuddled, apparently.
Some of his thoughts must’ve shown on his face, because Laisa drew back a bit to study his face.

“What are you going to do now?”

His laugh sounded bitter even to his own ears. “What could I do? I wish I could go searching for him myself, but... They won’t let me. I’d have to ask permission, and they’ll just say I’m chasing one of my... my ‘wild stories’.”

And if he left without asking permission, a patrol would soon find him and drag him back to Voltis’ estate. Virdon had no idea what the consequences of his disobedience would be - a stern talking-to? Arrest?

... the whip?

“I could go in your stead,” Laisa suggested. “As a healer, I can visit another prefecture without having to ask permission of my master. I could ask around-“

“No!” Virdon thought his heart would stop. “It’s too dangerous! You’ve heard about the Kobavasa, they’d snatch you from the road and kill you like a, a... No, you stay here, you hear me, Laisa? Right here, inside these city walls, where you’re safe!”

She frowned at him. “I’ve been traveling the district all summer, Alan. Long before you turned up to protect me.”

He clenched his teeth so hard that his jaw hurt. “Don’t mock me. I’ve already learned that it’s not my place to protect anyone.”

Laisa grabbed him by the collar and pulled his face down to hers. “Stop talking this nonsense,” she said sternly. “You’re stubborn like a mule, but you’re a good man.” She kissed him, long and deep, to drive her point home.

“Promise that you won’t endanger yourself because of me,” Virdon murmured when she released him.

“I promise.” She smiled up at him. “Though you must admit that it’s a good plan - if Chief Voltis had an actual eye witness, someone who had seen Master Ennis in Sultok with his mother...”

“It would still be just the word of a human,” Virdon reminded her.

Laisa shook her head. “The Chief loves his son, and he wants him back just as much as his mother did. Believe me, Alan, in this case, he would take the word of a human seriously.”

“Well, alright, it is a good plan,” Virdon admitted, and couldn’t help but smile when she beamed with pride. He gently traced her lip with his thumb. “I still don’t want you to go. It’s too
dangerous.”

Laisa sighed. “I guess we’ll need to put our faith in Chief Voltis then.” She raised herself on tiptoes to kiss him again. “He’ll figure it out, eventually.”

Virdon closed his eyes to better focus on her kiss, trying to let the sensation drown out his own guilt over his absence that night, trying to put his faith in Voltis’ ability to put two and two together.

It wasn’t his place to worry, after all.

When Burke showed up at the healer’s house to return the basket and the empty bottles - to his surprise, the humans did take care to collect them and return them to their doctor, a habit that the late Dr. Ropal had probably beaten into them - the door didn’t open. After knocking and calling for the third time, Burke tried the handle and found that Laisa had locked up.

That was pretty unusual - she’d have people coming to buy herbs all day long, and it was only early afternoon. After Galen had returned from his appointment with ‘Taris’, he had ordered Burke to immediately hitch up the horses for a quick doctor round through the villages near Chubla; they had skipped lunch, and now Burke was feeling hungry and cranky, and not inclined to waste his time at Laisa’s doorstep. The healer had probably locked the door just for him, for that little debate at sunrise.

He was still trying to decide whether he should just leave the basket outside her door, or pick the lock and deposit the bottles in the hall so that no passing human could help themselves to a free bottle, when an old woman poked her head out of the window of the neighbouring house and croaked, “She’s not in there.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Burke muttered. Aloud, he said, “You know when she’ll come back? This is her stuff, an’ I don’t fancy hauling it around all day.”

“Not for a few days,” the woman said. “She told me she’s visiting some relatives who have fallen ill, in Sultok. We’ll have to go to Lovits with our troubles, and have him pray for us.”

“Good luck with that,” Burke murmured, and turned to leave. He’d have to take the damn bottles back to the inn now, and stash them somewhere - probably in his own room, he couldn’t imagine that Galen would allow him to pile up trash in his room - and Cesar only knew how many more empty bottles would join that first basket before the damn woman returned.

His mood plummeted even further when he ran into Virdon at the ghetto’s gate. “You’re outta luck, bud,” he growled as he shoved past him. “Your girl is out to visit some relatives, nobody knows when she’ll be back.”

He suddenly found himself grabbed by the arm and flung against the barricade. “Hey,” he protested. “Careful, man! That’s glass in there!”

Virdon’s face was tense, his eyes a pale blue boring into Burke. “What did you say? Where did she go? When?”

Burke felt his irritation shoot up like a jet of flame. “Why the hell should I tell you anything, stranger?”

Virdon didn’t seem to listen to him, although his fist was still crumpling his shirt. “She can’t have left longer than two hours ago,” he muttered. “I went back to the estate at about noon...”
Then he brought his face close to Burke’s, his gaze clear and cold with no trace of the slightly addled Taris in it anymore. “Because she might be in danger, and I don’t think you’d play with an innocent’s life just to spite me.”

Burke snorted. “Sure she’s in danger. She’s a human, it’s our default way of life here.”

He saw a muscle tick in Virdon’s jaw as his former commander clenched his teeth. “You’re out in the prefectures every day,” Virdon growled. “Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of the Kobavasa.”

Burke shrugged. “They’ve been here long before you an’ I showed up, an’ your healer had to deal with that fact all summer. Don’t know why you think anything has changed, jus’ because you have the hots for her.”

Virdon’s gaze flickered for a moment. He moistened his lips. “I think she got herself in danger on purpose this time. Because of me. So yes, something has changed, and I’m responsible, and... come on, you don’t have a feud with her!”

Burke held his gaze for a moment... but it was true. He actually didn’t have anything against Virdon’s girlfriend. “She went to Sultok,” he said. “At least that’s what her neighbour told me.”

Virdon released him with a curse. “Sultok! That’s Aboro’s prefecture!”

Burke raised his brows. “And...?”

Virdon flicked him an incredulous look, then seemed to remember that as ‘Dr. Kova’s’ orderly, Burke had probably been out of town for the better part of the day. “Chief Voltis’ son was abducted last night, by his own mother, it seems - and she lives with Aboro. I... I had mentioned that to Laisa, and she had offered to travel to his prefecture to find out more...”

“Goddammit, Al!” Burke couldn’t believe his ears.

“I told her not to go!” Virdon threw up his arms in despair. “I told her it’s too dangerous!”

“What else did you tell her that made her think she’d have to go to Aboro for you?” Burke said, stunned.

“Nothing...” Virdon raked both hands through his hair. “Just that I should’ve stayed in the mansion that night, that I could’ve prevented it...”

“Yeah, or maybe that kidnapper just would’ve shot you,” Burke said dryly. “Stop pacing, Al, the guard over there is gettin’ twitchy.”

Virdon let his hands drop with a sigh. He didn’t correct Burke’s use of his old name, which either meant that the bastard had regained his full mental capacity, but hadn’t bothered to let any of them know about that little fact, or that he was too distraught about his girlfriend to care about Burke’s needling.

“I need to stop her,” Virdon muttered. “Get her back to Chubla... she’s on foot, but she has a head start of several hours.” He was staring into space, reviewing an invisible map in his mind. “A man on horseback could easily catch up to her...”

“Good luck finding a horse, or an ape who’d allow you to ride one,” Burke scoffed. “That reminds me, you’d need your master’s permission to leave town for your little rescue mission. And since your master got nabbed by the bogeyape, I guess your next contact is his father. I’d heat up the popcorn, if the damn monkeys still had it...”
Virdon paused to stare at him. “Enjoying yourself, are you?”

“I jus’ enjoy watching you settle into your new life as a monkey’s slave, Taris,” Burke said with a sardonic smile. “Course you can’t remember what it was like before, when we never asked permission from Za... Mila and Kova for anything. They didn’t exactly treat us as equals, but at least they tried really hard to treat us as people. But hey, this is what you wanted - enjoy.” He turned to go.

“Danny...”

He walked on, not looking back.

“She might die. Is your anger really worth sacrificing her life?”

Burke paused, head pounding. He only turned back to Virdon when he was sure he wouldn’t punch his friend’s stupid, worried face.

“What do you want from me, huh?” he snarled. “Spit it out. Ask me.”

“I need a horse,” Virdon said tersely. “As you pointed out, it’d be difficult to get one from anyone else. I ask you to lend me one of your horses, so I can catch up with Laisa before one of the Kobavasa does.”

Burke regarded him for a moment. “Suppose I give you a horse - doesn’t mean you’ll get permission from your master.”

Virdon smiled faintly. “Chief Voltis has more important things on his mind right now. I wouldn’t steal his time with... unimportant human business.”

Burke scratched his ear. “You’d go without permission? You’d get the whip for that.”

Virdon shrugged and avoided his gaze. “That’s not your problem, though.”

“True.”

They stood there for a moment, the only humans not hurrying along on some errand. Burke saw Virdon’s jaw work.

“Will you give me a horse?”

“No.”

Burke vaguely gestured at him. “You’re an eye-catcher, with your hair and eyes.” And that limp that was also still there, although only faintly visible now, and invisible once he was on horseback - but if he did get into an ambush, the leg might give out at the worst moment.

’sides, I doubt your little master wants a bloody mess on his rug, after they’ve given you that beating for running away.

Virdon swallowed hard. “I... see. Well... thank you for hearing me out, at least.” He slowly turned away, still looking stunned.

“I’m gonna get her, you idiot.” Burke shook his head when Virdon turned back to stare at him in disbelief. “Did you really think I’d let some monkeys kill a human just to see you squirm?”

“I... I...” Virdon turned up his palms. “Thank you.”
Burke turned to go. “I’m not doing this for you.”

“I know...”

Burke didn’t slow his step, didn’t look back.

Didn’t dare to.
Chapter 18

“There’s some nut bread and cold meat in this box, and soup in the other,” Zana greeted Galen when he came up the stairs to their room. “I thought we could have a late lunch together before you have to drive out again.”

“That sounds excellent,” Galen murmured. He moved slowly, as if his morning round had already thoroughly exhausted him - or as if he was in deep thought. “I’m starving.”

He didn’t say anything more until he had almost emptied his bowl. “Forgive me for being such a bad table companion...”

“Well, I didn’t cook it, so the praise for making this soup delicious enough to capture all of your attention goes to that street vendor,” Zana said dryly. “Don’t worry, dear, I understand that your work is exhausting.”

“It’s not as bad as I had feared, actually,” Galen said, and leaned back with a sigh. “It’s actually less taxing than the hours I spend in Ropal’s town practice. Travelling from village to village gives me the opportunity to rest between the consultations, or to look up symptoms... or to empty your delicious lunch boxes. Though to be fair, most of the time it’s Peet who empties them. That human can eat nonstop.”

“Well, he’s full of nervous energy,” Zana smiled. “I guess he has to replenish it often.”

“And how was your morning?” Galen asked, quite obviously unwilling to discuss Peet again. He had sent him to the human healer as soon as they had arrived back at the inn, and even given him some semblés to buy himself something to eat. Since Peet had forced him to confess what had happened in Etissa, Galen seemed eager to put some distance between himself and Peet whenever possible. Zana wondered what those doctor rounds had to be like for them.

She dunked another morsel of nut bread into her soup. “It seems I was accepted into the mentor program at the shelter.”

“If anyone deserves to be in that program, it’s you.” Galen reached for the box with the nut bread. “You will teach them a thing or two, what with your professional background...”

“I can’t ever mention that, and neither can you,” Zana warned him. “It was a unique position - one that didn’t even exist before I set my mind on scientifically examining human behavior. I can only assume that they dissolved my department after I... left.”

What had happened to her little group of human toddlers? Sold off, most probably. Zana valiantly steered her thoughts away from the avalanche of memories that threatened to break loose, and focused on her more immediate problems. “There was only ever one behavioral analyst for humans, which means that referring to that position is the same as sending a priority message to Urko where to find us.”

“You’re right,” Galen said regretfully. “But that means you won’t be able to work with humans here, except at that shelter. And they don’t pay. You said you wanted to earn money...”

“So will we stay here for good?” For now, Galen was only a replacement for the late Dr. Ropal. It was a temporary solution, as far as Zana was aware, and with the question of Alan/Taris still hanging between them and Voltis, she doubted that they were the chief’s favorite apes to keep around.
“I see no reason why not.” Galen rose to put the kettle on the stove. “With Alan being determined to keep his new identity, Voltis has no reason to feel hostile towards us anymore. And unless I make a major professional blunder, it’ll be much easier to just keep me as Chubla’s veterinarian than to find someone from the South to fill the position.”

They would stay here - live in a house, go to work, sleep in a real bed...

There would be no more rolling down endless roads; no more falling asleep in utter darkness in the wild, with Alan, or Peet, or Galen, or herself keeping watch, straining eyes and ears for the furtive sounds of whatever dangers were moving in the underbrush. No more hiding from patrols. No more close encounters with Urko...

Zana tried to feel that new reality, and failed.

“Zorya herself gave me the tour of the shelter, can you imagine?” she said brightly. “It’s not something she usually does, but she wanted an update on how Alan is doing.” She sighed, her forced cheerfulness deflating. “Of course I couldn’t deliver any good news.”

“It’s in Alan’s hands now,” Galen murmured. “Just as you said it should be. From what you told me about your encounter in the woods, he is beginning to remember. He just doesn’t want to be his old self anymore.”

“I can’t blame him,” Zana said dryly, and saw Galen flinch.

His reaction didn’t gratify her. Galen could feel guilty all he wanted - and rightfully so - but what good would that do if they still had lost Alan? She’d happily forgive Galen, if she’d only get their friend back.

“You saw him this morning, didn’t you?” she continued. “How was he? Did you get the impression that he recognized you?”

“He insisted on calling me Dr. Kova, so it was hard to tell.” Galen poured the boiling water over the tea leaves. “But he implored me to speak on his behalf to Chief Voltis, which I found peculiar. Of course, as his doctor, I am a kind of confidant...”

“What did he want you to talk about with the chief?” This was peculiar. And Galen’s face was too bland, his voice too casual all of a sudden.

“Oh, uh, apparently the chief’s son ran away again. I guess your intermezzo with Zatis yesterday upset him. Alan... Taris is convinced that there’s more to it than just a disgruntled teenager having a fit of temper. But naturally, nobody in Voltis’ household would listen to a human’s theories.”

Galen carried the pot over to her, carefully avoiding her gaze.

Zana narrowed her eyes. “What was his theory? And did you talk to Voltis?”

“He thinks that Ennis' mother broke into Voltis’s house last night and abducted her son. Apparently, Ennis’ telescope is missing, too, and that... somehow that proves it. I didn’t really understand it myself, but yes, I spoke to Chief Voltis, just as I had promised Alan. I mean, Taris.”

Zana leaned back in her seat and pursed her lips as she considered Alan’s theory. Peet had insisted that Aelia would be able to get Alan to the border of the Forbidden Zone somehow, that she still had connections inside Voltis’ household. So it wasn’t as impossible that she had broken into her former home as it seemed; but then she had switched from Alan to Ennis for some reason.

Maybe the grief became overwhelming when she was suddenly so close to him again. Maybe she
felt she couldn’t bear the loss of her child any longer.

“Alan holds himself responsible,” Galen continued. “He spent the night with the human healer, and now he berates himself for not being at his master’s side to protect him.”

“Alan always assumes responsibility for things outside his control,” Zana said softly.

“Well, if he shared a bit of that sense of responsibility with Peet, I’d be grateful,” Galen muttered. “I sent him to Laisa over an atseht ago, and he still hasn’t returned. We need to drive out for another round to Pahles, and the sun is already setting.”

“Maybe he’s already at the stables, hitching up the wagon?” Zana suggested.

Galen just raised an eyebrow, but agreed to have a look. Zana went along, glad for the distraction; she had found herself brooding at the window more and more often lately, with nothing else to do but to wait for Galen’s and Peet's return from their rounds. The forced inaction was beginning to get on her nerves.

Peet wasn’t at the stables, though.

Neither was Tala.

“She made true on his word,” Galen murmured. He didn’t sound enraged, only stunned. “He really took off to meet that resistance fighter from Aken’s prefecture.” It was a sentiment Peet had muttered about with increasing frequency ever since he had failed to stir Alan's memory with his childhood prayer.

“No, he didn’t!” Zana couldn’t believe for a moment that Peet would simply vanish without a word. He might be angry and, and wounded, but he wasn’t a coward.

She wandered around the stable, trying to find a clue to what had happened, even asking the stable hands who were busy shoveling hay into the neighbouring boxes. Unsurprisingly, nobody had seen anyone doing anything, least of all saddling up and leading a horse past them.

“Humans stick together,” Galen said merely when she came back to Tala’s box. “Of course they wouldn’t tell on one of their own to his enraged master.”

“I’m neither his master, nor am I enraged,” Zana said, “and neither are you.”

Galen flicked her a sideways glance. “His master? Or enraged?”

“Neither. You have no reason to feel betrayed, either, because I found Peet’s things behind Ahpahchee’s box.” She had been shocked to find that Peet apparently had begun gathering supplies for his planned departure; but their presence meant that whenever that day was, it wasn’t this day.

Which still left them with the question of what Peet had needed Tala for.

“Peet hates sitting on a horse.” Zana shook her head. “He’d never ride one voluntarily. So what made him…”

“Who made him do it would be the more accurate question,” Galen cut in. “And I only know one person, but I cannot fathom why Peet would do anything for Alan anymore, after Alan had essentially… cast him out.”

“Even if that was true - and I’m not convinced that it is - Peet hasn’t cut ties with Alan,” Zana
corrected him. “He wouldn’t ignore it if Alan asked him for help...”

She trailed off, struck by the sudden realization what kind of help Alan must’ve pleaded from Peet. “Mothers, Galen! He must’ve asked him to retrieve Ennis!”

Galen gaped at her. Then he vigorously shook his head. “No... no. Why would Alan ask that of Peet? He must know that Peet doesn’t like Ennis at all, and besides, why wouldn’t Alan ride out and rescue the boy himself?”

“Because Alan is under a much tighter supervision than Peet, and has no means to get a horse himself,” Zana said impatiently.

Galen drummed his fingers on the door of Tala's box. “But suppose your theory is right - what would Peet gain by trying to save the boy? If he succeeded, Alan would just happily stay with Ennis, and Peet would’ve put himself in danger for nothing.”

Zana stopped in mid-stride. “He does this for his friend - and as a wise ape once said, a friend is never nothing.”

Galen said nothing for a moment; he stared into Tala’s empty box. “That was a long time ago,” he murmured finally.

“A long time, yes,” Zana said. “Some of us get wiser over time, it seems, while others-“

”... get dumber?” Galen’s voice was low and sharp.

“Become bitter,” Zana said softly. “For a while, I was afraid that Peet would succumb to that poison as well, and despite everything, it makes me so happy to see that he didn’t, in the end.” She came to Galen’s side and gently turned his head so that he had to look at her.

“It’s never too late to forgive, you know?” she whispered.

Galen put his hand over hers, and Zana thought that his eyes were maybe shining a bit brighter. She held her breath...

"How can you say that, after what happened to you... to us?" Galen's voice wavered a bit.

"Anger and regret won't bring our baby back, Galen," Zana willed her voice to be steady. "She's with the Mothers now, and I... I can only look after the living."

Galen heaved a deep sigh and closed his eyes. But when he opened them again, they were dry, and the moment was gone. Zana dropped her hand to her side again as Galen turned away.

“Still, what was he thinking?” he muttered. "Does he really believe he can just ride up to Aelia’s house and demand she give back her own child? Or... is Peet planning to steal Ennis right back?"  

“Galen...”

“And now that Chief Voltis is using that abduction to swoop down on her Kobavasa comrades...”

“Her what?”

Galen shrugged. “I accidentally overheard his plans to pin the abduction of his son on Aboro - Voltis thinks that Aboro is protecting the Kobavasa, or even leading this little rebellion himself, but I assume he never had sufficient proof to justify disciplinary measures. Or maybe he held back for the sake of his former wife. It’d be hard to explain to his son why he’d incarcerate his mother... In
any case, she has crossed a line he isn’t willing to ignore, especially if he can exploit it to get rid of that pesky prefect.”

“Galen… stop.” Zana held up her hand. “You must’ve misunderstood something. Aelia isn’t a Kobavasa. She’s a human rights activist - Zorya herself told me so.”

“Well, I know for a fact that Voltis is riding out with his guard towards Sultok right now,” Galen insisted. “I heard him, Zana - he wants to bring down Aboro for the abduction of his son. I don’t know how he can connect him with Aelia and her Kobavasa…”

“Aelia and Aboro are living together, apparently,” Zana interjected. “But Galen, I know for a fact that Aelia is on the humans’ side! She believes that apes shouldn’t keep them as working animals or pets - according to her, humans belong in the wild, as free creatures!”

There was no way Aelia would put up with a man who commandeered a band of human-killers. Zana refused to believe that Aelia could be so smitten with Aboro that she would be able to ignore his murderous pastime.

Galen just raised his brows. “If she believes that humans are nothing but wild animals, maybe Aboro convinced her that hunting is the most natural interaction an ape could have with them - after all, the bushcat kills the rabbit every day in the woods, too.”

He closed Tala’s box with a sudden, determined motion. “We can speculate about that woman’s motive all day, but in the meantime, Peet is probably riding on to Sultok, if your theory about human friendship is correct. He’ll be right in the middle of that clash between Voltis’ men and Aboro’s Kobavasa - and he’s riding in blind.”

He hurried towards the gate; after a moment, Zana hurried after him. As much as she wanted to scold him for not mentioning that little detail about Voltis sooner, other questions were more pressing right now. “Where are you going?”

“I’m paying another visit to my famous patient,” Galen said grimly, “to find out if your speculation is correct. Someone needs to stop Peet before he gets himself killed.” He didn’t look at her. “I may not know a lot about friendship, but I do have a sense of responsibility towards all of you.”

He lengthened his stride even more, and Zana stopped trying to keep up with him. She would’ve needed to break into a run to do that, and she saw no sense in accompanying Galen to Alan. She had something else in mind.

So she just watched Galen vanish around the corner of the inn, head bowed, shoulders hunched, and wished she’d thought of something else to say as parting words.

Something like, you know well enough about friendship with our humans, Galen, if you’d only allow yourself to trust them again.

She hoped she’d still have the opportunity to tell him.

Ennis’ window overlooked the whole eastern part of Chubla; chimpanzees still preferred to live and sleep as far above ground as their limited architectural skills would allow. When the sky was clear, one could even see the eastern road beyond the city gate, winding its way into the mountains towards Sultok Prefecture.

Right now, Virdon didn’t appreciate the view. It just reminded him of the fact that as Voltis’ property, he was chained to this room, condemned to let others ride out to rescue Laisa… to find
Ennis...

*You’ll be a boy an’ his dog, Al.*

He hadn’t really minded while he had been Taris. But even if he managed to keep up appearances - and he wasn’t even sure he could do that; he had already slipped up to Zatis - that content, slightly addled man was gone now. He was back to being Alan Virdon, once a starship commander, still a father, a husband...

... no, a widower. Virdon unconsciously reached for the data disc hanging from his neck. The emptiness there still came as a shock.

And he still had no idea what to make of his life now. He had been just as unable to conceive of a future for himself on this world as Burke had been when he’d asked him back in Silam.

Virdon had wished - he’d have prayed for it, if he hadn’t felt completely unable to face God after this degradation - to escape that old life, that old self. He had wished to *end*, and his wish had been granted, for a time.

And now he was back to square one, only with the added complication of having alienated his old team - and now Galen had told the others, too...

Virdon turned away from the window with an angry growl. *I’ll sort this out later. Right now, Laisa’s life is in danger, and Pete’s, too - and I can’t just sit here doing nothing!*

He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to return to Burke, and to Galen and Zana - but if he couldn’t suppress his former self, his life as Taris would be unbearable. Not even Laisa would be able to make up for it. But if he ran away, he would lose her, too.

Ennis was a good kid. Virdon reached for the boomerang and slowly turned it in his hands. The boy was so desperate for companionship... just as he had been desperate for a son, someone he could teach, someone he could love... but...

He let his gaze wander over the shelves that were stuffed with toys and wooden machines. It was amazing what he had been able to produce in those short weeks - but then he had been carving these things during every spare moment. He had even made a miniature oil rig, although nobody would pump up oil on this world ever again. Virdon shook his head and tiredly rubbed his eyes.

It was no use. He couldn’t stay. He couldn’t be Taris anymore.

He’d have to run - escape into the Forbidden Zone… which meant losing Laisa. Losing Zana, and Pete… even Galen.

He’d have to try to find other humans like hi... in the same situation as him.

There were no other humans like him, except for one.

The sky outside was darkening, a sudden gust of wind rattling at the window frame; soon he’d have to light a lamp. If he decided to sit this out after all.

No, he couldn’t - he couldn’t wait here like a... like a *good boy*, wait for his master’s eventual return. That wasn’t how he had led his life before. That wasn’t how the rest of his life would be.

Virdon dropped the boomerang on Ennis’ bed, strode to the door and yanked it open. An ape tumbled into his arms, his hand still at the doorknob. “*Cesar!*”
A chimpanzee, but not Voltis. Virdon carefully pushed him away from his chest. “I’m sorry, I didn’t... ah...” It was Galen. Galen...

”... Dr. Kova.”

*I’ll sort this out later!*

Galen straightened, and glared at him. “And where were you going so hastily, Taris?”

Virdon felt the blood throbbing in his temples as his blood pressure shot up with his annoyance. Still, if he wanted to uphold this identity - for now - he had to play along. “I, ah... to the kitchen. I was getting hungry.”

Galen narrowed his eyes, but didn’t question his story. Instead, he took Virdon by the arm and gently pushed him back into the room. He closed the door before he turned back to him. “Well, then I’m lucky that I caught you before you vanished - again. I’m looking for my orderly - you know, the dark-haired human who likes to swear a lot.”

It was impossible to say if Galen had already seen through his pretense. Virdon valiantly suppressed a smile at the chimpanzee’s description of Burke, and shook his head. “He wasn’t here.”

That was true... technically. They had met in town, outside the human ghetto.

Galen regarded him with an unreadable expression. “Curious,” he said after a pause. “We were actually about to drive out for our afternoon round in the prefectures.”

“Maybe he... got distracted,” Virdon suggested, feeling more and more uncomfortable. Alan Virdon hadn’t been a man who casually bent the truth.

“Maybe,” Galen said with the same inscrutable expression. “I wonder what kind of distraction motivated him to take one of my horses. I cannot use my wagon with only one horse, it’s too heavy. Not to mention that I need my orderly, too. You wouldn’t know anything about that?”

“No,” Virdon said curtly. The sooner he managed to move Galen to leave, the sooner he could ride after Burke. He’d probably have to steal Apache...

But why not take advantage of the fact that Galen was here, now? “Did you speak with Chief Voltis? Were you able to convince him of my theory about Ennis?”

Galen’s gaze flickered for a moment. “In a manner of speaking. Is he still here?”

“He left a while ago, why?” Galen seemed to be unusually tense; Virdon wondered if it had something to do with Burke’s disappearance, or with Voltis’ reaction, whatever that might have been... or with both. “Is something wrong?”

Galen wandered to the window and leaned heavily on the window sill. He didn’t look at Virdon; he gazed outside, seemingly fascinated by the panoramic view of the town. “Why don’t we drop this charade?” he said, and Virdon felt his heart plummet into his gut.

*I’m not ready yet... I haven’t decided yet what I’ll-

But Galen didn’t call him out on his memory loss. “If I tell you what Chief Voltis is planning, will you tell me where Dehni went?”
Virdon knew that he shouldn’t be outraged at the way Galen was baiting him like a dog - *do that trick for me, and I’ll give you a treat* - after all, it was him who insisted on being Taris the pet human...

But he couldn’t help it. “You presume I know where Danny is?”

Galen turned around with an annoyed glare. “Very well. If you happen to see him, tell him to come to the inn without delay. And tell him to avoid the Eastern prefectures for a few days.” He pushed away from the window and made for the door.

“Wait!” Virdon threw up his hands in defeat when the ape paused and raised his brows at him. “Alright, maybe I know where he went to. Why shouldn’t he ride east?”

Galen rubbed his fingertips over his mouth, watching him intently. “Because Chief Voltis is determined to crack down on Aelia and Aboro and their little Kobavasa insurgency. He’s leading a whole battalion there, so I would advise against any human getting between them. Apes don’t wage war against other apes, but today they will get as close as Cesar allows.”

Galen must’ve seen the horror in his face, because he suddenly dropped his nonchalant demeanour. “So Dehni did ride to Sultok - did you send him there to try and steal back Master Ennis? Are you out of your mind?”

Virdon raked a hand through his hair as he hastily calculated the distances that Laisa and Pete would’ve traveled in the meantime. Voltis’ battalion would be on horseback, too - when had they left? An hour ago? Two?

“No, I didn’t send him to rescue Ennis,” he said at last. “Pe... Danny left to find Laisa and bring her back. She went to Sultok this morning to visit some relatives who had fallen ill... the winter fever...” He drew a deep breath. “I need to ride after him, warn him. Get them both back to safety - and don’t you tell me I can’t go!”

“I’m telling you no such thing,” Galen said dryly. “You’ll take Ahpahchee - he hates apes. I’ll rent a horse from the stable. It will be a hard ride - we need to be fast, and we can’t rest. Do you think you can stay on the horse?”

“I can ride,” Virdon growled. Galen smiled, and suddenly, Virdon was absolutely sure that the ape had long seen through his pretense.

“An unusual skill for a human,” Galen remarked, and turned away. “Come, then. We cannot lose any more time.”
Chapter 19

After half an hour or so, Burke began to hate the world, Tala, Laisa, Virdon, and his backside. But Virdon and the horse were definitely at the top of that list.

He had no idea when exactly the healer had decided to play the shining knight to Virdon’s damsel in distress act, but had calculated a head start of five hours to be on the safe side. That meant Laisa was ten to fifteen miles ahead of him, and if he wanted to catch up to her, he couldn’t just let the horse go at a walk.

On the other hand, as he had learned from Katlin many moons ago, he couldn’t let the horse run the whole distance, either. He could probably alternate between walk and gallop, but despite the riding lessons that Al had foisted on him and Zana during their trek, Burke didn’t feel competent enough to calculate the duration of either speed that wouldn’t exhaust the horse, or make them too slow to catch up with Laisa before she reached Sultok.

That meant he had to cross the distance at a trot.

There wasn’t much to distract himself from the pounding and chafing of his inner thighs and his butt against the saddle - at this time of year, the vegetation was sparse and wilted; the trees, stubbornly hanging on to the old four seasons climate of yore, had shed their leaves, except for some mutated stuff that sported leathery vines. It would make spotting a Kobavasa gang easier, but it would also make it easier for the bastards to follow him through the underbrush.

At least the rapidly falling darkness would make it more difficult for them to take aim… he hoped. Rather belatedly, Burke wished he’d thought of bringing a gun with him; even a handgun, easy to hide under his vest, would’ve been better than to be armed with only a knife.

Well, too late. He’d been too pissed off at his former commander to think ahead. He needed to cool down if he wanted to survive in the future. That meant he couldn’t lose his head over Katlin as Al had lost his over Laisa. Though in that case, the idiocy was probably mutual, or otherwise the woman wouldn’t have run off like that. Burke doubted that she had any interest in the Chief’s son. She had done this purely to please Virdon.

Burke couldn’t imagine that Voltis would just sit in his office and ignore his ex-wife’s stunt, either. He had only caught a glimpse of the chimp once - and from the other end of a corridor, when he had been accompanying Galen - but the chief didn’t strike him as someone you crossed without paying a steep price. Aelia and Aboro had to know that, too, and were probably readying their troops right now.

*So much for that chimp’s promise to get Al out of the chief’s house. Well, guess she has bigger problems right now.*

He stood up in the stirrups to peer down the road before him. The sooner he’d catch up to that stupid woman, the better. Serious shit would go down here soon enough, and he didn’t want to get caught up in it. Voltis’ army was probably right behind him.

He spurred Tala into a canter, not just for the sake of his butt.

To his relief, a lone figure appeared on the road soon afterwards. Not many humans had reason - or permission - to travel between the prefectures, or even between the settlements within a prefecture, so it had to be her. For Laisa's sake, Burke reined in his horse and didn’t approach her at full speed.
Still, the healer spun around at the sound of hoofbeats, eyes huge and dark in her pale face. Hoofbeats meant ape patrols, usually.

Or Kobavasa, around here.

Burke brought Tala to a halt beside the woman, and leaned down to her in fake surprise. “Well, well, well,” he drawled. “Fancy meeting you out here, healer. Whatcha doin’ alone on the road? These parts are a bad, bad place for a human - more than usual, I mean.”

Laisa had recovered quickly from her shock, judging by the frown on her face. “Dehni? What are you doing here? Where did you get a horse?”

“Stole it,” Burke said nonchalantly, and was rewarded with a shocked gasp.

“Dehni!”

“I’ll give it back, don’t worry.” He offered her his hand. “Which means the sooner you climb into the saddle behind me, the greater the chance that my gentle master will show me some mercy. C’mon, it’s not safe out here, an’ you know it. Let the apes sort out their shit themselves. ‘s not our business.”

Laisa didn’t move. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said stubbornly. “I’m visiting a relative, they’ve fallen ill with winter fever...”

“Yeah, right,” Burke interrupted her. “An’ I’m sure Sultok has a fine healer, jus’ like Chubla has. An’ we all want Chubla to keep that fine healer, so drop the act and get up here!”

Laisa stepped back. “You can’t forbid me to visit my family. Not even an ape would do that.”

“Goddamn fucking Cesar!” Burke jumped out of the saddle and steadied himself against Tala’s shoulder for a moment. His legs always were wobbly after sitting on a horse for more than five minutes. “I don’t care if you have a sick relative in Sultok! This whole goddamn district is crawling with Kobavasa, an’ on top of it, the chief’s crazy ex has kidnapped their son, an’ you bet that ol’ Voltis is coming after her! I have no fucking idea why you think you need to go an’ save that kid for Al... it’s not that you’d come even close to where they hold him. An’ I don’t care, but I promised Al to get your stubborn ass back to safety, so get on the damn horse before I tie you up and throw you across the saddle!”

For the first time, Burke thought he could detect a flicker of doubt in her eyes. “Alan sent you? And you agreed to go... for him?”

Burke didn’t want to examine that thought too closely. “Oh, it’s Alan now, yeah? He got his gray matter stirred rightways again?”

Laisa gaped at him for a moment, then vigorously shook her head. “I just used the name you’re using all the time, because you always get so angry when I call him Taris.”

“Uh-huh.” She was covering for Virdon, Burke was absolutely sure of it. For some reason, it infuriated him even more. “Whatever. An’ no, I’m not doing this for him. I don’t like monkeys killing humans, is all.”

This time, she didn’t scold him for calling them ‘monkeys’. Instead, she flicked him a sideways glance before she stepped up to Tala’s head and began to stroke her nose. “He... he got some memories back,” she admitted without looking at him. “They greatly disturbed him. He doesn’t want to think about what happened to him... whatever it was. And I respect that. So I call him
“He got them back last night when he and you, uh, did the deed?” How much of Virdon’s memory had returned? All of it, or just the worst part?

Laisa nodded, then shook her head. “We... we didn’t... he... he suddenly remembered something terrible, and then... we just talked. Well,” she laughed an unhappy laugh, “I talked. I don’t know if he even heard me.”

Burke remembered his own flashback when Urko had suddenly shown up in Pendan, and his mouth went dry. Somehow, that memory always hovered too close to the surface.

“It was still good that you kept talking to him,” he murmured. “Gave him something... outside... to focus on. Something real that... didn’t belong to that memory.”

“I’m glad that you understand the state he’s in right now,” Laisa said softly. “He’ll get better, he just needs help.”

“Can’t help him if he doesn’t even admit he knows me,” Burke muttered, and grabbed Tala’s halter. “But that’s something we can talk about when we’re back in Chubla. I mean it, Laisa, this is way over your head. An’ if something happens to you, Al will lose the only human who means something to him now. He thinks you went because he came to you to talk about the kid’s abduction - he already holds himself responsible for your little trip to Sultok. How do you think he’ll feel if you get caught in the crossfire of Chief Voltis’ little war?”

Lisa frowned at him. “Why do you think Chief Voltis will ride to Sultok? Tar... Alan said the chief didn’t believe him when he told him that Ennis had been abducted by his own mother.”

Burke blinked. He couldn’t remember if Al had mentioned that little detail to him. But more importantly...

“So you admit that you jus’ made up that sick aunt in Sultok?” He grinned triumphantly at Laisa’s deepening scowl. “Knew it! You two really-“

Tala jerked her head down to reach for a knoll of wilted grass on the side of the road, and with his hand stuck too deeply under her cheek strap, Burke was jerked aside with her.

Something cracked behind him; something whizzed past them where his head had been a moment before. Burke cursed, yanked his hand free, and grabbed Laisa’s arm to drag her off the road. He angled for Tala’s reins, but the horse had already moved beyond his reach, spooked by the shots that were now echoing around them in a rapid staccato. Burke cursed again.

Tala buckled, ears pressed against her head, turned, and sped off, back to Chubla. Burke clenched his teeth and hastily retreated deeper into the hedge, still dragging the healer with him. The unknown shrub was something thorny, but unfortunately, it had shed its leaves, too, and didn’t provide much cover - it only made it harder for the approaching riders to follow them on horseback.

It didn’t stop the apes from shooting at them.

He and Laisa tore through the thorny twigs, heedless of the burning strikes the shrubs left on their arms and faces, and tried to burrow deeper into the underbrush. Laisa was silent beside him, too shocked or too frightened to cry; Burke hoped she’d stay that way. He had his plate full with trying to keep ahead of the black-robed, masked thugs who were still firing at them, he couldn’t spare the mental capacity to calm her down on top of it.
If she’d climbed into the saddle when he had told her...

... Stubborn idiot, just like Al. Those two really deserved each other.

Something hot pushed past his upper arm, too fast to cause pain - he only felt his sleeve go wet as the blood started pouring down his arm. Just a graze, but still... the next bullet could be whipping through his skull. Or Laisa’s skull.

They had been racing downhill from the road; in these parts, you either went upslope or downslope. It meant that their pursuers had a bird’s eye view on his escape route; they just had to wait until he and Laisa broke into a clearing - which Burke couldn’t see from his position, and thus couldn’t avoid stumbling into - and pick them off.

Some of the hunters wanted to get up close for the kill, though - Burke could hear them crashing through the underwood behind him, their horses grunting with exertion.

He wouldn’t be able to outrun them. You couldn’t outrun a bullet.

Burke threw a hasty glance behind him; they had reached a tiny clearing in the thorny netting of the thicket, and none of their pursuers were visible. It was just a momentary respite, but maybe it would suffice.

He came to a skidding halt, forcing Laisa to stop, too, and clasped his hand over her mouth before she could say anything. “Lay down,” he whispered, and tugged at her arm when she didn’t react, forcing her to lie on her side in the middle of the path. He hastily pressed his blood-soaked sleeve against her skirt, then took her hands in his and positioned them over her knee.

“Clutch your leg,” he whispered urgently. “You’ve been shot, you can’t walk, I abandoned you. Shout for me to come back, make lots of noise. Play for time.”

“He’ll shoot me,” she whispered back, eyes huge with panic.

“Trust me.”

He couldn’t explain himself to her, there just wasn’t time. Burke unsheathed his ANSA knife, showed it to her, and squeezed himself into the thicket at a right angle to their former escape route. Laisa, catching on to what he was planning, started to cry and shout, muffling the noise he inevitably made.

“Dehni! Dehniiii! Come back, please - don’t leave me! Oh Mothers, Dehni, help me! They’re coming for me!”

She was good; if this didn’t work out, Burke was sure he’d hear her cries in his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Though, if this didn’t work out, the rest of his life would be short.

He spotted his target through the branches - their hunter had been closer than he had realized. The hooded figure was working the lever of his gun, completely focused on his wailing prey beyond the shrubs. Burke threw subtlety to the wind and broke through the hedge like a bulldozer.

The ape had been too distracted by the promise of an easy kill ahead of him to react in time. Burke rammed his knife down the inside of his thigh and grabbed for the barrel of his gun with the other hand.
You didn’t need to stab someone in the heart to kill them; slashing the femoral artery did the job nicely enough. The ape managed to fire a shot that went nowhere, then slid off the horse. Burke helped him along and cut his throat for good measure.

The horse sprinted off for a few steps, then came to a sudden halt - it had probably spotted Laisa blocking the narrow path. “Grab the reins,” Burke quietly called out to her, “don’t let it run off. We’ll need it to get the blast outta here.” He dragged the ape deeper into the thicket and began to peel off his black robe. It was harder than he’d thought - apes were a lot heavier than humans.

“What are you doing?” Laisa whispered when he stepped out into the path again.

Burke gestured at his Kobavasa attire. “We need to get away from these killers,” he whispered back, “that means we can’t look like targets. They’ll fire at everything that looks human, so we’ll look like Kobavasa instead. Wait here, I’ll get you a costume, too.”

Laisa gestured at the thing in his hand. “You’ll wear... that?”

Burke shrugged. “Don’t like it anymore than you, but... yeah.”

He strapped on the mask. It was the real deal, no cheap paper maché skull. These creeps really fashioned human skulls into party decorations.

One more reason why killing them was so damn satisfying.

His second catch was even easier. The Kobavasa had reined in his horse when Burke came stumbling along the path. “What in Koba’s name... where’s your horse?”

“One of them attacked me,” Burke wheezed. “Never seen a human like that before... so ferocious... so cunning...”

The rider had scoffed at that, and that had been the last thing he’d done. Burke dragged the second horse after him to where he had left Laisa, and dumped the robe into her arms. “Hurry up, no idea when the next monkey turns the corner.”

Laisa put on the robe and the horrific mask without fuss, but balked when it came to riding the horse. “I can’t... I’ve never sat on a horse before,” she whispered. “They’ll realize we don’t belong to them the moment they see me clinging to its neck!”

Humans were forbidden to ride by threat of death; and although the northern apes did make exceptions, a human on horseback was still a rarity. She had a point, much as it pained Burke to admit it.

“Okay, fine, sit behind me,” he grumbled. “We’ll just tell them you got ambushed by a supernaturally wild and powerful human.”

“By you, you mean?” Laisa murmured when she had climbed into the saddle.

Burke smirked, and spurred on his horse. “Who else?”

She snorted softly, but didn’t comment.

Burke counted eight other riders waiting for them on the road. Their leader didn’t comment on the missing horse, just asked, “Lost them? Well, you get some, you lose some...”

He nodded towards another rider who was wearing exactly the same outfit as everyone else. “I got
notice that we’re to return to headquarters for a special announcement, otherwise we’d have spread out and hunted them down.” He turned his horse, and one by one, the Kobavasa fell into line after him.

The hooded figure that the leader had introduced as HQ’s envoy didn’t move - it was clear that he intended to bring up the rear. Burke had actually planned to take up that position, and then to inconspicuously fall behind, but by the looks of it, he’d have to amend that plan. He clicked his tongue and took his place as second-to-last in line.

He wasn’t too worried. The dumb monkeys didn’t suspect a thing. He had a gun now. And he’d been given the unexpected opportunity to find out the identity of the head KKK monkey.

Maybe he could take out their leader, make this afternoon worth his while after all.

As an ape, I shouldn’t be so out of breath from climbing a tree.

She’s going to throw me out of the mentor program for this.

Zana grabbed the railing of the platform that extended from Zorya’s doorstep, and drew a last deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart as much as her racing - and slightly incoherent - thoughts. Accosting an Orangutan in their own home was the biggest possible faux pas... but she simply hadn’t been able to think of any other option to avert the catastrophe that was now looming over all their heads.

Galen couldn’t have come back to the inn with Alan, to talk things through? To find a solution that doesn’t involve a mad dash after Peet, and a collision with either Aboro or Voltis? Or both?

Men!

She knocked.

Zana still didn’t know what had driven her back to the stables after a while - maybe female intuition. When she had reached Ahpahchee’s box, the gelding was gone, too. This time, the stable hands had been willing to talk to her - Doctor Kova and Chief Voltis’ new human had taken Ahpahchee and one of the stable’s own horses, and had ridden off in a great hurry.

She knocked again, fighting against her mounting impatience. Orangutan or not, if Zorya didn’t open her door this next moment, Zana would climb in through the window. She needed Zorya to make sense of this mess, and she needed her half an atseht ago! She had already lost precious time with her second trip to the stables, and it was already after dark...

Just when she was about to knock for the third time, the door opened and a slightly alarmed but still immaculately dressed Zorya squinted at her. “Mila! Is something the matter?”

“Yes!” Zana said tersely and pushed past the befuddled Orangutan. “I’m terribly sorry to invade your home like that, but this is an emergency, and you’re my only hope.”

“Well, this, this is somewhat of a surprise,” Zorya stuttered, and closed the door behind her. “I usually don’t receive visitors here... I was actually working on some, some project...”

“Zorya.” Zana spun around and pinned her with a fierce scowl. “As much as I try to honor the Orangutan custom of chasing the badger up the tree before sitting down to talk, we simply don’t have the time for it now! I need your help!”
“Yes, yes... what do you need my help for?” Zorya nervously nestled at her sleeves, and gestured towards a set of hammocks. “Can we sit down for this?”

“Of course. You sit down. I’m not in the mood for sitting right now.” Zana propped her hands on her hips and wished that Zorya’s living room was big enough for pacing. She felt ready to explode.

“You remember that talk we had about Aelia, when I appl... when I visited the shelter?” Better not remind the Chairwoman of her application for that mentor program right now.

Zorya nodded, and lowered herself into one of the hammocks.

“Good.” Zana rubbed her forehead, trying to collect her thoughts. “I also assume that the news about young Ennis’ disappearance have reached you in the meantime.”

“Yes, he ran away into the mountains again,” Zorya said, her confusion apparent. “He has done so numerous times before. But Mila, what-“

“No, he didn’t run away this time,” Zana interrupted her mercilessly. “He was abducted from his very bed, and we have reason to believe that it was his own mother who did it. Chief Voltis is on his way to Sultok as we speak.”

“Aelia took Ennis?” The hammock began to sway softly, as the shocked Orangutan began to rock back and forth. “Does Voltis have any proof for that?”

“I assume he has, he didn’t consult with me,” Zana said dryly. “But what worries me more is that Ennis’ new human...” she sighed at the designation. It was Alan! Mothers! If he’d just stop being so stubborn... “Taris, our own Dehni, and my husband have also run to Sultok. I can only imagine that Taris wants to be with his master, and the other two want to save him from his own foolishness.” It was the simplest explanation, if she didn’t want to start explaining the special relationship she and Galen had with these two humans.

Zorya swayed a bit more wildly in her hammock. “I understand your worry, Mila, but I still have no idea what part you intend me to play in this...” she gestured vaguely, “this mess.”

“Well - Voltis isn’t going there alone,” Zana pointed out. “According to... to my sources,” Mothers, she sounded like, like Felga... “He’s taking the whole town guard there. And Aboro, as I’ve learned, has the Kobavasa at his disposal. Can you imagine what will happen if these two clash?”

“Mothers...” Zorya said weakly. “But what can we do?”

Zana regarded her for a moment. No matter how pressed for time she felt, if she wanted to save Peet, she had to know exactly what was going on, both in Sultok and in Chubla.

She wanted the truth. And she wouldn’t accept any polite evasions anymore, Orangutan etiquette be damned. “Did you know about Aboro’s connection to the Kobavasa?”

Zorya sighed; she didn’t meet Zana’s eyes. “There were rumors, but they could never be proven, and I never believed it. Aelia would never associate with one of them.”

That was exactly what Zana would’ve said an atseht ago, too - but Galen’s remark about hunting also being nature’s way was still vivid in her mind. And contrary to Peet or Zorya, she had never met Aelia in person. She couldn’t go by her own instincts about the woman, only by everyone’s opinion of her.

“Chief Voltis seems to have gotten proof,” she said. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be riding to Sultok
this very moment. And if what you say about Aelia is true, then she is the only one who can prevent a disaster there.”

She crouched down before the hammock to lock eyes with Zorya. “Aelia has to return Ennis to his father, Zorya. But we both know she won’t do it without... encouragement.”

And if what Galen said about the hunt is true, then she found a way to twist her ideal so that it fits Aboro’s mad intentions. In which case, the only encouragement Aelia would take seriously could well be the barrel of Voltis’ gun.

Still, they had to try. For Ennis’ sake, and Peet’s. “Someone needs to talk some sense into her. Someone she trusts. Ennis is a child! Anything could happen in Sultok! We cannot just sit here while he is in danger!”

“I... I don’t know if I’m the right person to do that,” Zorya said; she had begun plucking at her sleeves again. “I’m certain Chief Voltis has experts for those negotiations...”

Zana took Zorya’s hand and softly pulled it away before the Orangutan could unravel her sleeve. “You were Aelia’s mentor, Zorya. She looked up to you once, and your word will still have more weight for her than that of some crusty old lieutenant.”

Zorya was silent, her fingers cold and clammy in Zana’s hand.

“You single-handedly built up the biggest animal protection society in the North, Zorya,” Zana said finally. “You can do this. I fully believe in you!”

“Well, then... I should probably get my robe,” Zorya murmured.

“And your shawl,” Zana added. “I rented a coach from the stable, and it doesn’t have a top.”

Actually, the coach had a top, originally, but Zana had asked the stableboy to take it off. They would be racing against time, and the less weight the horses were dragging behind them, the faster they would be.

That, however, was nothing Zorya needed to know about. Zana held open the door and smiled encouragingly at her. “You're doing the right thing, Zorya - you’re saving a child.”

“Everyone is thinking they are doing the right thing, Mila,” Zorya sighed, and moved to the end of the platform. “How do you think we ended up here?” She swung herself over the railing and vanished.

Zana followed her silently, for the first time at a loss for words.
One of the things Zatis had always said when Ennis had wished for something or other was ‘be careful what you wish for, young Ennis - the Mothers might give it to you’. Which had seemed a bit dumb to Ennis at that time, because that was exactly the point of wishing for something, right? Why wish for something you didn’t want to get?

But right now, sitting in his mother’s house, brooding over some excessively boring homework, he began to appreciate the wisdom of his old teacher’s words. He had wished long and hard that his mother would come back home - that they would live together again, like before.

Well, they were back together again now; maybe the Mothers had missed the part about ‘like before’.

Ennis chewed at his quill and stared unseeingly at the scroll before him. His homework was some math problem concerning a farmer who was locked in competition with his neighbour, and the text slyly omitted the number of crops each farmer had harvested that year - that was for Ennis to figure out. As if he’d care about some dumb Gorillas one-upping each other with their turnips! This was just as bad as living with his father!

No - it was worse: although the door to his room wasn’t locked (because he wasn’t a prisoner, his mother had said; he was her son, after all!), a lot of grim apes were milling about the house at all times, and he wasn’t even allowed to come near the walls surrounding the yard. Ennis had been relieved to learn that his mother had her own house, and that that prefect wasn’t living here, too; but from what he had overheard from the guards, Aboro came by often enough, even at night. And here, Ennis couldn’t escape into the mountains, or walk along the river, as he always had back home, when things got too... too...

No, here, he was grounded all day, probably for the rest of his life. Despite his mother’s protestations, he felt more and more like a prisoner. And he was beginning to miss Zatis... and even his father.

But most of all, he missed Taris.

Poor Taris - how was he faring now, without his master? Ennis hoped that Zatis at least would be nice to him; his father would be ignoring his human just as he had always ignored him. Maybe he hadn’t even noticed that his son had vanished.

And that healer would probably be nice to Taris, too - but not too nice, if she knew her place. Healers weren’t allowed to get too lovey-dovey with anyone, that was against the rules. They had to focus on their work, and only on their work. But Taris probably didn’t know that, or had forgotten it, like he had forgotten everything else. Ennis resolved to remind him when he came back. He didn’t want his human to get in trouble.

And that other human would probably also be there - the dark one that belonged to that travelling doctor. Ennis bit harder on his quill and frowned. Dehni would use this opportunity of his absence to harass Taris about being his friend, and leaving his master to come back to him and the doctor, and to that Mila woman...

It was high time to go home! And this here wasn’t his home, no matter what his mother said.

Ennis threw the quill onto the table with a huff and watched with a certain satisfaction how the ink
spattered over the farmer and his turnip problem. Let the Gorillas sort it out themselves, if they were able to even count that far. He was going home now, no matter if his mother disapproved or n-

The door was yanked open, and two people stumbled in and almost fell over each other in their haste. They froze when they saw Ennis.

Ennis froze, too. The two people were humans.

The man recovered first; he softly closed the door and leaned against it. “You’re not gonna yell for the guard again, will ya?” he said under his breath. It was the dark human... Dehni. And the woman was Laisa.

Ennis resisted the urge to pinch himself. He was pretty sure he wasn’t dreaming.

“What are you doing here?” he said in the same subdued voice. “If anyone finds you, you’ll be in big trouble!”

Dehni laughed, a short, unhappy sound. “No shit, Sherlock. Why do you think we’re hiding in your room? Not that we knew it was your room...” He moved aside, away from the door, but still pressed against the wall. If the door opened, he and Laisa would still be hidden behind the door blade.

True enough, the door was yanked open again, and one of his mother’s guards glared at Ennis. “Everything alright in there?”

Ennis glared back. The man had force-walked him away from the outer wall and into his room earlier. “As soon as you’ll remove your ugly head from my sight.”

The guard narrowed his eyes. “Have you seen some humans running around here?”

Ennis stared at him with disdain. “Are you stupid or something? We don’t have humans here. Mother is against it.”

The guard just grumbled something under his breath and slammed the door shut. The humans stared at Ennis, their eyes looking huge and dark in their pale faces.

Then Dehni grinned. “I like your style, kid.”

But Ennis wasn’t in the mood for flattery. “Are you stupid? What are you doing in my mother’s house? These guards hate humans, and I don’t know where my mother is right now - if they find you, she won’t be there to protect you, and these thugs don’t listen to what I say.” It hadn’t taken long for him to find out about either thing.

Dehni raised his brows at that. “An’ why is your mom employing thugs?”

Ennis shrugged. “I dunno. She doesn’t want humans in the house, because she says it’s slavery, but most apes don’t want to do all the work that humans ought to do, so it’s hard to find people... my mother doesn’t want humans in the house because she thinks you should live in the wild. But these guys” - he pointed at the door - “don’t want humans in the house because they think you’re vermin. And you still haven’t told me why you’re here.”

Dehni glanced at Laisa, who seemed to be at a loss for words for a moment. “We wanted to see how you’re doing... now that you’re living with your mother,” she said finally. “And bring you greetings from Taris. He misses you a lot.”
Ennis swallowed heavily. “I miss him, too.” He turned back towards his desk to put his quill back into the ink pot. And so they couldn’t see him fight back his tears. He wasn’t a baby anymore, and he wouldn’t embarrass himself like that. “I’d rather go home, but... Mother won’t let me. She says Father had a whole year alone with me, and now it’s her turn.”

“Be glad she didn’t screw your head off to spite your dad,” Dehni muttered.

Ennis spun around, tears drying instantly from shock. “What?”

Dehni shrugged, his eyes twinkling. “It’s what you do with dolls, if it’s actually your turn, but your friend keeps playing with them.”

Laisa slapped his arm. “Don’t frighten Master Ennis, Dehni!”

Dehni rubbed his upper arm in mock pain. “C’mon, ‘her turn’? How old is that woman, three?”

Ennis frowned. “Don’t talk like that about my mother, she’s an ape and you’re a human!”

The mirth vanished from Dehni’s eyes. “Right. Sorry, kid. No badmouthing your mom anymore. - Okay, so, we’ve given you our regards from Taris, I’d say we go home now, tell the ol’ boy you’re fine an’ all.”

He didn’t really like Dehni, and he suspected the feeling was mutual, but Ennis could recognize an opportunity when he saw one. “Take me with you!”

The humans stared at him; Ennis stared back, struggling not to threaten them with calling the guards if they refused.

They didn’t look as if they wanted to refuse him outright, though; Dehni was thoughtfully rubbing his mouth, Laisa was pressing her lips together in obvious worry. “This thing is more heavily guarded than Fort Knox,” Dehni said at last. “Getting you out will be a helluva job... and once they discover you’re gone, they’ll be after us like beagles on a fox trail. If it’s just me an’ Laisa, we can probably sneak back to Chubla without ringing any alarms.”

Despite all the confusing references, Ennis understood what Dehni was getting at; accompanying the humans would just endanger them. And if he let them go alone, they could bring word to his father that he hadn’t gone with his mother of his own free will, and that he didn’t want to stay in her house.

“If you don’t take me with you, I’ll call the guards,” Ennis said, feeling miserable.

The humans just stared at him, Laisa looking disappointed, Dehni looking... absolutely bland, which was frightening, somehow.

“Fine,” Dehni said after a long pause. “It’s already dark, maybe we can sneak you out. But let’s wait until the excitement out there has died down a bit before we try our luck.”

“The guards are out after dark, too,” Ennis muttered.

Dehni smiled, and Ennis felt his fur rise against his will. “Yeah, but they can’t see as well in the dark.” He wandered over to Ennis’ bed and flopped down on it. “Gonna be some time before they’ll give up looking for us. Do you have anything to kill time? Cards, a tiska board?”

“No,” Ennis said, and cautiously sat down at his desk again. “Mother wants me to study all day, or work around the house...” There was a lot to do if you didn’t have humans who did all those chores
for you. Doing the dishes was pretty high on the list of things Ennis despised.

“Damn.” Dehni crossed his arms behind his head and closed his eyes. “Poke me when I start snoring. Don’t wanna alert one of your thugs.”

Ennis stared at him with disdain; Dehni hadn’t taken off his shoes when he had taken possession of his bed.

He turned to Laisa. “You can tell me a story. Of the White City.”

Laisa shook her head. “Why that one? It’s a human story.”

Ennis shrugged. “I like it all the same.”

It was the story Taris liked best; his human had never tired of hearing it, and now, as Laisa’s quiet whisper filled the room, Ennis imagined that the human lying on the bed and listening with him to the story wasn’t Dehni, but Taris.

“When the great Cesar had defeated the armies of Man,” Laisa began, “he declared that all the human wizards had to bring their weapons and tools to the Holy Grove to have them destroyed. And everyone who came to that grove, and laid down their weapons, and swore a holy oath to accept the apes as their master, and to obey them, and to never say ‘no’ to any ape, would be spared; and they would be taken in by the apes and would get fed and clothed and taken care of.”

Dehni snorted softly, revealing that he was just pretending to sleep. “Fucking slavers!”

Laisa hesitated for a moment before she continued.

“And the humans came to the holy grove and fell on their knees and laid down their weapons and bowed their heads before their masters. And great Cesar was true to his word and was full of mercy and spared their lives, just as he had promised.”

“The whole concept of owning people is a fucking abomination,” Dehni growled without opening his eyes. “I’m a free human, no damn monkey owns me. Don’t understand how anyone could agree to that back then...”

“Maybe it was their only chance of survival?” Laisa suggested. “Anyway, some humans did not obey the command of the great Cesar, and kept fighting the apes in the woods and in the deserts. But in the end, they were too few, and Cesar and his generals killed many of them, until just a handful of them was left.”

“Can’t imagine how that could’ve been possible,” Dehni murmured from the bed. “I mean, we had nukes... Eh, don’t mind me,” he added when Laisa glared at him. “Go on, tell that story. I bet it’s been written down in some super-secret book that I’ll never get to read, so I’d like to hear what happened back then from an alternative source.”

Laisa exchanged a confused look with Ennis, who just shrugged and gestured for her to carry on. “Uhm, where was I... And the great Cesar showed again mercy to the humans, and made them the same offer as before. But the humans were wilful and proud, and told him that they would rather die in the wasteland than bow to the apes.”

“Damn right,” Dehni muttered, but this time, both Ennis and Laisa ignored him.

“So Cesar declared that if they preferred the wastelands, into the wasteland they would go; and no ape would follow them there and lay a hand on them. But if they returned, Cesar would kill them
“So the wizards and the warriors of Man turned their backs to the woodlands and meadows of the East and went into the wasteland. They saw many wonderful and horrible things in those lands, and they had to fight many dark beings. And many of the humans died. But that is a story for another day.”

Dehni pushed himself up on one elbow and peered down at Laisa, who had sat down on the floor and was leaning against the beiframe, with sudden interest. “They went West? Into the Forbidden Zones?”

“It’s just a story, Dehni,” Laisa murmured tiredly. “A legend. - They always went west, and farther west, through the wasteland, following the sun. They went until they couldn’t go any farther, because they had reached the end of the world. And so that nobody falls off the world, the Mothers had lifted a great mountain there.”

Dehni whistled softly, and Ennis felt his irritation grow. Taris had always just listened with rapt attention, and never interrupted with comments. It broke the flow of the tale, but telling Dehni that would probably be a waste of breath.

“The Rockies,” Dehni was murmuring to himself. “They reached the Rockies.”

“But the humans despised the Mothers and their wisdom,” Laisa ploughed on, “and wanted to go even farther, beyond the edge of the world. So they climbed the mountain, and went to see what was behind it. And behind it was a big water, with no land on the other side. That’s when the humans finally saw that they couldn’t defy the Mothers, even if they had defied the great king Cesar in the East.

“They couldn’t go on, but they couldn’t go back either, or certain death would await them. So they talked among themselves, and said to each other: ‘Let us build a great city on this mountain, greater and fairer than the city of the great king Cesar. Are we not better than the apes? Are we not wiser, with our magic and our weapons?’ And so they built a great city, as bright as the morning star, and full of the wonders of their magic.

“But there was another ape kingdom in the south...”

Dehni scoffed. “Of course there was.”

“There was another ape kingdom in the south,” Laisa repeated, “and they heard of that human city, and went and destroyed it. Because Man is not greater than Ape, and can never be.”

“Bullshit,” Dehni growled, and for the first time, Ennis began to understand why some apes thought that some humans could use a flick with the whip now and then.

“And the humans had no means to defeat the apes, which just goes to show that their magic is not greater than the apes, either,” Laisa said with a hint of defiance in her voice; “and they had to flee again, but the only way they could go was deeper into the mountain. And that’s what they did.

“The king of the South followed them ever deeper into the mountains, and the humans began to despair. It seemed that no matter what they did, the ape scouts always found their scent again. So the wizards came together again and talked about what to do. And they decided to use their magic again, but this time, it was very dangerous, and would maybe even cost their lives. But their situation was so desperate that they saw no other way—“

The door flew open with a bang, and guards came piling in as if the corridor was vomiting them all.
into Ennis’ room. They rushed past Ennis like a black wave, choking Laisa’s terrified shriek and Dehni’s curse, engulfing both of them in a flurry of snarls and slaps.

Ennis sat frozen on his chair and watched as one of the thugs yanked Laisa to her feet by her hair, only to hurl her towards the door with such force that she fell to the floor again and lay there curled up and whimpering, her arms shielding her head in expectation of more assaults.

A painful shout from the bed made Ennis whip his head around to the second battle zone; but it hadn’t been Dehni shouting. A guard had broken down on the floor and lay there, unmoving; a second one was clutching his shoulder, blood seeping between his fingers. It had been him who had shouted when Dehni had wounded him with... what? Had he bitten through the guard’s armor?

No, he had a knife, Ennis saw when the other two dragged him from the bed; it fell from his limp fingers as one of the apes squeezed his wrist so hard that Ennis could hear the bones crunching under the skin. They threw him to the floor, and Ennis swallowed when Dehni didn’t jump up immediately. He seemed dazed, as if he had gotten a hard slap to the head.

One of the guards pulled a crop from his belt; it was the ugly guard from before, Ennis realized. “I’ll beat the fear of your masters into you before I cut your throat,” he wheezed, and raised his arm.

When he struck, he had to bend down to reach to the floor, where Dehni was still lying, limbs twitching weakly as he tried to come to his senses; but Ennis thought that the guard was using that movement to put some extra force into the strike. The crop hit Dehni’s back with a resounding crack, and Dehni spasmed with a yell.

From then on, the guard didn’t bother straightening, he just stayed in that half-bent crouch and covered Dehni’s back with bleeding stripes, whooping and hollering at both humans’ - and Ennis’ - screams of horror and pain. His comrades grabbed Dehni’s wrists and ankles when he tried to crawl away, and kept him in place.

Ennis forced himself to come to his feet; his body felt strange, numb and sluggish, as if it didn’t belong to him. He’s killing him! He’s killing Dehni, and I’m watching!

He waded towards the scene, his arms and hands feeling heavy and swollen, as if they had been filled with water. “Stop! Stop, you’re killing him! I forbid that! I FORBID THAT!”

“Outta my way, brat!” The guard shoved him aside. He was stinking of blood, and his face... his face...

Ennis had never seen such ecstasy. It made him want to throw up. Maybe throwing up on that maniac would make him stop...

“Stand down right now, all of you! What is going on here?”

His mother’s voice cut through the storm like a knife, and wonder of wonders, everyone stopped moving. Even the maniac.

Ennis stood where he was, panting as if he had run for miles. The air was damp, somehow, reeking, and somewhere to his left, Laisa was still sobbing hysterically, and Dehni was too silent, and the guards were panting right along with Ennis and that was wrong, wrong, because it made him feel as if they had done something together, something terrible...

He lifted his eyes to his mother’s face, trying to find something calm, something reassuring in this wasteland.
Aelia didn’t look at him; her blazing eyes were boring into those of the lieutenant, freezing him to the spot. “Are you out of your mind? Were you going to abuse and kill a human in my own house? In front of my son? Out!” She stepped aside and pointed towards the corridor. “Don’t you dare show your face here again! I will not stand for animal abuse, no matter what position you have in Aboro’s guard!”

She turned to the others. “Take the humans into one of our vegetable cellars - their doors can be locked. And bring them hot water and bandages, and some herbs. This one is a healer, she can look after the other’s wounds.”

She waited until the guards had left with the humans before she looked at Ennis. “Are you hurt?”

Ennis mutely shook his head.

Aelia drew a deep breath. “Thank the Mothers! I’m so sorry you had to witness this... But now you’ve seen with your own eyes why I’m against human husbandry. These poor beasts simply have no chance to protect themselves against abuse - apes are just too strong. If I hadn’t happened to be nearby...”

... then Dehni would’ve been killed.

And he would’ve stood by and let it happen.

And then Ennis did throw up.

“There is an old saying that my teacher loved to quote,” Zorya gasped. Her voice was almost inaudible, though Zana couldn’t say if that was due to the Orangutan’s breathlessness, or the wind that was whipping past both their heads, just like it was whipping the clouds across the sky above them, rapidly hiding and revealing the full moon. “’If you are in a great hurry, walk very slowly’.”

“Well, we’re not walking, so I’m not sure that wisdom is applicable here;” Zana shouted back, and leaned forward to give the horses more line. From the corner of her eye, she could see Zorya grabbing the railing even harder.

“Well, she always quoted it in connection to the story of the fool and the coach that broke down because the driver hurried the horses too much...” Zorya said through clenched teeth.

“Are you calling me a fool?” Zana threw a quick glance at her; the Orangutan was holding on for dear life, her long, fine hair pressed flat to her body. The cold light of the moon turned the fiery orange into dull silver.

“No... no, the fool was the one who told the driver that he should drive slowly if he wanted to reach the town quickly,” Zorya groaned. “The driver thought he was talking crazy, drove at a slightly slower speed than we right now, and broke a wheel in a pot hole...”

“Then let’s hope that Voltis keeps his roads in better condition, because we cannot afford to slow down,” Zana yelled over the cacophony of clattering hooves, thundering wheels, and the howling wind. A storm was rising, and if they were unlucky, it would overtake them on their way to Sultok.

They were driving at breakneck speed, she admitted to herself; but they were so far behind everyone else that she feared they would only arrive to a bloodbath if they slowed down now. As sorry as she felt for the travel-sick Zorya, she couldn’t accommodate her today. At least the icy wind also prevented the clouds from hiding the moon, so that she could see the road they were racing down.
Sultok wasn’t *that* far away, but Zana had no idea when Voltis had left Chubla, or at what speed he and his guard were traveling. What worried her more was that she knew exactly when Galen and Alan had left, and that they must’ve been in a great hurry to reach Peet... who had left Chubla even earlier. Her fiancé and her humans had to be already there, and Mothers only knew what trouble had found them in the meantime.

The thought made her grip the lines harder, and urge on the horses, although that was useless - they were already racing along the lonely eastern road to Sultok at a speed that neither the now topless coach, nor the horses had been made for. At least the road was still dry, though only the Mothers knew for how long, before the storm would break loose.

“Mila, *please!*” Zorya moaned. “What good will we do in Sultok, if we never get there?”

“Trust me, I know how to drive a wagon,” Zana tried to reassure her.

Zorya wasn’t placated, though. “But this isn’t a wagon, it’s a coach... a, a *modified* coach, and I don’t think your husband ever let you drive your wagon so fast!”

Zana chose to ignore that last objection. “Do you have any idea where Aelia will most probably be now?”

Something *clacked* with a sharp, loud sound under the coach’s platform, and the whole construction’s right side jumped at least an ell high before it slammed down on the cobblestones again.

“That must’ve been a rock or something,” Zana shouted after a moment of stunned silence. “But the wheels are still rolling. All good!”

Zorya’s expression told her that nothing was good, nothing would ever be good again, and that she could forget about showing her face at the shelter ever, not to mention working there as a mentor; but they were already in Sultok prefecture now, and anyway, somethings were simply more important than...

Zana swallowed heavily. *I'll find something else to do. Some other worthwhile work.*

“If she’s not with Aboro, she will probably be at home right now,” Zorya said after a long pause. It took Zana a moment to catch up mentally - they were still talking about Aelia.

“She’s either at home or with Aboro? No other places she could be, things she could do?” she wondered.

Zorya shrugged. “At least that’s how it was when I last visited her.”

Zana turned her head to stare at her in surprise. “You visited her in Sultok?”

Zorya urgently gestured for her to keep her eyes on the road. She didn’t answer until Zana had obediently turned her attention back at the inky horizon before them.

“Yes, once or twice,” Zorya admitted. “Shortly after she had separated from Voltis. She could have changed her routine by now, of course, but back then, she was so enamoured with Aboro, it was either him, or nothing.”

“You said she’d be with him, or at home,” Zana remarked. “They don’t live together?”

“No, she has her own house - a gift from Aboro.”
Maybe he didn’t want her around all the time, Zana thought, especially in the beginning, before he had turned her to seeing things his way.

“How did you stop visiting?” she asked.

“She stopped inviting me. I, I had a lot of other engagements at that time, anyway…” Zorya sounded a bit uncomfortable.

What a coincidence. “Oh,” Zana said innocently. “Did you say something against Aboro?”

“No, not at all. I never even saw him, he was never there when I visited. And we talked about other things, mainly about our respective campaigns regarding human protection…” Zorya trailed off.

Zana glanced at her from the corner of her eyes, but decided to let her think things through without interrupting. Losing a student this way had to be painful; she didn’t need to poke her finger into that wound.

There was a sharp curve ahead and for the next moments, Zana’s attention was focused on slowing down the horses without toppling the coach. When they rounded the bend, Sultok suddenly lay at their feet in the valley below - a small town with human-style houses, crowded together behind a sturdy stockade; here and there, the first lamps were being lit in the windows.

Zana pulled at the lines and the horses stopped, snorting and shaking their heads; the heat from their bodies rose in steaming clouds around them. She drew a deep breath; she felt as if she had run all those miles herself. “I need directions now. We won’t bother with the prefect’s office, we’ll go straight to Aelia’s home.”

Beside her, Zorya was panting almost as badly as the horses. “Yes,” she wheezed, “but not straight to her front door. If what you believe is true, we might just arrive to Voltis’ guard cordonning off her house.”

“True,” Zana agreed. “So what do you suggest?”

Zorya hesitated; then she sighed deeply, or maybe just gasped for air, and said, “There is a secret passageway to her house - or away from it; it was meant as an evacuation route, in case of... Aelia couldn’t really tell me in what case. She said it had been Aboro’s idea. We would arrive directly in the inner yard... That is, if she hasn’t banked it up in the meantime. She was a bit dismissive of it when she showed it to me.”

“Only one way to find out,” Zana said, and flicked the lines.

“The exit is on the other side of town, in some grove,” Zorya added. “Please, please drive slowly now - I can’t see a thing, and neither can you.”

She was right - night had overtaken them on their way even more quickly than the brewing storm, and the moon was now hidden behind a heavy cover of clouds. Zana gripped the lines in frustration, but forced herself to let the horses go at a walk. By the looks of it, Sultok wasn’t yet under attack. Maybe they had arrived in time.

She wondered where Peet was now.
“Dehni? Dehni, can you hear me? I’m going to take off your shirt now. It’ll hurt, please don’t attack me again...”

Burke could hear Laisa just fine, but his jaw was clamped shut from the effort to keep the pain under control, so he just waggled his fingers a bit to signal her that he’d understood. The burning sensation on his back intensified as she began to peel off his shredded shirt, and he couldn’t suppress a strangled moan.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Laisa whispered, but she didn’t stop. Burke wished he was able to tell her to stop - it was pointless anyway, unless she took off his pants, too. That monkey had beaten him up and down from his neck to his thighs.

It had been a stupid idea to wait in monkey boy’s room; they should’ve kept moving. But the kid would’ve called the cops on them, so what else could they’ve done? It was the same with every other step before that - there hadn’t been any opportunity to break away until they had reached Sultok, not with that Kobavasa behind him breathing down his and Laisa’s necks. And as soon as they had passed through the gate, the apes had thrown it shut and they had been trapped.

And then the thugs had begun to shed their costumes, and he and Laisa had to jump off their horse and hightail it into one of the alleys. Burke had hoped to lose their pursuers after they had rid themselves of their Kobavasa attire by melting into the crowd of other human slaves going about their masters’ business. But he hadn’t seen a single human in Sultok.

Really, they had been damn lucky to have made it that long. Well, sometimes you get the ape, and sometimes, the ape gets you...

“Done,” Laisa finally said with a gasp that told Burke she had held her breath the whole time. “I’m afraid they didn’t give me very potent herbs - just a bit of chamomile and yarrow, but the yarrow is powdered... it’ll keep the wounds clean, and it also takes away the sting a bit...”

“Girl, my back feels as if a swarm of pissed-off wasps nuked it from orbit,” Burke groaned. “It doesn’t just ‘sting’ an’ I really don’t think some flowers’ll make it better...” The monkeys had taken their sweet time with bringing the stuff to his and Laisa’s prison, too. His wounds probably were already infected anyway.

“Hush,” Laisa said, and Burke flinched as the stuff hit his torn flesh. If it was really powder, it should be light as dust, but it felt as if she was flogging him all over again.

The pain was excruciating - a sharp burn on the surface that somehow ate its way deeper and deeper into his flesh until it was everywhere, making his muscles cramp up and his mouth water. He had fainted in that room, and again when one of the guards had slung him over his shoulder and jumped down the climb-hole to the ground floor level. He didn’t know how long he had been unconscious, only that he had woken up too soon both times.

Now he couldn’t fall unconscious again, although for the first time in his life, he wished for it. Not even the guards in Urko’s prison had beaten him so viciously, but then they had been under orders not to damage Vanda’s toy.

“This is all I can do for now,” Laisa said apologetically. “Back in Chubla, I have salves and ointments... but you won’t be able to lie on your back for about two weeks...”
Burke laughed - or groaned, he couldn’t say - and turned his head with effort to look at her. The root cellar wasn’t really a cellar, since it wasn’t underground, and a bit of early morning light seeped in from a ventilation hole at the ceiling. Laisa’s face was in the shadows, but he could sense her fear all the same.

“Ya think we’ll live that long?” he wheezed. No point sugarcoating things for her. The whole town was a Kobavasa stronghold, with the robed thugs walking freely in the streets, and even in and out of Aelia’s house. Burke wondered why an ape who professed to oppose simian abuse of humans lived here, of all places. Maybe it was the only way for her to keep her ex at bay, since Voltis didn’t touch the local KKK for some reason.

Laisa plucked at the hem of her skirt. “If Aelia wanted us dead, she wouldn’t have stopped the guards...”

“Maybe she just wants to keep us alive for that prefect,” Burke speculated. “For interrogation.”

The healer drew a shaky breath. “But she said... she said she doesn’t allow abuse.”

“She doesn’t allow abuse in her own house,” Burke corrected her. “If she wasn’t okay with Aboro’s way of handling things, she wouldn’t stay with him.”

“I remember her from when she was still living with Chief Voltis,” Laisa protested. “She was always on the side of humans, she wanted a better life for us... she worked at the big shelter...”

And she had seemed to be serious when she had promised to break Virdon out and get him into the Forbidden Zone. Burke couldn’t fault Laisa for believing Aelia back then... after all, he had fallen for the chimp’s ploy himself. But it was stupid to cling to that illusion while he was bleeding out in that same chimp’s basement.

“People change,” Burke mumbled. “Sometimes they forget who they were. Sometimes they want to forget. Don’t fool yourself into thinking that this woman is the Aelia from your human shelter.”

Laisa just shook her head, but didn’t pursue the matter further. “What do we do now?” she asked instead. “If what you say is true, we can’t just... just sit here and wait for them to come for us!”

“You’re right,” Burke murmured. “I’ll just lay here and wait instead. - We’re locked up, Laisa,” he added when she glared at him. “We’re unarmed, I’ve been beaten to an inch of my life, we’re outnumbered, and we’re deep in Kobavasa territory. What exactly do you think I can do? Should do?”

She threw up her hands in frustration. “I don’t know! Do something!”

Burke sighed and closed his eyes. “Okay. Gimme some time, I’ll think on it.”

But nothing came to him, and the pain in his back rose and fell, rose and fell, and every time it rose, the pain grew stronger, until it filled his mind and he couldn’t think at all. For the first time in his life, Burke wished for drugs - tramadool, fuck, he’d even smoke weed! Or opium... opium sounded like heaven right now.

Maybe that’s why my old man self-medicated... maybe it wasn’t just because he couldn’t deal with the memories. I’ve no idea if he had any injuries that caused him pain... never asked him...

The door opened, and the sudden gust of cold air hit his raw back like a hammer. Burke flinched and moaned, then cursed himself for not catching himself in time. He forced his eyes open and squinted up at the intruder.
It was Aelia. She stared down at him with an expression of pity on her face that almost propelled him to his feet to try a swing at her. He didn’t want pity from a goddamn monkey.

“How do you feel?” she had the cheek to ask.

“Great, jus’ great,” Burke wheezed. “You?”

“I deeply regret that I wasn’t there sooner, to prevent this,” Aelia said, and gestured at his shredded back. “It’s so unfortunate that you have to deal with this additional handicap in your situation.”

Burke stared at her. Maybe Laisa’s herbal stuff was working, or something in that monkey’s speech had set off his internal alarms. Either way, the pain dimmed from excruciating to merely unbearable. He pushed himself up onto one elbow, carefully suppressing every moan and groan that threatened to rise in his throat this time. “What the blast are you talking about?”

Aelia crouched down so that she was at eye level with him. “Usually, I sedate selected humans and release them into the uninhabited areas to the West...”

“The Forbidden Zones,” Laisa whispered. “The families that suddenly vanished from their homes... you took them?”

“I gave them their freedom,” Aelia said firmly. “These religious taboos about the Zones are a blessing for humans. It’s virginal land, untouched by simian hands for eons - nature is still intact in there. It’s a huge, Scroll-protected reservation. Humans can live there like nature intended, not under the yoke of the apes.”

She was right, in a way, Burke thought - Katlin had retreated deeper into the Zone with her people, too. As long as that taboo held, they were a sanctuary for humans.

“What does your prefect say about that?” he wanted to know. “Aren’t you worried that you’ll piss him off if you steal his buddies’ toys?”

“Aboro and I have a... an understanding,” Aelia said. “And with human procreation rates being what they are...” She shrugged at his glare. “I do what I can to save as many of them as possible.”

It sounded really noble, but by now, Burke had lost his faith in Aelia’s claims. “Did you just drop them there, or did you give them tools and provisions?”

Aelia stared haughtily at him. “Humans are natural tool-makers. They don’t need simian interference.”

Burke laughed, feeling at once incredulous and vindicated. “So you... you drugged them, dragged them out of their homes in the middle of the night, and then dropped them somewhere in the wild, without food, or tools, or weapons, or, or anything, and miles and miles away from the next village... and then went home... and, and crawled back into your warm bed and felt all virtuous.” He spat out the last word.

“Tell you what,” he continued before Aelia could respond, “these people are not frolicking in the woods right now, or whatever your fantasy about them looks like. They’re frightened, they’re freezing, they’re starving, and they’re desperately trying to find their way back to civilization, ‘cause civilization is the only thing they know. Depending on when you dropped them off, they’re probably already dead - fell down a canyon, got eaten by some mutated shit...”

“That is nature’s way...” Aelia started.
“They’re not equipped to go back to nature!” Burke exploded. “You fucking *domesticated* them!”

“Yes, and it’s *unnatural*!” Aelia snapped back. “Nature will select those whose instincts are still intact, and weed out the others, and the result will be a strong and healthy stock of *wild* humans, just as they’re meant to be!”

Burke gaped at her. “That’s what it is, right? Yet another fucking *breeding program*! And the end result is a... a beast-man, naked, an’ dumb, an’... I dunno, *mute*? ’Cause that’s what you’d like, right? Only apes can have a civilization, a culture, a religion, a language...”

“That’s all irrelevant for you,” Aelia cut him off. “I would’ve loved to give you your freedom like I did for all those other humans, but unfortunately, you got caught up in... things you don’t understand...”

“The Kobavasa,” Burke said flatly. “Your lover’s little side project. I think I understand damn well what that’s about. He’s created a private army for himself. Wonder why your ex let it slide for so long.”

“As I said, things you don’t understand,” Aelia repeated coldly. “But we cannot allow you to go back to your owners with whatever little things you picked up here and there...”

“’Course not,” Burke sneered. Laisa laid a warning hand on his arm; he ignored her.

“The captain of my guard wanted to shoot you in the yard, but I don’t allow violence in my house,” Aelia continued as if she hadn’t heard him.

“So what, he’ll shoot us on the other side of your fence?” Burke scoffed. “Do you really think that’ll make you less of a murderer?”

Aelia was silent for a moment. “No,” she said finally, “which is why I insisted that if he wanted to see you dead, he’d have to do it like nature intended.”

The pain in his back suddenly flared up again, like banked flames roaring to life, as understanding slammed into Burke. “A hunt,” he said flatly. “They’re organizing a hunt for us right now.”

He tried to feel betrayed, but he wasn’t even surprised. Somewhere along the way, he had come to expect being fucked over by the apes. It was just how they always treated humans.

... except for Zana. And Galen had at least *tried* not to fuck up too badly, even if his track record had taken a dent lately...

Aelia glared at him. “It gives you a chance to escape, to survive,” she said. “The same chance every prey has. Remember that.”

“Please,” Laisa said with a trembling voice, “we meant no harm, we just wanted to visit Master Ennis...”

“He’s not your master,” Aelia cut her off, “and he’s currently unlearning the harmful ideas about humans and apes that his father allowed to take hold in his mind. The last thing he needs is more interaction with your kind.”

She wouldn’t budge, Burke realized. She couldn’t. This was Aboro’s prefecture, where people - humans and apes - lived by Aboro’s rules. Aelia had found a way to fit her ideology into his, and she’d defend her solution tooth and claw. It was the only way to keep her sanity.
“Alright, fine,” he said. Aelia’s gaze swept from Laisa to him. She looked surprised - she probably had expected him to react like the healer. Burke bared his teeth to her in the imitation of a smile. “But I want my knife back.”

Aelia raised her brows. “If you want a knife, I suggest you grow one. Otherwise, I’m afraid, nature didn’t intend you to have it.”

“Oh, right,” Burke deadpanned. “Knives are unnatural. What about guns? Or hunting on horseback? I just want to level the playing field - and you’ll help me, if you’re really serious about giving this prey here a chance to survive after your thugs almost beat me to death.”

She pondered this - and him - for a moment. “You’ll get your knife,” she said finally.

Burke forced another smile on his lips. Much as he despised that monkey, he needed to stay on her good side for now. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Aelia rose. “The hunt will begin shortly. Prepare yourselves.”

Laisa buried her face in her hands with a groan after the door had closed behind the ape. “You were right, Dehni - we are doomed.” Her voice sounded thick with tears she valiantly struggled to keep back. “I’m so sorry... I should’ve listened to you when you told me to come with you...”

Burke sighed. “No use cryin’ over spilled milk, as my mom used to say. If that monk... ape really gives me my knife back, it won’t look so bad.”

Laisa let her hands drop into her lap and glared at him. “You said it yourself - they have horses, and guns. What do you think you can do with a puny knife?”

“Hey, don’t insult my knife,” Burke protested. “An’ leave the strategizing to me.”

Laisa sighed and threw up her hands in defeat. “What do you want me to do, then? I can’t just sit here and stare at the walls...”

“They’ll be here any moment,” Burke muttered. “You won’t have to stare for long. But if you wanna distract me from the bushfire on my back, you can tell me how that story ends that you were telling in Ennis’ room.”

“Everyone knows how that story ends,” Laisa growled, apparently not in a story-telling mood.

“Yeah, I don’t,” Burke said. “I lived a very sheltered life,” he added when she frowned at him.

Laisa snorted, clearly not believing a word he said. “They went into the mountain,” she murmured. “They used their magic to make a path that closed behind them, so the army of the king from the south couldn’t find them anymore. They built the White City in a valley that is forever hidden from apes and normal humans, and the legend says that they live there to this day, doing their magic.”

“Huh,” Burke said, and tried not to move. Every move made the pain flare up again; he had no idea how he was supposed to get up and walk out of the room. “What kind of magic are they doin’ there all day?”

Laisa shrugged. “They talk with each other over the wind... they can turn the night into day... heat water to a boil without using fire... and other things I don’t remember right now. Dehni, how are we going to escape those hunters? You can’t run, in your state!”

He had no idea. “I’ll think of something. Hey!” Burke waited until she looked up, and smiled at
her. “Don’t worry, princess, I’ll get us both home, okay?”

She nodded, but she didn’t look convinced, and he didn’t have any opportunity anymore to calm her down, because the door was yanked open again, and this time, Aelia’s guard came in. They dragged them to their feet, ignoring Laisa’s yelp and Burke’s agonized cry, and walked them down the corridor and into the yard.

Every step hurt like hell. Welts on his butt and the back of his thighs that Burke had managed to ignore until now were chafing against the fabric of his pants, and the muscles underneath were cramping up and making him stumble. He could hardly walk without the apes propping him up on both sides. He’d never be able to run, let alone outrun a pack of riders.

Laisa was right. They were fucked.

Aelia was waiting in the yard, engaged in a heated debate with an ape Burke hadn’t seen before. He looked roughed up, as if he had just run for miles - something that apes weren’t really suited for anymore since they had decided to try that upright walk.

“We need everyone at the town gate,” the ape was snarling. “You can enjoy your little hunting trip later!”

“If Voltis gets ahold of these humans, we’ll all be in trouble,” Aelia snapped. She was holding his knife, Burke noticed. The sight helped to ease the pain that was wracking his body somewhat. Not much, though.

“Well, that’s the least of our problems,” the other ape sneered, and reached for his gun.

“Don’t you dare!” Aelia growled, and to Burke’s surprise, the ape let go of the weapon.

“My son has been traumatized enough by your displays of brutality to last him a lifetime,” Aelia continued, and handed Burke his ANSA knife without taking her eyes off the ape’s face. “We’ll do this the right way, or not at all.”

“We can’t spare anyone,” the ape insisted, but Burke didn’t really listen to them anymore. The familiar weight of the knife in his hand was better than any opium; he could relax enough to take in his surroundings, while the apes were debating about the best way to murder him.

Something drew his eyes upward, maybe a furtive movement, maybe just his famous human instincts. Up on a platform, well hidden behind the pickets, cowered an ape, peering down at them. Ennis.

Yeah, I guess gunning us down in the yard would strain that sweet mother-son relationship a bit.

Well, there were other ways to accomplish that. “You mean there’s a right way to murder us?” he interrupted Aelia mid-sentence. He didn’t feel like breathing in too deeply, because moving his ribs under his torn skin set his back on fire all over again, but he wanted the kid up there to hear what was going on down here. “That’s a new one, missus.”

“Don’t call me that,” Aelia snapped. “And nature doesn’t know murder-“

“No, nature doesn’t know murder, but *apes* damn well do!” Burke yelled. “And you’re not as dumb as you’re trying to be - you’ll let these thugs shoot me an’ the woman like rabbits, an’ call it ‘natural’! An’ then you’ll have the *nerve* to feel all virtuous about it, too!” He spat at her feet, and got backhanded by a guard as a reward.
“Stop that!” Aelia yelled, though it wasn’t clear if she meant him or the guard.

Burke grinned at her. He could feel fresh blood running from his nose and over his lip into his teeth as he did so. “You think you’re gonna teach your son to be a noble ape - the only thing you’re teaching him is how to make a fool of yourself, a fool who can justify anything, and pervert anything, and can still look at himself in the mirror without feeling ashamed of himself…”

“Be quiet,” Aelia hissed, and for a moment, Burke was sure that she’d slap him.

But she stepped back, and back, and gestured to the guard. “Take them out the eastern gate, and give them an atseht before you take up pursuit. That should give us enough time to turn Voltis away, and give you,” her eyes were full of loathing now as she gestured at Burke and Laisa, “enough time to escape.”

Burke mockingly saluted her with his knife, but she had already turned her back to him and was marching into the house.

His warden grabbed him by the arm and dragged him along. “I’d love to blow out your brain,” he muttered, “but we’ve got more important things to do right now. Your luck, frog.”

Burke didn’t bother with a reply. He was looking for Ennis up in his hiding place on the balcony. For a moment, human and ape stared at each other; the boy’s eyes were huge and frightened.

Didn’t like to see your mom like that, huh?

He couldn’t feel sorry. Everyone here was hiding from reality, and it made him sick. Don’t be like them, kid. Open your eyes and deal with what’s there, not what you wish should be.

He held Ennis’ gaze as long as he could.

Whether by coincidence or design - and Galen hoped it wasn’t the latter, because that would’ve had bad implications for the humans in this prefecture -, Doctor Kova hadn’t been called to Sultok even once since he had taken over from the late Doctor Ropal. Since Galen hadn’t been eager to run into Chief Voltis and his men while he was riding with the chief’s freshly acquired human, he and Alan had stuck to the human-used cart tracks that led to Sultok on a more circuitous route than the main road. Combined with Sultok’s reluctance to call in a veterinarian, this meant that Galen wasn’t familiar with the territory, which had slowed them down considerably. It didn’t help that they had been traveling at night, unable to orient themselves by landmarks; they had even accidentally veered off the track once or twice.

At least there was a comparatively high probability that Laisa and therefore, Peet, had used this route, too, Galen had pointed out - as a human, Laisa would probably stick to the humans’ path by sheer habit, and Peet would hopefully have followed her. He wasn’t an expert tracker like Alan, but maybe he had asked the stablehands for directions...

His theory had been vindicated when they had come across a riderless Tala, but Galen was worried about the implications of their find.

“Maybe Peet just fell off,” he had suggested.

Alan had tied Tala’s reins to his saddlehorn, his face an unreadable shadow in the flickering moonlight. “Then we should soon meet him limping towards us.”

But they had met neither Peet, nor Laisa, and now Alan’s silence was deafening - a focused,
brooding absence of words and facial expressions that didn’t bode well for whoever had snatched his friends from the road.

Now, in the first, dull light of morning, they had finally reached the town that gave the prefecture its name, without having found any sign of either Peet or Laisa. Standing at a bend in the road that sneaked along the mountain towards Sultok, Galen stared at the sight below: since the slope diving away from it was too steep for trees to take root, this spot provided him and Alan with a natural vantage point over the valley. Maybe in summer, couples would wander up here to gaze at the stars above, and the lights of the town below.

Right now, though, the town didn’t offer a romantic backdrop. Even from up here, Galen could see that the shutters over most windows were still down, the town gate closed. It looked as if Sultok had readied itself for a siege.

Metal clinked as Ahpahchee jerked his head against the reins, and Alan shifted in the saddle. His hip and leg were still giving him trouble from time to time, especially after he had exerted himself. Riding all night had to be a strain for his old injuries.

“Looks as if they were expecting the chief,” the human finally broke his silence, and nodded towards the barricaded gate, where a group of black-clad riders was patiently waiting; they were still in formation, a motionless, menacing presence. “I wonder how long they’ve been waiting down there... and why they haven’t tried to force their way in yet. They must’ve had a head start of several hours on us.”

“Chief Voltis had sent them out in small teams,” Galen murmured back, straining his eyes to detect the district chief among his men. “He wanted to keep this operation secret until the very last moment - maybe he suspected that he has informers among his own guard. So he probably needed some time to gather them, at some, some rendezvous point in the hills, before he came here...”

Alan flicked him a surprised glance, as if he hadn’t expected Galen to come up with such a logical explanation, but didn’t comment, and Galen decided not to feel offended. Maybe he had interpreted that glance wrong.

“He and Aelia had an agreement about Ennis’ custody,” he murmured, trying to stay focused on their mission. “I wonder what prompted her to break it all of a sudden.”

“I guess I’m the reason.” Alan sounded chagrined. “She seemed to disapprove strongly of Ennis having a human friend. She maybe thought that Voltis had crossed a line when he allowed the boy to keep me around.”

“In any case, she escalated the situation for Aboro.” Galen scratched his head. “Which is bad for us, because I have no idea how we’re going to get into town now.”

Alan shrugged. “We’ll slip in after Voltis - you don’t really think Aboro can shut him out for long?” He clicked his tongue at Ahpahchee and directed the horse down the road without waiting for Galen’s reaction.

Galen turned his horse to follow him, trying and failing to come up with a better option. After they had lost precious time during the night with trying to avoid the chief, now they were sauntering up to him! And with the question of who was Alan’s legal owner still hanging between him and Voltis, Galen wasn’t eager to anger the chief by crashing into his carefully staged operation against this rogue prefect. It might remind Voltis why he shouldn’t give him that permanent employ as district veterinarian...
... But since Peet and Laisa hadn’t been on the road to Sultok, they had to be in Sultok itself. And that didn’t bode well for either of them. Alan was right - they needed to get inside as quickly as possible, and Voltis was the only one who could open that gate for them right now. If that meant that Voltis would kick him and Zana out... the northern badlands welcomed everyone desperate enough to deal with sand eels and rabid humans...

Voltis’ glare confirmed his worst fears. “Dr. Kova.” The Chimp’s smile was completely devoid of humor. “You seem to be everywhere these days, except at a sick cow’s side.”

“On the contrary.” Galen forced himself to return the smile; the muscles in his face felt stiff, and slow to comply. “I was called to Sultok in my capacity as a veterinarian.”

“Were you now? Without your wagon and your orderly?” Voltis’ cool gaze swept over him, his horse, and Betsy in her scabbard. His eyes bored into Alan for a moment, but neither human nor ape said a word, and Galen felt unable to turn his head to gauge Alan’s reaction. He felt unable to move at all.

“Well, it was an emergency call,” he managed, the fake smile still frozen on his face. “The wagon would’ve slowed me down too much.”

Voltis narrowed his eyes. “An emergency? And you didn’t even bring your doctor’s bag?”

Galen thought of Peet and Laisa, and the Kobavasa who had been openly infesting the whole district, but especially this prefecture, for over a year - a year in which Voltis had done nothing to curb their murderous activity - and felt his smile tighten even more. “This kind of surgery only requires one instrument.”

“This doesn’t concern you, doctor, and frankly, you’ll just be in the way,” Voltis snapped. “I suggest you return to Chubla and get to work - the work I’m paying you to do. And take Taris with you - we’ll have a word later about this, Taris -“

“On the contrary, District Chief,” Galen interrupted him, while visions of him and Zana struggling to make a living in the badlands flashed before his eyes, “this does concern me. My orderly is in that town, and I need him back.” He suspected that mentioning Laisa wouldn’t sway Voltis in his favor. The less humans mentioned, the better.

“Your runaway human is irrelevant,” Voltis growled, confirming Galen’s suspicion. “I’ve waited a long time for this day, and I will not tolerate it being jeopardized by civilian interference!”

“With all due respect, Chief, my orderly’s importance is not yours to decide. If you want me removed, you’ll have to spare some of your men to escort me back to Chubla. Otherwise, I’ll stay right here.” Galen drew a deep breath. This was it. This was his and Zana’s future, burning up under Voltis’ fierce glare.

“I promise not to get in your way,” he added weakly. “I just need to get through the gate, and then... we’ll go our separate ways. I won’t interfere in any way in your operation.”

Whatever Voltis had been about to say was cut short by a sudden commotion at the gate; all heads turned toward the small door in one of the gate’s wings that opened to let out a short, stocky Chimp with a prefect’s insignia on his breastplate, and a jovial smile on his lips.

“District Chief Voltis,” Aboro purred. “What an unexpected honor.” He closed the door behind him and was now facing down his superior, who was still on horseback, and Voltis’ whole squad with the same honey-dripping smile as before. Galen grudgingly admired the man’s nerve.
Voltis wasn’t in the mood for playing games, though. “Since your lover kidnapped my son, my arrival was anything but unexpected, Aboro. It seems you’ve gotten cocky in this nice little prefecture that I appointed to you.”

Aboro raised his hands, his expression changing to regretful incredulity. “I assure you, I had no idea what Aelia was planning, and had I known, I would’ve prevented this insane endeavor.”

“That, I even believe,” Alan murmured at Galen’s shoulder. “The last thing he needed was an enraged Voltis at his doorstep.” Galen quickly glanced at Voltis, but Alan’s voice had been too low for anyone but him to hear.

“But - and don’t take this the wrong way, Chief,” Aboro continued, “- your marital disagreements are your private problem, and none of my concern. I’m not responsible for your inability to keep your wife in check.”

“Bad move,” Galen heard Alan murmur behind him, and silently agreed - not that there was any good move that Aboro could’ve made at this point. Maybe the prefect was aware of that fact; maybe it was the reason he didn’t mince words.

But Voltis didn’t take the bait. “Since you agree that this is my problem, open the gate, and I’ll deal with Aelia myself.”

“My pleasure, Chief,” Aboro smiled. But he made no move to signal to his men behind the stockade.

Voltis leaned slightly forward in the saddle. “Is there a problem, Prefect?”

“Your men.” Aboro nodded at the silent formation behind Voltis. “I’m afraid the invitation is only valid for you, Chief.”

A murmur rippled through Voltis’ guard, and died down again; Galen couldn’t say if it was surprise or anger. He could feel Alan going very still at his side. For a moment, the only sound was the wind that had gained strength and was now tousling the horses’ manes and Alan’s hair, and the creaking of leather, as Voltis straightened in his saddle.

“Is there a reason that Sultok is in lockdown on a perfectly normal weekday?” Voltis finally said. His voice had taken on a new quality of calmness, one that reminded Galen of that special mood that Alan sometimes slipped into when Peet was in deep trouble.

Aboro shrugged, the oily smile still oozing from his lips, as if it was the only expression the ape was capable of. “You maybe heard of those bands of lawless apes that are terrorizing your district, District Chief. Unfortunately, a prefect can only do so much for the people that have been entrusted to him. But I’m determined to take all necessary measures to protect the citizens of Sultok, until the situation has been remedied by a capable district chief. I mean, by you, of course.”

“Of course,” Voltis murmured, and Galen felt the fur rise on his back. Voltis’ next words made it bristle.

“Do you know the punishment for sedition, Aboro?” The chief’s tone was casual, as if he was discussing his next meal; behind him, some of the guards’ horses began shaking her heads in protest as their riders gripped their reins harder. None of them moved, or reached for their weapon, but Galen could sense their eagerness like lightning on the horizon.

“Whatever the council decides,” Aboro said, seemingly unmoved. “Provided, of course, they find the evidence presented to them satisfactory.”
“Oh, they will find it satisfactory,” Voltis murmured. “Open the gate at once, Prefect.”

“You have no valid reason to demand that from me.” The smile was gone from Aboro’s face.

Voltis leaned down to him and bared his teeth. “I’m the District Chief, Prefect. You do as I say.”

Galen felt Alan’s hand grip his wrist and realized that he had reached for Betsy. He relaxed his fingers with a titanic effort, but Alan held on until Galen had turned his head to meet his gaze. “Not yet,” Alan mouthed, before he released his arm.

Galen drew a cautious breath and returned his attention to Aboro.

The ape was still staring back at Voltis without blinking. “The city is under lockdown because of the Kobavasa threat that you didn’t-“

“Open. The. Gate. Or I will arrest you and take you back to Chubla, and there you will tell me everything about this little organization of yours.”

“Arrest me on what grounds? You have no evidence I had anything to do with them,” Aboro hissed.

Voltis smiled.

Galen held his breath.

“I have your entire correspondence with Zafkis and Urko,” Voltis said softly. “The original letters; I had Zatis copy every single one of them. All you, and Urko, and Zafkis ever received were those copies. The council will examine the letters I’ll present to them for authenticity, and they will not fail.”

Something to keep in mind when you resume your correspondence with Melv, a distant voice said in Galen’s mind, but he didn’t really pay attention to it. His gaze was glued to Aboro’s face, Aboro’s eyes that were locked with Voltis’.

Then Aboro muttered something, and Voltis answered in the same, low voice, too low to make out the words; and Aboro turned away and waved at his men behind the stockade, and the gate swung slowly open.

Aboro retreated, step for step, still not taking his gaze from Voltis, and Voltis advanced, matching his horse’s step to Aboro’s. The guard followed suit after a moment’s hesitation, and it looked as if Aboro was pulling them all inside on an invisible string.

Alan was urging Ahpahchee forward, too. “We should use the opportunity, before they close the gate again,” he murmured to Galen as he passed him.

Galen followed as if in a dream, with the dreamlike certainty that they were making a grave mistake.

Behind him, the gate slowly swung shut again.
Chapter 22

The hostility of Sultok’s - Aboro’s - guard was palpable as Virdon and Galen passed them. It emanated from the stares of the Chimps flanking the open gate; it stiffened the posture of the guards manning the wall-walk above the riders’ heads as they slowly passed through the gate; and it pounced on them in the utter silence of the rest of the town guard that had formed a cordon to both sides of the street. They were blocking all the entrances to the side alleys, Virdon noticed, leaving only one way open for Voltis - the way that Aboro was leading, still moving backwards, still keeping his eyes on his superior.

“I don’t like this,” Galen muttered behind him.

Virdon turned around in his saddle to face him - and stiffened at the sight of the still open gate behind them. Riders were piling in behind them, but they didn’t belong to Voltis...

“Kobavasa!”

It was as if his shout had broken Aboro’s strange spell; the guards on the wall-walk yanked the guns to their shoulders, taking aim, while Voltis’ men tore their horses around to face the new threat pressing down on them from behind - black-robed riders, their faces hidden behind hideous, skull-like masks that were gleaming in the pale light of dawn.

Then the guards up on the battlement opened fire.

Virdon jumped from Apache, using the horse as a living shield against the bullets. It was all he could do - he didn’t have a gun, due to the apes’ philosophy of keeping their humans unarmed, and Aboro’s guard blocked all escape routes. Voltis’ guard - as well as he and Galen - were trapped on a wide plaza, with no means to seek cover. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

*Did Voltis really expect Aboro to just roll over and show his belly?*

Virdon hung on to the reins to keep his panicked horse from rearing, trying to keep out of reach of its hooves and keeping it between himself and the shooters at the same time. With Tala still tied to Apache's saddlehorn though, it was impossible. The horses took off, trampling a few of Aboro’s men in the process, and vanished into an alley. Other guards closed the gap before any of Voltis’ men could take advantage of it.

The acrid smell of gunpowder filled his nose as Voltis’ men returned fire, and the noise was deafening after the eerie silence a moment earlier, the sharp staccato of shots interspersed with the howl of ricocheting bullets. Nobody was on horseback anymore - many guards had been killed during that first assault, while the rest of them had followed Virdon’s example, and were now trying to use their mounts as makeshift cover. Still, Virdon thought wildly, jumping out of the way of a Kobavasa rider who smashed through Voltis’ men like a wrecking ball, trampling them underfoot before he was shot from his horse, they had no chance. They were outnumbered and encircled, and-

Something whooshed past Virdon’s head and hit the pavement with a crack. It had been bigger than a bullet, much bigger, and when it broke on the cobblestones, thick white smoke emerged from it, choking him. Virdon stumbled back, coughing. For a moment, engulfed in the smoke, he couldn’t see a thing.

Cracks all around him signaled the arrival of more smoke bombs; someone was throwing them
over the stockade. The whole plaza was engulfed in smoke now, hiding them from Aboro’s shooters on the walkway above. Virdon stumbled through the smoke, trying to protect his lungs from the burning sensation by burying his nose and mouth in the crook of his arm, and to part the clouds by waving his other arm. Maybe he’d be able to slip through the cordon in the confusion created by the smoke screen. He hadn’t intended to be caught up in Voltis’ fight, and without a weapon, there was nothing he could do except to get away from the battleground as quickly as possible, before a stray - or not so stray - bullet found him. He only hoped that Galen, wherever he was in that chaos, wouldn’t try any heroics just because he had Betsy at his disposal.

The gate to his right crashed open again, and Virdon dove aside before he was trampled down by the new riders pouring in - not Kobavasa, as far as Virdon could glimpse through the roiling smoke. Voltis’ reinforcement, that he had kept tucked away somewhere in the underbrush.

No, Voltis hadn't been as thoughtless as Virdon had feared. But still reckless, offering himself as bait for the rogue prefect as he had done, though it probably was the only bait that would tempt Aboro to open the gate.

The numbers were more even again now, and the cordon of Aboro’s men had been broken by the new arrivals; sudden chaos broke out as they mingled with both Aboro’s men and their own, and the gunshots subsided - the apes had switched to hand-to-hand combat. In the still billowing smoke, nobody dared to shoot at a moving shadow, for fear of hitting one of his own.

Virdon ducked behind a fallen horse and tried to get a quick overview of the situation. The apes might not be able to tell simian friend from simian foe, but a human was still discernible even in this smoke. He clenched his fists in helpless frustration - if he had needed any more convincing that a life as Taris-the-pet wasn’t for him, he had found it here, defenseless in the middle of a simian skirmish.

Right on the other side of Virdon’s cover, two apes were fighting each other with knives, their snarls and grunts surprisingly loud in the silence after the gunfire. Somewhere to his left, a horse was screaming. A single shot cracked, but it hadn’t been aimed to end the poor beast’s agony - one of the fighting apes was jerked to the side, half across Virdon’s dead horse, as the bullet whipped through his skull. Virdon hastily ducked out of the way, and felt the sting of bone shards and the hot spray of blood and brain hitting the side of his face.

The battle was moving towards him; he had to move. Virdon came into a half-crouch, ready to sprint towards the mouth of the nearest alley... and froze.

An ape loomed over him in the thinning smoke, his bloodied hand gripping a machete. Virdon recognized the face - Aboro. His helmet was gone, and he bore a nasty gash on his cheek.

Aboro’s face was expressionless. He took a step forward, raised the knife, and grabbed Virdon’s shirt with the other hand, ready to put him down like a dog, and Virdon couldn’t do anything but stare up into that almost-human face.

*We’re not different at all, brother... we’re all sinners...*

And then Aboro’s face exploded, and his fist loosened on Virdon’s shirt as he slumped, and Virdon stared into Galen’s face, not ten feet away from him. The chimp’s eyes were huge, his mouth slightly agape; his expression reminded Virdon of the day Galen had accidentally shot one of Urko’s guards to defend Zana.

But this hadn’t been an accident. And he wasn’t Zana... but...
Galen blinked, his momentary stupor dissolving, and lunged at him. Virdon felt his hand close around his upper arm like an iron band; the next moment, he was yanked to his feet and towards the mouth of the nearest alley.

He stumbled along, still dazed. “You shot Aboro.”

Galen didn’t look at him. “Yes.” He sounded just as dazed as Virdon felt. “Let’s find Peet and Laisa and get out of here as quickly as possible.”

A commotion behind them made Virdon jump aside, dragging a surprised Galen with him. Their backs pressed flat to the wall of one of the houses, they gazed back to the plaza, where their attackers’ movements suddenly changed, becoming more frantic, less focused. It took Virdon a moment to realize why: the Kobavasa were scattering, trying to escape into the side alleys as well, where they would throw off their gruesome costumes and transform into harmless citizens again: a baker, a farrier, a teacher...

Aboro’s town guard, on the other hand, was not as easily spooked by the death of their leader - maybe because they knew that they couldn’t escape the district chief’s wrath, since their identities were known. They were fighting against Voltis’ men even more ferociously now, but they were also trying to cut off the Kobavasa, preventing their escape. Suddenly, everyone was fighting everyone else.

Then Aboro’s guard suddenly fell back, retreating into the side alleys, and Virdon and Galen hastily ducked behind a potted palm as they rushed by them. The guard’s movements looked too ordered, too intentional for a panicked escape. Someone among them had taken command, and had ordered them to regroup. But where?

“Leave the Kobavasa be for now,” someone to Virdon’s right said. “Focus on the guard while I’m gone - don’t let them get back to the watch house.”

Voltis appeared around the corner, conspiring with his lieutenant. Both looked bruised, and Voltis was pressing a hand to his side. He didn’t look as if whatever injury he had suffered would keep him from seeing this operation through, though.

“Take to the roofs, if necessary,” Voltis was saying. “Cut them off at all costs.”

“What if they surrender?” his lieutenant asked. He didn’t look overly eager to burden himself with prisoners.

Voltis shrugged. “If they lay down their weapons, you’ll arrest them; that’s the law, Voran.”

Voran made a face, but saluted and turned away to rally his men; Voltis wiped the blood from his face and moved on, passing Virdon and Galen without noticing them. Galen, apparently recovered from his shock of having killed the leader of this little uprising, jumped up and hurried after him. Virdon followed him after a moment’s hesitation; it was no use if they got separated again in the chaos. He was still without a weapon.

“Where are you going?” Galen gasped, still a few steps behind Voltis. He moved stiffly; he wasn’t used to fighting, although their new way of life had forced him to adapt somewhat, and had to be feeling sore now. Virdon could see that he had a hard time keeping up with the district chief.

Voltis didn’t break his stride. “I’m going to get my son. Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m still looking for my human, as you know,” Galen wheezed. The gun was dangling from his fingers as if it had become too heavy for him. “Now that the prefect is dead, maybe your wife can
tell me where he is.”

Voltis flicked him a glance from the corner of his eyes. “And why would you think that?”

“She lived with Aboro for over a year.”

Virdon fought the urge to snatch the gun from Galen's careless hands. They could still be ambushed, both Aboro's guard and the Kobavasa were still at large in this town.

“And she is very concerned about the fate of humans living under simian rule,” Galen was saying, still oblivious to the danger around him. “I'd say she’s bound to know, one way or the other, what happened to a human that recently stumbled into Kobavasa territory.”

Voltis made a noncommittal sound at that, but didn’t try to turn them away anymore. Virdon wondered if Aelia hadn’t been the reason that Voltis had hesitated to crack down on Aboro all this time. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to give the impression that he was persecuting the prefect over a woman. Did the apes view a runaway wife as an embarrassment for the husband?

They turned another corner, and Voltis stopped as if he had run against a wall.

The house across the street was surrounded by a wall that was at least seven feet high, and was topped with a platform that jutted outward at a sharp downward angle; it was meant to prevent an invader from climbing across as much as it enabled the defenders to hurl all kinds of deterrents at their attackers. It was the first time that Virdon saw a house this fortified inside a town.

The guards manning the battlement only heightened Virdon’s impression that this was no simple town house; some of them were bloodied from the recent battle - apparently, not everyone had tried to reach the watch house. Had Aboro left orders for them in case of his death?

Voltis ignored the guards; his gaze was fixed on one ape alone, and Virdon thought that he had never seen such deep despair and hopeless love in a man’s face before, be it human or simian.

Aelia was returning her husband’s gaze with an unreadable expression. Her hands rested lightly on her son’s shoulders, keeping him in front of her like a shield. Ennis looked nauseated and ready to bolt.

Then Ennis’ eyes fell on him, and before either his mother nor his father could utter a word, he leaned forward so suddenly that he slipped from his mother’s grip. “Taris! You came! You found me!”

Then his expression changed from elation to alarm. “They’re hunting Dehni and Laisa, in the mountains! They’re going to kill them!”

Virdon felt the blood drain from his face, his limbs; it was all rushing into his heart, making it heavy and aching, as if he had swallowed a stone. He stepped forward without meaning to, his gaze glued to the boy’s agitated face.

“Where?” he asked hoarsely. “Where did they go?”

Ennis wildly waved his arm. “Out the eastern gate, I don’t know where they went then…” He shook off his mother’s grasping hand, and stumbled back two steps, out of her reach. He glared fiercely at her. “You…” he pointed an accusing finger at her, and turned his head to search Virdon’s gaze. “She ordered it! She ordered to hunt them!”

Virdon didn’t really care who had given that order. “How long ago did they leave?”
Ennis looked unsure. “Maybe half an *atseht* ago...”

“All at the same time?” Virdon asked urgently. Half an hour ago, roughly... though at this time of year, more like fifteen minutes, twenty... plenty of time to kill off two humans stumbling through the underbrush.

Ennis shook his head. “No, they let the humans go first...”

“Enough,” his mother snapped. “It’s out of our hands now. Nature will take its course, as it has for eons.”

Virdon clenched his fists, but she was out of his reach, both literally and... “We’ll see about that.” He turned away. He’d find them, both of them, and-

“Alan!”

Virdon reacted before he realized that Galen had called him by his old name. He stood as if rooted to the ground, his back still to the apes.

But then he remembered Galen’s face after he had shot Aboro - after he had saved his life. Galen had no reason to save Taris, the pet of ‘Young Master Ennis’.

He had saved Alan Virdon.

He slowly turned around. Galen had followed him, and looked at him with a searching expression.

For a moment, neither of them said a word.

Then Galen held out Betsy. “I think it would be wise not to race into this situation unarmed.” He made a little shoving motion when Virdon didn’t immediately take the gun. Virdon slowly reached for it, still too stunned to say anything.

“And this,” Galen pulled the ammunition belt over his head to hand it to him, “should also come in handy.”

Virdon stared at the gun and the belt in his hands, then back at Galen. “Thank you,” he said at last.

Galen nodded. “I’d also give you a horse, but I’m afraid they ran away when the shooting started. They’re somewhere in town, but it would probably take too long to find them...”

“You won’t catch up with them anymore,” Aelia called down to them. Virdon slowly raised his gaze, but his eyes were drawn to Ennis instead.

The boy was staring down at him, his face mirroring his own shock.

*He knows. Taris is gone.*

*I’m so sorry, Ennis...*

“The hunters may be on horseback,” Galen said, “but their prey isn’t.” He wasn’t looking at Aelia, Virdon realized when he turned his gaze away from the grief-stricken boy on the battlement. Galen was talking to him. “They can’t outrun a horse any more than you can - they’re hiding somewhere in the vicinity. It’s not too late to save them.”

“Are you inciting a human to use violence against apes?” Voltis growled. “You do know what’ll happen to him, don’t you?”
“I know, yes,” Virdon said, before Galen could answer. “But I also know what will happen to my friends if nobody intervenes. And I’m... willing to bear the consequences if that means they’ll be saved.”

“He won’t go alone,” Galen said suddenly. Virdon whipped his head around, but Galen’s attention wasn’t on him anymore. “But I would much appreciate it if one of your men could lend me a gun, since I only brought one for the two of us. A regrettable oversight of mine, I admit.”

Voltis narrowed his eyes. “So you are inciting my human to use violence against apes. Shall I remind you of the consequences of that for the ape?”

“You don’t have to do this, Galen,” Virdon murmured.

Galen drew a deep breath. “A wise ape recently reminded me that a friend is never nothing,” he said quietly, without taking his eyes off the district chief. “I wish she had reminded me sooner.”

“Yes, I am aware of the consequences,” he said to Voltis, before Virdon could react. “But I’m willing to take responsibility for my actions. Will you lend me a gun, District Chief?”

Voltis studied him for a long moment; then he turned his icy gaze to Virdon. “For this operation - and only for this operation - you have my permission to use any means necessary to protect Dr. Kova’s property - and that healer, too - from the Kobavasa outlaws.” With a abrupt motion, he offered Galen his gun; Galen took it with the slightest of bows.

Virdon stared at the district chief. *I’ve just been promoted to police dog.*

“If you manage to arrest some of them instead of killing them all, it would be an unexpected, but very welcome feat,” Voltis added dryly. “I have some urgent questions I’d like to ask them.”

Virdon bowed slightly as well. “I make no promises.”

But if Laisa or Pete were dead, he’d unleash hell on their murderers.

*That* was a promise he was willing to make, if only to himself.

“Alan!” Doctor Kova shouted, and Ennis thought his heart would explode and break out of his chest... splatter everyone with blood and bone fragments...

... because Taris froze.

And then he slowly, slowly turned around.

For a moment, he and Doctor Kova stared at each other; then the doctor gave him his gun, and Ennis realized that Taris was about to go after Dehni and Laisa, alone, and armed...

*You just told him he should go, stupid! He’s just doing as he’s told.*

But Taris wasn’t, not really. He was going after his friend, because Dehni was his *friend,* and he had remembered him, just as he had remembered his name, his real name, and everything else...

Taris looked up as if he’d heard him, and Ennis saw that his friend was gone, really... really gone. The eyes that were boring into his now were the eyes of another human, one that was more alert, more... Ennis couldn’t put a finger on it. Different.

And he was telling him goodbye.
The heart in his chest was still aching like crazy, and though Ennis hadn’t thought it possible, the pain was getting worse now. Crying would help, but he couldn’t cry, not in front of all these people, not in front of his father, not over a human...

“Aelia, listen...”

When Ennis turned around to see who was speaking, he nearly fell off the walkway. The ape that had appeared out of nowhere was bleeding everywhere; one eye was swollen shut... or... or missing? Ennis took a step back, then another. He didn’t want to be too close to that guard, who was reeking of blood and gunpowder.

At least Ennis thought that the smell underneath the gunpowder was blood. It was somehow... meaty, like the innards of some freshly slaughtered cow, but he couldn’t see any innards hanging out. Maybe they were kept in place by the leather of the ape’s uniform.

Ennis took another step back.

The guard was breaking down, clutching at his mother’s arms. Aelia was gripping his arms in return, bending down to catch what he was saying. Ennis couldn’t understand a word from where he was standing, but he saw his mother flinch, then freeze. Whatever was happening, it couldn’t be good.

Then his mother straightened, letting the guard slip from her hands. The man crumpled on the walkway, and Ennis stared in horrified disbelief at his prone form. The guard wasn’t moving, but he was still breathing - was he dying there, at his mother’s feet? Ennis hastily looked around: was nobody coming to help the man?

But none of the guards moved a finger, and his mother was staring down at his father again, her face completely calm, even thoughtful. “I don’t want us to yell back and forth on the street like some gutter monkeys, Voltis - no need to put on a show for the neighbours.”

“So what do you suggest?” his father asked. Ennis wished he’d look at him just once, just a quick glance to acknowledge he had seen him; but his father’s gaze was riveted at his mother’s face, as if she was the only ape in existence.

“Let’s talk about this... situation like adults, in my house,” Aelia said.

“Open the gate, then, and send out your guard.” His father sounded resigned, as if he didn’t really believe she’d do that - surrender her men to him.

“They are Aboro’s men, not mine,” his mother said. “I can’t order them to surrender. Why don’t you tell him to order them to come out?”

“Aboro’s dead,” his father said tersely, and although his mother gasped, and gripped the edge of the wall with both hands, Ennis knew that it was all just for show; she had already known. The guard had told her, before he died.

“In that case,” his mother said in a weak voice that was also just for show, and now Ennis was beginning to feel irritated with her, “I... I need something to convince these people to give themselves into your hand. You understand? An incentive, like... an amnesty.”

His father’s face hardened, but after a moment of silence, he nodded. “Any ape who comes through this gate and lays down his weapon will be granted amnesty for inciting unrest, and for resisting the district force. That includes entrenching themselves in your house, and using firearms against my guards at the town gate.”
“I’ll tell them,” Aelia said. “Give me a few moments - I have to negotiate with them, I can’t force them.”

His father didn’t look as if he believed her, but he didn’t say anything. Aelia pushed away from the wall, and hurried towards the steps that led down from the walkway. She gripped Ennis’ upper arm in passing, and dragged him down the stairs with her. At the foot of the stairs, the captain of the guard awaited her, scowling fiercely.

“You don’t think he’s letting us all off the hook?” he growled.

Aelia didn’t stop, forcing him to join them. “He just made a public announcement,” she said. “It’s the best you can hope for, under the circumstances. I won’t tell you what to do - it’s your decision. Do take your time, though - I need two horses ready.”

“You’re not trusting his amnesty?”

“I wasn’t included, and anyway, I don’t plan to stay. Without Aboro...” Her voice broke. She really must’ve loved that prefect, Ennis thought. She really wouldn’t have come back home. Ever.

It didn’t hit him as hard as he had expected. Maybe he was still numb from losing Taris. Or maybe he had known for a long time, and just hadn’t noticed that knowledge growing inside him, slowly and silently, like a tree.

“Without Aboro, there is nothing for me here,” his mother continued. “So get me those horses, before Voltis starts tearing down the gate.”

The ape nodded and turned away. Aelia grabbed Ennis’ shoulders and leaned forward to stare into his eyes. “We’ll need to hurry now, sweetie,” she said, “there’s no time to pack your things, I’m afraid. But it’ll be alright, I’ll buy you new things, don’t worry...”

Ennis shook his head. “How do you want to get out of here?” he asked. “The house is surrounded, and Father’s troops are already in town.”

Aelia smiled and patted his cheek. “As I said, don’t worry. Your old mother has some tricks up her sleeve.”

Ennis stepped back, out of her reach. “I’m not coming with you. And this time, I won’t let you drug me, either.”

His mother straightened with a sigh. “I don’t have the time to argue with you.” She reached into the folds of her robe, and Ennis stumbled backwards, into the hands of a guard. The ape grabbed his arms and forced them behind his back.

Panic slammed into Ennis’ gut. “You can’t drug me for the rest of my life,” he yelled. “I’ll run away as soon as I’ll wake up, you’ll see! You can’t force me to stay with you, I hate you, I hate you-” He thrashed in the guard’s grip, but the man’s hands were like iron bands around his arms.

“You’re my son,” Aelia said firmly. “A child belongs with his mother... and once we’re in the northern badlands, it’d be a very bad idea for a young ape to run off alone. The humans there are truly savage, not to mention the other beasts that roam the wilderness.” She pulled out a little flask and uncorked it. A sharp, sweet smell hit Ennis nose, a smell he recognized. It made him gag.

Aelia dribbled a bit of the liquid on her handkerchief and moved towards him. “You say you hate me now, but you’ll understand that it’s for the best when you’re older... and then you’ll understand that I gave you a better life, a life that doesn’t turn you into a slave-keeper...”
“It always makes me suspicious when a virtuous life has to be bought with vice,” a new voice said. It wasn’t loud, but it still carried clearly across the whole yard. It made his mother jerking up in alarm, and made the guards grab for their weapons. The one still holding Ennis in his grip whirled around, dragging him along, face to face with...

... two apes, shadowy figures under the open stable gate. They stepped out into the gray light now, and Ennis recognized the lady from the shelter, the Orangutan his mother had worked for, before she had left. Zorya.

And Mila - he’d thought that he’d recognized that voice. She was looking grim, her lips pressed together as she gestured at the fabric with the ugly smelling stuff in his mother’s hand. “If you have no better argument, you should think again about your claims,” she said. “Are you really going to drug your son every time he disagrees with you? Do you think that’s how one should raise a child?”

“How did you get in... you showed her the secret passage,” his mother hissed. She was addressing Zorya now, who apologetically spread her arms.

A secret passage? Wow. Ennis was impressed against his will. This was almost like in the adventure scrolls he loved to read, the ones about Melos and his faithful human, Taris. Taris...

“It took us a while to find it in the darkness, but we thought you might not open the front door for us,” Mila said dryly. “But we need to talk with you all the same.”

His mother narrowed her eyes. “Who are you?”

“I’m a...” Mila flicked a glance at him. “A friend of Ennis. Madame Zorya and I are very worried about him - and about some of your other activities, too.”

“Yes, Aelia, how could you?” Zorya said in a mournful tone. “The poor things!”

“Do you know that woman?” Aelia murmured without taking her eyes off the women.

“Yes, she’s Doctor Kova’s wife,” Ennis murmured back, and for a moment, he could’ve sworn that his mother held her breath, but then she shrugged, and maybe he had just imagined it.

“I really don’t have the time to explain it to you, Zorya,” she said. “Voltis is waiting for that gate to open, and for the guard to surrender... and I don’t plan on being here when that happens. I have other plans for my life.”

“And plans for the lives of the humans in your path, I’m sure,” Mila said in the same dry tone as before, and now Ennis was sure that his mother stiffened.

“But you’re right, this is not the time or place to talk about that,” Mila continued, and gestured at him. “Today, we only ask of you not to drag your son into the mess you made of your life. He deserves a stable and normal environment...”

“A normal environment?” his mother laughed harshly. “When ‘normal’ is damaging to humans and apes alike? How could I wish to inflict such a life on him?”

“Instead you want to inflict the life of an outlaw on him,” Mila snapped. “A life on the road, never knowing where you’ll sleep, always listening for the hoofbeats of the next patrol, always living in fear... not to mention hungry. Or do you have any skills you could use to earn money while on the road? How will you feel when your son is starving, and you don’t know how to feed him? What if he falls ill?”
“I have friends,” his mother said, but she didn’t sound so self-assured anymore.

Mila raised her brows. “In the badlands? I really doubt that. And even if you do have friends up north, a fever, a poisonous animal, or a pack of... violent humans hurting Ennis will get him in such a bad shape that I doubt you’d reach your friends quickly enough. And what will he do when these things incapacitate you instead?”

Before his mother could counter Mila’s rapid-fire arguments, Zorya cut in. “How could you join with these despicable Kobavasa thugs? They are criminals, murderers...”

“I didn’t join with them,” Aelia said impatiently. “And I told Aboro I was against his way of handling things, but this was his prefecture. I tried to save as many of them as possible, relocating them in their natural habitat, but Zorya, I really need to go now!” From the other side of the door, Ennis could hear his father calling her name.

“Fine,” Mila said to Ennis’ surprise. She even stepped aside a bit, clearing the exit. “I have no intention of stopping you. But Ennis needs to stay here. You cannot expose him to the dangers of your new life. Not if you really love him.”

“And leaving him to people who’ll turn him into a slave-keeper would be any less dangerous for him?” Aelia shouted.

“I’m talking about dangers to his life!” Now Mila raised her voice, too.

“And I’m talking about dangers to his soul!” Aelia strode over to him and put a hand on his shoulder; the guard let go of him, but stayed in grabbing range. No chance for him to run over to Zorya and Mila, Ennis realized. And even if he made it... all the guards had guns; Zorya and Mila were unarmed, as far as he could see, and anyway, there were only the two of them, but so many guards...

He had to convince her somehow to let him go with them. Convince her that his soul would be alright, even if he stayed behind. Ennis drew a deep breath.

“You told me that apes and humans can’t be friends, because the human has no say when the ape decides something,” he began, then hesitated. He didn’t really know what he was going to say... but this was somehow important. This was the root from which everything grew, and he had to follow it upward, and outward, and find the faulty branch in his mother’s argument. The one that would break if you put weight on it.

“And you think that you found a better way to treat them, a... a superior way,” he continued, feeling his way upward. “You say you give them that freedom... to decide for themselves. Away from apes. But you...”

And then Ennis remembered Dehni’s eyes, boring into him. Dehni, limping across the yard in the iron grip of his mother’s guards, his back bleeding from their abuse.

“Dehni had no say when you decided to give him to the Kobavasa.” He clenched his fists at the memory of Dehni’s cries when the guard had beaten him. “You say you despise apes who own humans, because the humans are at their mercy and have no say, but you did the same with Laisa and Dehni! I bet they didn’t want to be hunted!”

“I had no choice in that matter,” Aelia protested. “You talk of things you don’t understand!”

Ennis took a step back. It was a step that brought him closer to Zorya and Mila, but his mother didn’t seem to notice. “I do understand, and you were right - apes shouldn’t own humans.”
His mother stiffened, surprised, but not convinced. “And of course you’d give up your pet human, too.”

“Yes.” He had to clench his jaw, hard, to hold back the tears, and to force his voice not to waver. “He was never mine to keep anyway. I didn’t want it to be true, but... I know it now. I can’t own him.”

And now there was moisture in his eyes; Ennis furiously rubbed it away. “But I hate what you did here, with Dehni and Laisa, and I swear, I’ll run away. I don’t want to go with you, I won’t stay with you. I don’t want to drug humans and dump them somewhere in a Forbidden Zone where they’ll die, I don’t care if you think it’s natural!” He glared at his mother. “I don’t see humans as working animals, like father does, but I also don’t think they should live somewhere far away from us, like you want them to. I want to live with humans as my friends, like she does!” He pointed at Mila.

His mother’s lip curled in a nasty sneer. “Did she tell you that? Do you really think she doesn’t have ownership papers for her friends?”

“Only because our society demands them,” Mila said. “Without papers, our friends have no protection against apes who simply claim that they’re wildlings, and thus up for grabs for any ape who wants them.”

She was talking of Taris, and Ennis felt his fur bristle with embarrassment.

But Mila didn’t even look at him - she was holding his mother’s gaze as she continued. “I dream of the day when humans and apes will live in this society as equals, and humans won’t need any papers anymore, because it’s simply become unthinkable that a human can be owned by an ape; until then, I’ll treat our humans as if they were already free, with all the respect that they deserve. It may not be ‘natural’, but it’s a whole lot more dignified than what you are inflicting on them without even asking their permission!”

“I want what she wants,” Ennis cut in. “And I’ll never stop wanting anything else.” He felt strangely calm as he said it; the pain in his chest was gone. Maybe it was because he suddenly understood that he hadn’t lost Taris - Alann - to Doctor Kova; because the human didn’t belong to Doctor Kova, either. He was his own master - and that meant he could still be his friend, even if he was no longer Taris.

The realization hit him unexpectedly; Ennis had to fight the smile that threatened to spread across his face.

“What that woman wants is impossible,” his mother scoffed. “Our society will never accept animals as equals. As persons. The best we can do for them is to get them as far away from their ape masters as possible.”

“We are the society,” Ennis said stubbornly. “When we change, one by one, society changes, too.”

Aelia snorted. “If only it was that easy... and I’d love to explain to you why it isn’t, but our time is running out. If you don’t come with me, that woman’s crazy dream will hurt you, Ennis, and it’ll hurt you deeply.”

Ennis took another step back. Away from her. “Like your dream hurt the humans - and your guards.” He gestured at the dead ape.

“I missed you so much,” he continued, “I thought every day you’d come home and everything
would be like it was before. Everything would be right again. That was my crazy dream. And it hurt me every day.”

He began walking towards Mila and Madame Zorya. “But I know now... that it was a child’s dream. And I’m not a child anymore.” He looked over his shoulder at his mother, who stood where he had left her, still clutching the wet handkerchief.

“And my dreams are different from yours,” he added quietly.

Maybe there were tears in his mother’s eyes; he was too far away to say for sure. But her voice was firm when she spoke. “I love you, Ennis, you know that, don't you? Even while I wasn’t with you, and... even when I’ll be far away, I’ll always love you.” She turned away to mount her horse. The guards watched her silently as she rode towards the stable - towards her secret escape. For a moment, Ennis regretted not seeing it. Maybe Mila would show him - she had come in through the same passageway, after all.

Aelia stopped the horse beside him. “You stay strong, darling... my beautiful child. I’ll come back to you one day, I promise.”

Ennis nodded; he didn’t know what to say. Aelia hesitated, then spurred on her horse. She vanished into the dark mouth of the stable gate.

Nobody said a word until the sound of hoofbeats had become muffled, then vanished.

Mila nodded at the captain. “Are you ready to face your master?”

She threw open the gate.
“Dehni... wait!”

Burke swallowed a curse and stopped. He’d thought that the healer would be in better shape, but apparently she had spent most of her days behind the counter of her apothecary instead of wandering from village to village. He grabbed a low-hanging branch and drew a deep breath. No point cursing her - it wouldn’t make her any faster.

And to be fair, he was out of breath, too, and dizzy, probably from the beating. His back was a mess - he hadn’t been able to put on his shirt, and though these parts had shifted to a semblance of North African temperatures all summer, the air was chilly now. He didn’t know if it had cooled down with the brewing storm overhead, or if he was shivering in reaction to the pain and the blood loss, and what the hell, it didn’t matter. The apes wouldn’t give him any slack one way or the other. And they wouldn’t give them that promised asheh, either.

Laisa was struggling towards him, holding something in her apron. Since Sultok lay in the valley, all paths surrounding it led up some mountain slope or other, but if that was to their advantage or not, Burke hadn’t yet decided. It was slowing them down, but it also made it easier to fight an enemy who was struggling upslope behind them.

In close combat, yes - but the damn monkeys had guns. And there wasn’t enough foliage to provide cover. Oh, there were spots of evergreen vegetation - not the pines that Burke knew from his own time, but trees with thick, rubber-like leaves - but they were scattered across the landscape in patches, and the apes would enter those patches prepared for an ambush, and would probably shoot him and the healer before they’d ever reach them.

“Dehni, you can’t go on like this.” Laisa had finally reached him, not as out of breath as he’d expected. She hadn’t fallen back because she couldn’t keep up with him, Burke realized when she opened her apron. She had been picking flowers!

Well... not flowers. “What the hell are you doing? This isn’t an afternoon stroll through the meadows!”

“You’re losing too much blood!” Laisa held up a clump of wooly stuff. Moss, Burke saw now. “This will stop the flow, and it’ll take just a moment, I just need to press it on the wounds.”

And probably press a shitload of germs into them, too, but Burke had stopped caring about that a while ago. They wouldn’t survive this hunt; it was just a question of how many monkeys he could take down before they got him. Not that he’d tell Laisa - he needed her to stay motivated. She could play bait again - he flinched involuntarily as the first clump of moss bit into his raw flesh - she could play bait, lead the monkeys where he could get close to them...

“It’s working,” he heard Laisa’s relieved sigh, and watched idly as the first blood-soaked lump of moss dropped to the ground beside him. He could probably use it to lay a trail, too...

... while Laisa was working on his bloodied back, a plan began to form in Burke’s mind.

“The storm is getting stronger,” Laisa said quietly, and pressed another lump of moss into his lower back. “Sometimes, the storms get so strong that they uproot trees... sometimes people get killed by falling trees... actually, you shouldn’t go into the woods in a weather like this...”

“’m all for trees falling on the damn monkeys,” Burke muttered. “Gotta appreciate the irony.”
“I was more worried a tree could fall on us,” Laisa said. “There, all done. It’ll break up and bleed again if you move too much, but I guess we won’t have much of a choice there...”

“Nope.” Burke turned around and gestured at the bloodied moss to their feet. “Put them back into your apron, I’ll need them later.”

Laisa made a face, but obeyed without asking for a reason. Burke was glad that she trusted him enough not to start a discussion about his every move. “Besides, the storm is helping us,” he added, and bent down to help her gather up the moss. “It’s shaking every branch, masking our movements, and it’s also muffling the sounds we’re making.”

“But it’s doing the same for the apes,” Laisa objected.

“Yeah, but they’re on horseback. They’re way easier to spot for us than we’re for them, and they’re making more noise, too. And besides,” he reached into her apron and held up a piece of bloodied moss to her with a smirk, “I’ll know exactly where they’ll be.”

Laisa eyed it skeptically. “Yes, they’ll be right behind us.”

“Better than right before us, or jumping us from above.” Burke threw the lump of moss back to the others. “You know, you could collect more of this stuff.” He unsheathed his knife and began to scan the vegetation around them.

“You can’t be thinking you’ll stand a chance with your knife,” Laisa commented, and gestured at his ANSA knife. “That trick you used earlier on them won’t work a second time.”

Burke smiled at her. “Ah, baby, I can do so much more with a knife than just stick it into an ape. Do you really think I only know one trick?”

“Sometimes I worry about you, Dehni,” Laisa murmured, and he laughed.

They continued to crawl up the mountain, Laisa collecting fresh moss and dropping the blood-soaked pieces where he told her, Burke hacking a branch into pieces as long as his hand and sharpening the ends to a point.

The trickiest part of his plan was to find a suitable sapling. Although his knife had a serrated side, it wasn’t suited for felling trees or sawing wood. He’d have to uproot a small tree, which meant he had to find one whose roots didn’t dig deeply into the ground, and although Burke knew how the trap he had in mind was constructed, he had never needed to actually make one - and as he had told Virdon time and again, he had grown up in the urban jungle, not the natural one.

It was Laisa who found the right sapling for him, and it was also Laisa who found a kind of vine choking some tree that he used to tie the parts together, and finally, it was Laisa who sacrificed her underskirt so that he could cut it up and fashion the tripwire from it.

“We make a good team, you an’ I,” Burke remarked while he carefully set up the trigger.

Laisa followed the thread with her eyes. “So when the horse’s hoof snatches at the cord...”

”... it’ll spring the trap, and that bent sapling will swing around and skewer the motherfucker of a rider,” Burke gleefully completed the sentence. Laisa shuddered.

“I know they’re out to kill us,” she murmured, “but this is... nasty.”

“Yeah, damn right it is,” Burke agreed happily. “C’mon, we need to dig a few holes before they
catch up with us.”

Laisa followed him deeper into the thicket. The thorny shrubs would force the riders to follow the path, without any opportunity to evade Burke’s little gifts along the way. “You can’t dig a hole big enough to catch a horse,” she muttered. “Not in the little time we have.”

“Don’t have to catch a whole horse,” Burke said over his shoulder. “Jus’ break its leg.”

He half expected her to plead for the horse, but she kept silent, and even helped him to dig a hole in the path and cover it up with twigs and leaves.

“How many do you think are after us?” she asked while she sprinkled leaves over the twigs. She studiously kept her gaze on her work, refusing to meet his eyes.

Burke shrugged. “’Bout half a dozen? Doesn’t really matter, I jus’ need to get my hand on one of them, take his gun. Then our odds will be a lot better.” He waved his arm, indicating the hidden booby traps on the path behind them. “All this stuff is jus’ for making them nervous, slowing them down, taking out one or two... give me a chance to get close enough to cut a throat.” He drew his lip through his teeth, wondering if he should tell her the truth...

Laisa suddenly looked up. “I know we’re going to die, Dehni. So why are we going to all this trouble?”

Burke sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “Why should we make it easy for them? Gonna take as much of them with us as we can.”

Laisa shook her head. “What would that prove?”

He rose and dragged her to her feet. “That we’re not fucking sheep, maybe. C’mon, I need a better vantage point-”

A yell erupted farther down the path, followed by another, and another, sounds of pain mixed with pleas for help. “Seems they found my welcoming message,” Burke muttered. “But damn, they’re moving fast.” He hadn’t heard them breaking through the underbrush - the damn storm had masked their approach a lot better than he had expected. He didn’t have much time.

He grabbed Laisa’s hand and dragged her deeper into the thicket. The shrubs had shed their leaves, and didn’t really provide good cover, but that wouldn’t matter if his plan worked. Burke had her crawl under a fallen log and circled back to where they had dug the hole in the path.

He didn’t dare to climb up a tree and try to jump a rider from above. Their pursuers were apes - much more prone to taking the third dimension into account than humans. Chances were slim that he’d stay unnoticed up in that crown; he’d just make a better target.

So he just waited until he could hear the heavy breathing of the first horse beyond the thicket, waited until it seemed to be almost above him; then he broke from the underbrush and raced down the path through the thickets.

Burke could hear the horse taking up speed, its breathing becoming more rapid, the hooves pounding the ground behind him. He didn’t dare to look behind him; his hunter sounded much too close. Burke’s back started to burn as all the welts broke open again, and he could feel fresh blood running down and into the hem of his pants.

A shot cracked just as he rounded the bend in the path; his sudden change of direction saved his life, but Burke still imagined he’d felt the heat of the barely-missing bullet racing past his neck.
The hole in the path had to be right ahead of him... but he couldn’t see it. Laisa had heaped a
generous amount of leaves on the twigs covering it, and now it was perfectly concealed, even for
him.

Where was it? If he stepped into it himself, it’d be game over, and wouldn’t that be the most
embarrassing way to die? Caught in his own trap? Burke strained his eyes to catch any disruption
of the patterns of leaves on the ground, a discoloration, a faint outline...

He almost saw it too late; had to make an awkward long stride that broke his rhythm and made him
stumble. Behind him, the ape was reloading - maybe he thought his prey was breaking down from
exhaustion.

Burke did feel light-headed, whether from hypothermia, or blood loss, or simply from exertion, he
couldn’t say. But he forced his legs to run faster, to find the rhythm again, because the damn horse
had to step into the hole any moment now, please, please don’t miss the damn hole by some
fucking streak of dumb luck...

A crash behind him, and then the ear-piercing scream of the horse. Burke skidded to a stop and
whirled around.

The horse lay thrashing on the ground, its rider half-buried under it, silent and unmoving. Maybe
the beast had crashed its chest, or the monkey had broken his neck. Didn’t matter. The important
thing was that he wouldn’t need his gun anymore.

Burke had made one step towards the screaming horse when another rider turned the bend. The
ape didn’t hesitate for a second, yanked the gun up to his shoulder and fired. Burke dove head-first
into the brambles; the bullet grazed his neck and ripped out a chunk of skin, and maybe a bit of
muscle, but he was still conscious, he could feel the thorns of the thicket slicing through his skin as
he hastily dug deeper into the underbrush, trying to get as much distance and cover between
himself and the hunter before the ape could reload. Already he could hear the ratcheting sound as
the Kobavasa worked the lever of his gun.

*Shit, shit, shit*...

That had been his only chance to get his hands on a gun.

They were done for. Game over.

Amazingly, the ape didn’t shoot. He also didn’t follow Burke through the thicket - maybe he was
wary of being caught in another booby trap. Too bad that there hadn’t been enough time to make
more of them. Burke knew that the Kobavasa’s caution wouldn’t buy him more than a few
moments. Maybe he could use them to lure the monkeys away from where Laisa was hiding-

He almost yelled when she suddenly stumbled into him; he caught himself in time to swallow his
outburst, and hoped that the stifled grunt wouldn’t give away their position to the apes. “What the
hell are you doing?” he hissed, and grabbed her arms. “That was a good hiding spot!”

“You didn’t get the gun, did you?” Laisa whispered.

Burke exhaled. “No,” he admitted. “His buddy was right behind him, almost blew my head off.”

“Then it doesn’t matter if I stayed under that log.” Laisa sneaked her hand into his and squeezed it.
“And I didn’t want us to die alone...”

Burke closed his eyes for a moment. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.
“Don’t be. You fought well... we won’t die as sheep.” She huddled down at the foot of a tree - one of those strange ones with big rubbery leaves - and drew him down to her side.

For a moment, neither of them said a word. Above them, the storm was howling in the crowns of the trees.

Laisa laid her head against his shoulder. “I hope they’ll shoot us,” she murmured, “and don’t torture us to death...”

“I still have my knife,” Burke reminded her. “If they don’t shoot, I’ll... it’ll be quick.”

“Thank you,” Laisa whispered.

Some of the creaking and rustling around them had to be Kobavasa, Burke suspected, not the storm.

“How did that story end, by the way? - About those wizards in the mountain,” he added, when Laisa raised her head to frown at him.

“Like I told you - they live there to this day, doing their magic,” Laisa murmured, and rested her head on his shoulder again. “The legend says that sometimes they come into the valleys to help the people there - when there’s a drought, or a fever. But they always demand a child in return, and those children are never seen again.”

“Huh,” Burke muttered. “Maybe they’ll turn them into wizards.”

“It’s just a story, Dehni,” Laisa said softly. “It’s not true.”

“Yeah, I know, but... it’s nice that people can still dream about humans defying apes an’ getting away with it.”

Laisa said nothing, but he felt her tense beside him; she had noticed the Kobavasa now, too, spread out evenly, surrounding them from all sides. They still didn’t shoot; nobody was in a hurry anymore.

One of them finally spurred on his horse to make a few steps through the brambles, so that they could see him in all his freakish glory. Burke stared into the muzzle of his gun as he slowly took aim, then raised his eyes to stare into the empty sockets of the human skull the Kobavasa was wearing.

*I’m not afraid of you, monkey. I’m not afraid of dying, either. I jus’ regret that I didn’t get you first.*

Laisa was squeezing his hand so strongly that Burke thought he could feel the bones in it scraping against each other. She had turned her head to bury her face in his neck.

That was the other thing he regretted. If only his death had bought her escape...

He heard a sharp crack, and wondered about it. At this short distance, he should’ve been dead before he’d hear-

The Kobavasa dropped his gun as he was yanked sideways. Burke stared as he fell to the ground like a wet sack.

Another shot ripped through the rubbery leaves and took out a Kobavasa Burke hadn’t even noticed before.
Another shot. And another.

Burke finally unfroze and rolled on top of Laisa to shield her from stray bullets. All around him, the Kobavasa stirred from their stunned immobility; he heard wood splinter as they tried to escape... or dive for cover, he couldn’t really see what was going on. Somewhere in the thickets, the mystery shooter was still pelting the greenery with lead, and Burke thought it best to keep his head down.

“Pete! Are you alright? Have you been hit?”

The shots had died down, and so had all sounds of escape, but Burke didn’t move. Pete?

Then someone grabbed his arm and hauled him up and around, and he stared into Virdon’s pale face, drawn from worry and-

Burke made a fist and struck out.

Virdon hit the ground and lay there for a moment before he rolled around and came up on all fours. Behind him, Galen broke through the underbrush gripping his gun, brows raised and mouth slightly agape at the sight before him.

Virdon dazedly shook his head, then flinched with a moan and clutched his face. “I guess I deserved that.” His voice sounded muffled. When he staggered to his feet, Burke could see blood oozing through his fingers.

“Damn right,” he growled, “you do.”

Virdon let his hand drop. “Wanna take another swing? You’ve every right to be mad at me.”

Burke clenched his fists. “Maybe later.”

He bent down to offer Laisa his hand. She looked up at him with a worried expression, but took his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. Burke gently pushed her towards Virdon. “There’s your reason for coming here.” He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Virdon tried to wipe off the blood that was running from his nose, without success. “Both of you were the reason I came. Both of you.”

“I thought we agreed that you coming out here would be a bad idea,” Burke muttered. “Was the reason you sent me after her in the first place, remember? What made you change your mind?”

“Voltis decided to crack down on the Kobavasa and get his son back,” Virdon mumbled, still wiping at his face. “He took his entire town guard with him. Gal... we were worried that you’d get caught in the middle of that conflict.”

“That’s why there were so few of them after us,” Laisa realized. “The rest were fighting against the chief!”

“Yeah, but that puny rest would’ve killed us all the same,” Burke muttered. If Galen and Virdon hadn’t turned up with their guns...

He was getting tired of getting his ass saved by the colonel again and again. Yeah, it was nice to have survived - again - but damn, if his trap had worked... but it had worked, that hadn’t been the problem...
“Not on my watch,” Virdon said firmly. “I don’t allow anyone to harm my friends...” He wiped his chin again, looking insecure all of a sudden. “If... I’m still allowed to call you that.”

They stared at each other for a long moment.

“Why’re you here, too?” Burke finally asked Galen, then waved the ape off when he opened his mouth. “Doesn’t matter. Maybe you can patch me up before we ride back, so I can put on a shirt. It’s chilly today.”

He turned away without waiting for an answer, stumbling downslope, and after a moment, heard the others following him.

The walk back to Sultok was tense and silent; Burke wavered between relief and rage, and found it best not to say anything until he had decided which one it should be, and the others had probably picked up on his dangerous mood. Laisa had sneaked her arm around Virdon’s waist, and Virdon’s arm was around her shoulders, pulling her closer against him with every step.

“I should’ve hit you harder,” Burke muttered when they reached the edge of the forest.

“Your voucher for that second strike is still valid.” Virdon didn’t look at him.

Don’t tempt me. “What’s the expiration date?”

“Don’t push it,” Virdon tried to joke.

“I got every right to push it, an’ then some,” Burke snapped, and Virdon closed his mouth and looked away.

“I’m afraid I don’t have my doctor’s bag with me,” Galen finally spoke up, “but we’ll let the horses go at a walk, and give you a blanket... Who beat you up so thoroughly?”

“One of Aelia’s Kobavasa friends,” Burke muttered, not in the mood to discuss the events of this day yet, or to be distracted from his rage at Virdon. So now he admitted that he remembered them all! Why now, all of a sudden? But he was still too enraged to ask.

He’d have to wait a little longer, until his back was healed up enough that he could wear a shirt again.

And then he’d go find Katlin.

The tea was cooling forgotten in its mug as Virdon held up another faded map and squinted at it. Ape script was all swirls and dots - what Burke still derisively called ‘paw prints’ - and if an ape was sloppy, or in a great hurry, it tended to dissolve into something that looked as if he had dropped the quill and scattered ink all over his scroll. The ancient map, its ink faded with age, was almost indecipherable. But the younger the maps, the bigger the blank spaces got - territory that no ape had mapped anymore. Going by the most recent maps, all inland territory was one huge Forbidden Zone.

Trying to cobble together a viable map from the scraps of lore the apes had preserved, as well as his own memory of the geographic features of the former United States, had filled Virdon’s days ever since he had returned with Galen and Burke from Sultok. Burke had taken up residence with Laisa as inhouse patient, which was justified by the sorry state of his back, but had refused to let him visit; and after his return to the townhouse that Galen had inherited from his predecessor, he had found ways to avoid Virdon whenever possible.
Virdon dropped the map on the table, and rubbed his tired eyes. The sun was still setting too early for his taste; they were nearing midwinter - Christmas, but he wrenched his awareness away from that fact whenever it surfaced in his mind. He would honor the day when it came, but he would be glad when it was over, and all the memories of family celebrations had passed with it. Maybe Burke would’ve celebrated it with him, even if he didn’t acknowledge its spiritual significance, but they way things were looking right now, that was probably not going to happen anymore.

With a sigh, Virdon reached for the map again. Better to focus on the things he could do, instead of moping over chances he had already wasted...

“Still chasing that pipe dream?”

Surprised, Virdon turned around to see Burke standing in the door as if summoned by his brooding. “I’m trying to come up with a usable map from all these old scrolls, yes.” He gestured at the overflowing desk.

Burke slowly came over to his window, and stared at the stacks of scrolls with a slight shake of his head. “You know as well as I that it’s just a story people tell their children, Al. Why are you wasting your time with this stuff?”

Virdon carefully rolled up the brittle scroll and eased it back into its sheath. “Let’s agree to disagree about that,” he just said. For a moment, he had hoped... but it seemed that Burke was simply looking for a fight, and he wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.

But Burke wasn’t finished yet. “Even if you can draw up a map that won’t lead you to Canada, doesn’t mean you can actually cross the continent. Didn’t you listen to Galen? Everything west of here is a desert. It’s a death-trap!”

“I grew up in a desert climate,” Virdon murmured, and reached for another scroll.

“Yeah, I’m not talking about Texan-desert kind of death-trap.” Burke growled. “More like Atacama-desert kind of trap. Or Mercury on a nice, sunny day.”

Virdon looked up with a sigh. “Gee, one could almost think you’re worried for my health, Pete.”

Burke huffed at that, and turned away. He was still moving stiffly, the lashes on his back only freshly healed, but Virdon thought that it wasn’t pain that was freezing his posture into angry rigidity now.

Or maybe not physical pain.

They hadn’t talked about Etissa. Burke hadn’t asked, and Virdon was happy to leave that subject well alone. He no longer subscribed to the theory that ‘talking things through’ was really helpful, and even felt guilty for having tried to bully Burke into talking about his time in Urko’s dungeon once. If there was one thing he wanted to bury for all eternity, it was the memory of Ramor and his business. And his own part in that business.

But looking at Burke’s retreating figure, Virdon suddenly realized that if he wanted to save this friendship, he needed to give Burke... something. Some way to understand.

He needed to give him the truth, even if he wanted to flee from the room at the mere thought of it.

Virdon carefully put down the scroll he was holding. He wasn’t sure he wouldn’t tear it apart without noticing otherwise.
“I didn’t lie about my memory at first. I really didn’t remember a thing.”

Burke stopped and turned around halfway. “So when did you remember?”

Virdon drew a deep breath and stared out of the window. The light outside was a deep blue, interspersed with the golden globes of lamps in the windows of the neighbouring houses. “Bits and pieces floated up from time to time, but I... batted them away. I didn’t know what they meant then, but they made me feel... on edge.”

He stepped closer to the window and leaned his head against the glass. Apes had managed the art of making glass, but their window panes were small and thick, distorting the view. It was like looking through a fishbowl.

“I only remembered... everything... the night I spent with Laisa.”

“Yeah, that was like a replay of... well.” For a moment, Burke sounded uncomfortable. Then his voice grew hard. “An’ then you lied to all of us.”

Virdon squeezed his eyes shut. “I heard you talk with Laisa the morning after... after. And I realized that Galen had told you what had happened in Etissa. And I... I... I just couldn’t face you, knowing that you knew... of my disgrace.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. “Your what?” Burke sounded incredulous. “So what, you know what Urko did to me, I didn’t run away, did I?”

“That’s... you can’t compare that,” Virdon murmured, his skin hot against the cool glass. “You were tortured... raped.”

“So...?” Burke still sounded confused. “So were you.”

“No, I wasn’t.” Virdon struggled to get the words out. “I... participated.”

“Hell, I saw the rope marks on your arms and legs!” Burke’s voice was now equal parts angry and incredulous. “They had to tie you up for it, and Galen says you were drugged with Blaze! Doesn’t look like consent to me!”

Virdon turned around. This was his confession now, his disgrace, and he wouldn’t hide from it - he’d face Burke while he told him. “But I still... did it. Performed...”

He couldn’t do it; he turned away again, unable to face his friend any longer. “I hadn’t been with a woman since Sally, and I, I just gave in to my base urges...”

“Jesus Christ!” He heard quick, angry footsteps, and then Burke grabbed his shoulder and yanked him around. His face was flushed with anger. “Al, you know as well as I that the damn thing has a mind of its own. Guys come too soon, too late, not at all...” he threw up his hands in exasperation, “... or get a hard-on when it’s really, really inconvenient...

“Your dick isn’t a divining rod of consent! Stimulus an’ response, did you sleep through biology class? An’ did you really believe I’d think badly of you because you got fucked over by the damn monkeys? It’s what they do!” He took a step back, still staring at Virdon.

And Virdon saw it in his eyes - Burke didn’t pity him; and he was pissed at Ramor, or at all apes in general sans Zana, but not at him.

Virdon inhaled slowly, his chest inexplicably light all of a sudden.
“I still can’t believe it happened... to me,” he said in a low voice. Burke huffed a laugh and raked his hand through his hair.

“Yeah...” he muttered. “Can’t see myself telling the story of ‘how I got buggered by a gorilla once’, either. But you jus’ gotta move on.”

Virdon tried to smile. “And how is that ‘moving on’ working out for you?”

Burke’s gaze dropped to the scrolls on the desk. “Still on it.”

“I’m sorry I made you mad, Pete.” He tried to put all his sincerity, all his regret into his voice. “I didn’t mean to. I just wanted to... I wanted to erase what happened. I thought I couldn’t face anyone who knew about it.”

Burke shrugged. “You could’ve tried to half-drown me in the damn river. Heard that works wonders for the brain.”

Virdon dared to smile at that. “Are we good?”

Burke said nothing for a long moment. Then he sighed. “Is that voucher still valid?”

“Yes,” Virdon said, bracing himself for another of Burke’s mean hooks.

Burke nodded. “Good.” Then he grinned, noticing Virdon’s stance. “I’ll redeem it when you need your stupid head set straight again. Somehow, I jus’ know it’ll happen.”

Virdon released his breath that he hadn’t noticed holding, with a laugh. “So you’ll come with me?” He gestured at the heap of scrolls.

Burke blew his breath out in what was not quite a sigh. “Al, it’s just a damn story. Get your head around it, will ya - there is no White City On The Mountain.”

“These people lost their script, Pete,” Virdon insisted. “Stories are their only way to preserve their knowledge now. This so-called magic sounds a lot like memories of our technology - wireless communication, electricity... Maybe a pocket of our civilization still exists, hidden away somewhere in the Rockies.”

Burke laughed. “Yeah, somewhere in the Rockies. Do you remember how big the Rockies are? They go all the way from New Mexico to Canada! We’ll be searching for that damn fantasy city of yours for all eternity!”

“No we won’t!” Virdon held up the data disc that Galen had brought back from his meeting with Voltis - who had told him that Laisa had cut it off while Virdon had still been unconscious, and given it to Doctor Ropal - together with new ownership papers for him and Burke, this time with Voltis' seal on them.

Burke had made a face at these ‘gifts’, and truth be told, Virdon still didn’t know how to feel about getting the disc back - losing it had be hard, but had also brought a sense of completion, of unambiguity. Now, everything was possible again. And the responsibility to find a way to fulfil his promise was back, too - but somehow, it weighed heavier on his soul than before.

But the duty was not just to his family, and he’d fulfil it, no matter how he felt. “Pete, that second ship is real! You and I saw it with our own eyes - and considering that ANSA had hurled it across a millenium, ten years is a really narrow miss. They had data to guide them, and this is the only way they could’ve gotten it. We will find that city, trust me.”
Burke eyed the disc with disdain. “So we’ll find your mythic city, an’ you’ll send them the data, knowing full well that it’ll crash their ship ten years before ours in the jungle, only to be found by Urko, who’ll bash the crew’s heads in? That your idea of getting home?”

“I don’t presume to know more about temporal mechanics than you, Pete, but by the looks of it, I already did it, or we wouldn’t have found the wreckage. I have no idea what I’d upset if I suddenly veered off course and didn’t send the data, but I don’t want to find out.” Virdon stared at the disc in his hand. “Maybe there’s a way to add a warning...” he murmured. “In any case, ANSA needs to know what happened... and what will happen to Earth.” He looked up to meet Burke’s gaze in the darkening room. ”Maybe we can prevent it from happening at all.”

Burke said nothing for a moment; he reached up to light the lamp hanging over the table. “Stop the monkeys from taking over?” he muttered as golden light bloomed up in the glass. “I’m all for it...” He flicked Virdon a sideways glance as he closed the glass and pulled the lamp back up towards the ceiling. “But we’d kill Zana, too... and what about your girl? Laisa?”

Virdon rubbed his neck, feeling profoundly uncomfortable. “You can’t kill what’s never been born. And I’m sure Laisa’s soul will still be born, just into a different life. A better life than this.”

“What about Zana?”

“I’m sure her soul will be born, too, and Galen’s... just not in the body of an ape...” Virdon shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know, Pete, I’m not a pastor. But I know I can’t just ignore this story. It’s the first real lead we’ve got since we crashed here.”

Burke heaved a deep sigh. “Okay. I’ll come with you. Under one condition.”

Virdon narrowed his eyes, instantly wary. “What condition?”

Burke placed his hands flat on the table and leaned forward. “Once we reach the Rockies, you have one year to find that damn city. After that year, you’ll give me the data disc, an’ I’ll hurl the damn thing into a fucking canyon, an’ we call it a day.”

Virdon blinked. “And then?”

Burke lifted a shoulder in a casual shrug. “Make a life for ourselves here. You go back to Laisa - she’s nice, she’ll be good for you, assuming she waits around for your stupid ass - and I’ll go find Katlin, kick some monkey butt.” He smiled. “Good times.”

Virdon thought to himself that Burke had just outlined how he intended to commit suicide, but decided to deal with that problem later; right now, he was simply glad that Burke was willing to go with him. “I’d still prefer going home, but... alright. It’s a deal. One year.”

His friend raised his brows, apparently surprised at his lack of resistance, then eyed him contemplatively. “You’re getting tired of this, too, right, Al?”

Virdon shook his head. “I promised Chris that whatever happens, I’d find a way back home. And I know he took my word for it.”

“Al, in our line of work we can’t make these promises, and I’m sure Sally has explained that to Chris at some point,” Burke said softly. “It’s just a fact you have to live with when you grow up in a military family - mom, or dad, or your favorite cousin one day come back in a coffin - or not at all, an’ nobody knows what happened to them. It’s hard, yeah, but Chris isn’t the only one to have to deal with that kind of situation. I’m sure he got... well, not over it, but got on with his life. He still had his mom, after all, an’ his baby sister.”
Virdon nodded, suddenly too choked up for words. When he was reasonably sure that he wouldn’t embarrass himself, he admitted, “I’m not getting tired of it, but... I’m not sure I can keep up the search for the rest of my life. The longer I’m here, the more... unreal my old life becomes.”

Burke nodded. “As if it happened to another man. Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“There’s something else I’ve been thinking about lately,” Virdon added after a moment’s silence.

“Oh yeah? Should I be worried?”

“All this time, I just wanted to find a way home,” Virdon said, ignoring the jab, “and I assumed that whatever hardship the humans of this time were suffering would be erased anyway if I managed to warn ANSA of this future. But... I was being selfish. And if you're right, and there is no way back for us... we can’t ignore these people’s plight any longer.” He smiled wryly at Burke. “Well... you never did.”

Burke shrugged. “Yeah, I was pissed, but that doesn’t change a thing.”

Virdon slapped his hand on the table. Several scrolls jumped and fell to the floor; he ignored them. “Exactly! And that’s going to change now. We’ll help the humans we meet from now on.”

Burke pushed away from the table. “An’ how exactly are we gonna do that?”

“I don’t know yet, but we’ll think of something... some way to give them a better abacus...”

Burke shrugged. “Okay with me, as long as you don’t give it to the monkeys.”

“I’ll give it to anyone who strives to make a better life for humans and apes, Pete - they aren’t all like Urko, or Aboro.” Virdon bent down to scoop up the dropped scrolls. He’d still need them later, and Zatis wouldn’t be too pleased if he returned them crumpled or torn.

“Zana’s the black sheep, Al,” he heard Burke’s voice from beyond the tabletop. “She’s the only ape I’d give a better abacus, doesn’t mean there are others like her. Hell, she’s the only one I’d take back to our time... okay, Galen, too... but I don’t think I’d do them a favor with that...

“So how do you wanna know that the apes won’t use their ‘better abacus’ to oppress the humans even more?”

Virdon resurfaced to drop the scrolls back on the table. “I’ll use my common sense...” He grinned as Burke barked with laughter. ”... and I’ll pray for guidance.”

“So you an’ the Big Guy are on speaking terms again?”

Virdon smiled sheepishly. “He was the whole time. It was me who thought I couldn’t face Him, after...”

Burke was still grinning. “Heh, good thing he didn’t clock you one, too.”

The memory of his many bruises from his fall into the river flashed up in Virdon’s mind. “Yes, I’m lucky He’s quicker to forgive than... uh...”

“Careful, Al,” Burke muttered. He grabbed Virdon’s sketchy map and peered down at it. Then he snatched up a quill and started scribbling.

“Okay... there’s gotta be a place called ‘here there be dragons’...”
Chapter 24

Virdon remembered Burke’s joke a few weeks later as he stood before Laisa’s door, gathering his courage. Right now, he’d rather have faced that dragon than her.

But he couldn’t put this off any longer. Burke and he had decided to leave long before the Spring Equinox - before the sun would heat up the badlands to the west so much that they’d become impassable. Virdon had wanted to leave even sooner, but they had to wait until Burke’s back had scarred over sufficiently.

Virdon shook his head and felt for his own scars, sneaking up the side of his neck where Voltis’ house sign had been burned into his flesh. If they ever made it back home, they’d both have to get extensive cosmetic surgery to have all those scars removed - at least the visible ones.

With a deep breath, he knocked.

The door opened almost immediately, and Laisa greeted him with a broad smile. “Alan! Come in!”

He smiled at her, although his guilt intensified, then followed her inside.

“I’m taking inventory today,” Laisa informed him as she strode towards the herb room, “so I’m not receiving customers, except for emergencies.” She threw another radiant smile over her shoulder. “It’s so nice to have your company for that!”

“It’s always nice to have your company,” Virdon complimented her. He sat down on one of the two chairs in the room and watched her as she busied herself with pulling open drawers and peering into bottles, scribbling notes, and occasionally emptying a container into a big bucket in a corner. He rubbed a hand over his mouth, wondering how to break the subject of his impending departure to her.

Since his return from the ‘battle of Sultok’, as both apes and humans called it with gleeful hyperbole, his relationship with her had changed - intentionally, on his part. He was still attracted to her, and he still liked her very much - and if he had allowed it, those feelings of attraction and affection would’ve evolved into love; of that, he was pretty certain.

But the reappearance of the data disc had changed everything, turning him from widower back to husband - at least until this last search had been exhausted. He hadn’t told her that; hadn’t given any reason for his reluctance to share her bed at all, counting on her assumption that it had to do with his resurfaced trauma. And she hadn’t complained, and had been content with snuggling and kissing, but he had felt more guilty with every passing day. It wasn’t right to encourage her that way, keeping her hopes up that he’d come to her if she’d only be patient.

No, she deserved the truth, just like Pete had deserved it. But God, it didn’t ever get easier! Or maybe he had turned into a coward by his transformation into Taris-the-slave.

“You’re quiet today,” Laisa remarked.

Virdon inhaled deeply. “I’m just engrossed in watching you sort your herbs.”

She flashed a grin at him, and he grinned back, then sobered immediately. “But I’m also trying to find a good way to tell you bad news... and I’m coming up empty.”

Laisa straightened and gave him her full attention. “What kind of bad news?”
There was no way to cushion this. “I’m going to leave Chubla - for a long time, maybe forever.”

The herb room was always dimly lit, so it was impossible to tell if she blanched, but she left her open container on the counter and came over to him to sit down on the second chair. “You’re leaving? When? Where? And for what purpose? Why won’t you come back... sorry.” She leaned back suddenly, as if she wanted to pull back her own words. “I’m just so... this is so unexpected.”

“Yes, I know,” Virdon said, chagrined. “And that’s my fault. I’ve known it for some time, but I didn’t know how to tell you. I’m leaving for the western mountain range. What was ca... what my people know as the Rocky Mountains. It’s a long journey, all across the continent, so I don’t know how long it’ll take to reach them.”

“But why...” Then understanding dawned on Laisa’s face, and with it, indignation. “You’re searching for the White City. Alan!” She jumped up from her chair, too incensed to sit. “It’s a children’s story! Nothing but a story, Alan! It’s not true, never was true, and it’s not worth throwing your life away for it in the badlands! They’re infernal! Nothing survives in there! You’ll never reach the western mountains, if they’re even real, too, and not just part of that story!”

“Laisa, calm down.” Maybe that had been the reason he had hesitated for so long - dreading her ire, not her tears. “The mountain range exists, I know that for a fact. And I have reason to believe that the story has a kernel of truth - enough to justify this search.”

“And your master allows this... folly?” Laisa was pacing the tiny room, still fuming.

Virdon didn’t bother to correct her assumption about his and Galen’s relationship. “He does.”

“I cannot believe this! Why would he... never mind.” Laisa returned to the table and stared down at him. “What does Dehni... Pete say to this?”

“He’ll go with me.” Virdon couldn’t suppress a wry smile. “To keep me out of trouble.”

Laisa scoffed and turned away, but didn’t resume her pacing. She just stood there, rigid like a statue, facing the corner with the abandoned herb container.

“Is it because of me?” she finally asked in a small voice.

“No!” Virdon rose and embraced her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. She smelled of hay and resins, dark and bitter - since that first night, she had never again smelled of that sweet, flowery scent that brought back memories of Ramor’s breeding booth. Virdon closed his eyes and fought the urge to bury his nose in her hair. “I swear I’m not running away from you. If I was free to choose, I’d stay.”

It was true, he realized with a sudden jolt. If he was free... when had he started to consider his marriage to Sally as a burden of duty?

If he found a way home, would he lie beside his wife and dream of Laisa?

He straightened; the movement put some distance between himself and her. “It’s a mission... a duty I have to fulfil. I can’t tell you more... but it has nothing to do with you and me. - I’ll come back to you, if I can.”

The last words had tumbled out before he could think better about it. It was always like this with her. “I understand if you won’t wait for me,” he added lamely, suddenly remembering Burke’s words.
Laisa shook her head without turning to him; she slowly walked back to the counter and leaned against it, finally facing him. “I’m a healer, Alan.” She sounded tired. “I’m actually not allowed to have a lover at all... or a husband. I’m married to my purpose, and the apes don’t want me to be distracted from it. So you don’t need to worry about other men.”

So maybe her indulgence with his sudden chastity was for different reasons than he had thought. Virdon tried not to let his surprise show. “Why take that risk with me, then?”

Laisa didn’t meet his eyes. “You’re... different, somehow. Of course,” a ghost of that mischievous smile appeared on her face, “you’re also easy on the eyes. But when you woke up and couldn’t remember anything, I was intrigued.” The mischievous smile grew stronger. “There you were, with your exotic good looks, and that mystery surrounding you... how could I not be fascinated?”

She grew serious again. “But the more time I spent with you - and with Master Ennis being so fond of you, and so concerned about your recovery, I spent much more time with you than with any other patient - I came to know you, and...” She shrugged, and fussed with her apron, suddenly shy, ”... I just fell for you, I think. Fell for your laugh, and your gentleness, and your thoughtfulness, and... for you. Just you.” She looked up, and her smile was sad now. “I can’t explain it any better. It just happened.”

She wiped her eyes. “I knew from the beginning it wasn’t allowed. I just didn’t care.”

“I need to go,” was all Virdon could say. “But if... if I can, I’ll come back to you.”

Laisa sniffed, visibly fighting not to cry. “And Deh... Pete is going with you,” she said hoarsely. “Though I don’t know if that should make me more worried instead of less.”

Virdon grinned, trying to lighten the somber mood. “He wants to see the dragons.”

She frowned at that. “There are no dragons.”

“I know. Don’t tell him that, though.” He walked over to her, then hesitated, unsure if it was still right to kiss her.

To hell with it.

If he wasn’t going to ever see her again, he wanted his last memory of her - and hers of him - to be a good one.

Apparently, Laisa agreed with him on that.

Winter had ended so suddenly that everyone, humans and apes alike, had been taken by surprise. Alan and Peet had scrambled to finish the last of their preparations, shifting the day of their departure ruthlessly forward. They had hoped to avoid the deadly heat of the Forbidden Zone to the West, and the warmer weather was threatening to close that path for them far too soon.

Zana still hadn’t caught on to the change - of schedule as well as of weather. She was panting in her too-heavy robe, her heart thudding wildly in an attempt to pump her hot blood to the surface. Not for the first time, she envied the ability of humans and horses to shed their surplus heat via sweat. Apes could sweat, too, but by far not as efficiently.

Or maybe her heart was trying to jump out of her chest for a different reason - the same reason that made her throat constrict in a really painful way, until it felt as if an apple was stuck in it. The same reason that made her eyes so sensitive to the hot wind and the glare of the sun that they were
They were standing at the very edge of Potla prefecture, the westernmost of Chubla’s prefectures, bordering on the Forbidden Zone. Just the four of them - Laisa had a patient she had to tend to, and Ennis hadn’t been allowed to skip his lectures. Zana was glad about that; much as she liked both the healer and the young ape, it felt right that no outsiders would witness this moment.

This moment she had been dreading for so long.

“Are you sure you don’t want to travel on horseback?” she asked for the umpteenth time. “You’d be so much faster...”

Alan shook his head with a slight smile. “We don’t know how hostile the Zone will become - and then we’d either have to transport food and water for the horses, too, or shoot them. Trust me, Zana, traveling by foot is much simpler, even if it’s slower.”

“But how will you survive in there?” Zana fretted. “Once you reach the desert?”

“I grew up in the desert,” Alan said absently. He was already scanning the treeline, looking for a path, maybe. “Don’t worry so much, Zana - we’ll be fine. Maybe I’ll even be able to send you letters... I heard that there are caravans crossing the plains. Otherwise you’d have been out of tea a long time ago.”

“They are,” Galen threw in. “But they travel on a much more northern route than you and Peet. Here.” He pulled a leather bag from his robe and offered it to Alan.

“It’s your money,” he explained, when Alan just stared at it. “Money you and Peet earned, with racing, and fighting, and, and making leatherwares...”

Alan’s face froze for a moment - Zana was sure that he was silently adding one more way he had earned money - but he took the bag from Galen’s hands. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” Galen said, visibly uncomfortable. “As I said, it’s your money, strictly speaking. It’s the least I could do.”

“I don’t think we’ll have a chance to spend it in the Zone,” Pete commented. “Unless they hid a hot dog stand in there. Or a bar - a nice human bar, with human girls... Hey, don’t look at me like that, Al! You’re searching for a bunch of wizards; who knows what else has been hiding in that no-go zone for the damn m... apes?”

“These are travel papers,” Galen said, before Zana could scold Peet for his almost-slur. “I told Voltis I needed to send you up north to acquire some rare herbs for me. I doubt you’ll need them once you’re deep in the Forbidden Zone, but as long as you’re on the outskirts, they should be useful.”

Alan and Peet would travel a good part of the way northward before they’d turn west; the southern parts of the inland were too hot and dry to allow more than insect life. At least this piece of information had been repeated unanimously by every simian scientist and trader.

Peet took the proffered papers with a nod and carefully stowed them away in his backpack. The humans’ relationship with her fiancé had slowly relaxed after Galen and Alan had teamed up to save Peet and Laisa from the Kobavasa; a development that was in big part owed to Galen’s efforts at mellowing his reactions to them.

Zana was glad that he allowed himself to let go of his grudge, if not of his grief over the loss of her
daughter; she only wished he’d have started sooner. Now that he was finally coming around, the humans were leaving.

“I still can’t believe that this should really be the end,” she whispered as she hugged Alan goodbye. “After all this time... all these adventures...”

“It’s not the end.” Alan hugged her back, then looked at her with a smile. “It’s a new beginning for you and Galen. I’m sure you’ll do much good here, Zana - the humans are lucky to have you.”

Zana sniffed and wiped her hand over her eyes. “Promise me that if you don’t find that mythic human city, you’ll come back here first thing, Alan - before you embark on some new journey!”

“I will,” Alan assured her. “I’ve already made that promise to... someone else.”

The healer. Zana suppressed a sigh. She wished for nothing more than for Alan’s and Peet’s return, even if it was a selfish wish; but if that wish was granted, Alan’s infatuation with Laisa would throw them into trouble with the law... again.

*Oh, we’d find a solution! If they’d only come back...*

“You, too, Peet,” she said, turning to her other human - her fierce, defiant, forever untamed human. “I know that you don’t want to return to ape territory, but... just for a short visit? So I can see that you’re still alive and... alive?” She couldn’t bring herself to say ‘fine’. Peet would never be fine again, not as long as an ape was within shooting distance.

“If Al doesn’t find his Shangri La, I’ll be off to Katlin’s people,” Peet said gruffly. Then his expression softened. “But yeah, I’ll stop by you on my way south.”

“South is where Urko is,” Zana sighed.

Peet smiled. “Yeah.”

She shouldn’t hope for them to return, Zana realized. It would only spell trouble for them, danger - it would be the end of them.

*If you really love someone, you have to let them go.*

And now she was openly crying, and Peet stepped forward and hugged her, taking her completely by surprise. “’m not saying ‘don’t cry’,” he murmured into her ear. “But it’ll get better, trust me - and Al’s right, you’ve got a good life here, an’ you’ll be good for the humans around here, too.”

He let her go. “Take care, Zana - you were the only decent ape I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you, Peet,” Galen said dryly, and Peet gave him a cheeky smile, and for once, Galen didn’t seem to be offended by Peet’s teasing. Alan clasped hands with Galen, and told him to take good care of her - as if that admonishment was necessary -

... and then they left. Zana watched them vanish in the underbrush, a dark-haired human and a light-colored one, with the long, easy steps of humans that could still eat up the miles when an ape’s legs had given out long ago. They were made for this, Zana thought - made for roaming the vastness of the inner lands, while apes clung to the forests and lakes of the coast.

The humans turned back a last time, waving goodbye.

Then they were gone.
Zana didn’t remember how she got home; Galen must’ve been silent, too, or maybe she had buried herself in her grief so deeply that she hadn’t even heard him talking to her. It was the silence in the house when she stepped over the threshold that woke her up from her stupor.

Silence. And the white stripe of midday light blazing on the tabletop. Zana stared at it, not sure what to do next. The afternoon lay before her like the desert of the Forbidden Zone - vast, hot, and empty.

“Sit down, Zana,” Galen said gently. “I have something for you.”

She slowly walked to the table and lowered herself into a seat. She still felt strangely numb, and not really there. The silence seemed to clog her ears somehow, and her voice sounded thin and far away. “A tea would be nice.”

“Indeed. And while the water is heating up, let me...” Galen vanished from the room, and Zana resumed staring at the light that reflected from the polished wood of the table until her eyes began to hurt.

Galen’s arms suddenly appeared in her field of vision, and set something heavy on the table before her with a thump. Whatever it was, was hidden by one of his old robes that he had wrapped around it.

“A, a housewarming gift,” Galen said and turned away to take the teapot from the shelf. “Do open it.”

Her fumbling fingers revealed a row of round keys in a metal case. She looked up at Galen’s back; he was busy making tea.

“A typewriter?”

He half-turned to flick her a smile. “I remembered that you were very taken with the one that Gorilla had in Sapan.”

Zana slowly traced the keys with her finger. “It’s lovely, Galen. Thank you.” She didn’t want to speculate how much money it had cost him. “I’m a bit at a loss what I’m going to use it for, though. It’s not as if I have to write reports for Professor Zorvan anymore.” Not that he’d have accepted a typewritten report in the first place; everything had to be written by hand for the Orangutans.

Galen returned to the table with two mugs, and sat down opposite from her. “Well, you could write about our adventures, perhaps,” he suggested. “You’d have to embellish them a bit, of course - maybe as an adventure series for children. Or, or write whatever else you find notable.”

She forced a little laugh. “Like Felga, you mean? I’m not cut out to be a reporter.”

“You need a work that fulfils you and earns you money of your own,” Galen said softly. “You told me so yourself, remember. And I’m sure you’ll find something worthwhile; you’re the smartest woman I’ve ever met, and the most meddling woman, too.”

Zana glared at him for that last part, and he winked at her.

She leaned back and drummed her fingers on the table. “Now that you mention it, there is a matter I intend to meddle with.”

A problem for another day.


Today is another day.

Galen eyed her warily. “Do I dare ask what it is?”

Zana smiled at him. “Well, do you?”
“The night before my dad left, we had a barbecue.”

Chris said it without preamble, and Gina didn’t know what to say - Chris wasn’t even looking at her. He was staring up at the sky, at the stars, as if he couldn’t wait for the few hours until liftoff to pass. They had returned to his favorite spot at the beach, the place where he had been watching the Perseids with his father.

“Did you want one, too?” she finally asked. “If you’d said something...”

Chris shook his head. “No. Mom wasn’t in the mood back then, and now she’s outright pissed. Holed up in her lab, dissecting plankton or something.”

“Maybe Helen would’ve...”

Gina let the words trail away at Chris’ stony silence. She had never understood his aversion against his younger sister. It was as if Chris thought she was a changeling, a bad bargain for his lost father.

“They had invited the whole crew,” he continued after a long pause, as if Gina hadn’t said anything at all, “Major Burke, Jones - he was the mission specialist, like I am for the Daedalus - he was nice. Explained the Hasslein Drive to me as if I’d actually understand what he was talking about.” He shook his head, and Gina could see his teeth gleam in the moonlight as he grinned at the memory.

“They even invited Professor Hasslein, but he declined. He had to work. I think everyone was secretly glad that he didn’t come.”

“They didn’t like him?” Maybe they had better instincts than you.

Chris shrugged. “I think they didn’t understand him. He’s not the kind of guy you can chat up about the latest game, you know?”

"I see." I get it, he’s no mere mortal. Gina felt the old irritation creep into her body, tensing up her shoulders.

Chris seemed to be oblivious to her mood, still lost in that old memory. “Major Burke was funny, but Mom was... I dunno. Maybe she was pissed at Dad like she’s pissed at me now. She sent me to bed pretty early on.”

“Or maybe she had a hunch,” Gina murmured. ”Don’t go, Chris. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Chris finally turned to her. “Don’t worry - this time, all will go well.”

“Do you think Jones sabotaged the drive, back then?”

Chris shook his head. “No. Jones loved that machine, it was his baby - he’d never have sabotaged it.” He paused, then added, “Professor Hasslein told me that Burke did it.”
Gina blinked. “But why? That was suicidal...”

Chris shrugged. “I guess he didn’t know that. Must’ve been one hell of a surprise.”

“Well,” Gina said after a moment, “if you really manage to find them, you can ask them yourself about what happened on the ship.”

“When we find them, I’ll do exactly that.” Chris’ voice had taken on a hard edge.

They watched the ocean for a while, dark waves with starlight on their crowns lapping lazily at the silvery beach.

“What if you don’t find them?” Gina finally whispered. “Do you think you’ll even be able to let it go, or will you spend your whole life searching for your father among the stars?”

Chris was silent for a long moment; at last, she could feel him taking a deep breath. “I dunno. I spent my whole life preparing for this day, I can’t even imagine what I’ll do with it if I do find him.”

“You need a purpose besides finding your father, Chris.” Gina dug her hand into the cool sand, scooped up a handful and let it drizzle back to the ground, millions of tiny stars, twinkling in the moonlight as they floated down. “I’m sure you weren’t born just to search for him.”

“But maybe I was.” Chris’ voice was almost inaudible over the sound of the waves. “How do you know I wasn’t?”

“I just know it.” She could feel her heart clench in her chest. “You’re not just your father’s son, Chris. You are... you, and you have so much to give, so much talent, so much... loyalty. This world needs people like you - people with determination, and faith, and ingenuity. We need you, Chris, more than ever! Don’t go with the Daedalus...”

Chris put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him, and she laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

When he spoke again, his voice was gentle, but his words carried a finality that brought tears to her eyes.

“I’m the mission specialist - nobody knows that machine better than me, except Hasslein... and Helen, maybe, but she’s too young. They need me there, and I want to go. Can’t you understand that?”

His voice hitched. “I want to be there when they find them. I want to see his face when he realizes that we didn’t abandon them, that he’s going home, I want... I want to look in his eyes and tell him it’s me, Dad, it’s me, and I’ve come to get you home. And I...” she could hear him swallow hard, “...I’ve waited so long for that day.”

Her eyes were blurring, so she couldn’t really see his face when he turned to her, but his lips were warm and salty from the ocean spray, from the ocean, not from tears, and she pulled him closer, pulled his warmth and his weight over herself like a blanket. Tried to memorize everything about him with her whole body, so that she wouldn’t forget how he felt and smelled and tasted after he left her for his dream.

She could feel the dark cold silence of space arching over them, a yawning emptiness reaching from horizon to horizon.
Chapter End Notes

And this... is the end of series 1. I started writing it in April 2016 and never stopped, and now, after more than six hundred thousand words, I feel... exhausted LOL. But it was worth it, I loved every single day of writing it.

I’m so grateful for all your comments, your kudos, but most importantly, for returning again and again for every new story, for staying with me and the guys even when the story took a dark turn and gave the characters (and you, the readers) so much grief. Thank you for having faith in me and in the story. It means a lot to me.

Series 2 is already outlined, but writing it will have to wait until I’ve finished the first draft of my original story; if you don’t want to subscribe to get email notifications, just check back on my profile page now and then. I’ll update it as soon as I start writing for this fandom again. I hope you’ll join me then for series 2, where Virdon and Burke cross the continent to find that last remnant of human civilization...
... Zana sets forth to rescue Al’s children
... Galen quietly builds up his network of free thinkers under the very nose of the Orangutan clergy
... while Urko rises to power in the south - and begins to turn his attention to the northern prefectures...

End Notes

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed this story, please consider clicking the "kudos" button. It lets me know that you liked what I created, which is super motivating and uplifting :D, and it also lets others know that this story is worth checking out.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!