

The Ape

Dracula of the Apes, #2

by G. Wells Taylor, 1962–

Published: 2014



Table of Contents

Dedication



October, 1894.

Chapter 1 ...	Goro's Land.
Chapter 2 ...	The Tribe.

Chapter 3 ...	Eeda.
1894-1899 — One to five years of age	
Chapter 4 ...	The Night Ape.
Chapter 5 ...	Grooming Rock.
Chapter 6 ...	Mates and Playmates.
1900-1902 — Six to eight years of age.	
Chapter 7 ...	Friends and Enemies.
Chapter 8 ...	Mystery and Danger.
1903 — Nine years of age.	
Chapter 9 ...	Special Son.
Chapter 10 ...	Omag's Mischief.
Chapter 11 ...	The Lair of Fur-nose.
Chapter 12 ...	Treasures.
Chapter 13 ...	The Shining Fang.
1904-1905 — Ten to eleven years of age.	
Chapter 14 ...	A Jungle Joke.
Chapter 15 ...	The Call of Dreams.
Chapter 16 ...	The Pride of Prey.
Chapter 17 ...	A Great Killer.
1904-1905 — Ten to eleven years of age.	
Chapter 18 ...	Seeds of Ambition.
Chapter 19 ...	The Two Trees.
Chapter 20 ...	Magnuh.
Chapter 21 ...	The Bakwaniri.
Chapter 22 ...	Demons, Curses and Crimes.
Chapter 23 ...	The Guilty Parties.
1907-1909 — Thirteen to fifteen years of age.	
Chapter 24 ...	Life Flies Forward.
Chapter 25 ...	Strange Apes.
Chapter 26 ...	The Lions.
1910 — Sixteen years of age.	
Chapter 27 ...	Harkon the Huntress.
Chapter 28 ...	Lurking Vengeance.
1912 Eighteen years of age.	
Chapter 29 ...	Heirs to the Crown.
Chapter 30 ...	Skin-stones and Doorways.
Chapter 31 ...	The Cripple's Cane.
Chapter 32 ...	King of the Apes.



This trilogy is dedicated to the authors of the classic novels that inspired its creation.

Bram Stoker

Dracula

&

Edgar Rice Burroughs

Tarzan of the Apes

October, 1894.

Chapter 1

Goro's Land.

The jungle seemed to go on forever. This African rainforest was so overgrown with verdure that the midday sun could barely penetrate its leafy covering. Some beasts could make the climb high into the thick canopy, there to watch the mist and fog that crept through the upper reaches and clung to the loftiest branches until it was dispelled in the tropical heat.

Indeed, so thick was the jungle canopy that raindrops often failed to reach the ground, were instead consumed as they dripped and fell from the heights, sucked right into the red-mawed gullets of the arboreal denizens, or soaked into moss-covered branches as thick as trees, captured to form waterholes for high-ranging animals roaming through.

The upper reaches teemed with living things. A cycle of life and death consumed each day.

As it did on the ground, where it was dark and shadowy; where the undergrowth grew thick with leaf and thorny vine; where perpetual twilight gripped the land from sunup to sunset and threw endless shadows amongst the mammoth tree trunks.

The jungle seemed to go on forever, but it did not. Few of its inhabitants understood that because few had marked many days on any calendar. It was "day one" in earth's history for most of them, or "day two" or "three." Some lucky few had a grasp for greater spans of time, but with that often came the curse of sentience; and in such a case, fear of instant death would bind those so endowed much tighter to their own beating hearts, and the "days" they *could* appreciate became dangerous to dwell upon.

They lived in the "now" because a lapse in that focus could make any moment their last.

But sentience was a rare and dubious prize in the jungle, so to most “forever” existed in varied lengths, but was always marked between birth and death. Both of those states were in profusion in the wild, and so “forever” varied from creature to creature.

A basic primitive law was created within these numerous perspectives that stalked each creature to the end. The length of life was inconstant, counted in days, and measured in paces, footfalls, or the flap of wings as one traveled between water supply and food sources, between colony, flock or herd, and mates, offspring or enemies.

A day’s walk from the Gypsy Horvat’s yurt, a tribe of unusual anthropoid apes had stopped to forage in a small clearing lush with berry bushes and ripe grasses. They were heading back to the fruit-rich forests that bordered the sandy beaches to the west after taking a long meandering loop south to eat tubers, water chestnuts and grubs in the swamps before heading north again to the Grooming Rock where they had stayed for three long days.

The tribe of apes moved constantly throughout their range in search of food and water, a search that took them east along elephant trails where they traveled inland to clearings rich with grasses and other delicious foliage; or as the season dictated, they crossed overland on a southern course to swampy coastal lowlands. At other times, they would employ these traveling methods in tandem by walking northeast along the elephant track until a hike through thorny ravines brought them to where mango and nut-bearing trees covered the low hills.

Their constant wander brought them at times near to the sands by the great blue water where they dined on shellfish and other tasty shore dwellers that were trapped in a shallow harbor where a long segmented arm of stone stretched in pieces out into the waves.

There the bravest apes could wade in search of the delicious sea creatures that made their homes in the dimpled stone.

When they weren’t raiding these tidal pools, they snacked upon the various fruit and nut trees that abounded east of the beach.

They were especially fond of the berries that grew so densely around the Gypsy Horvat’s yurt, and their passion for the fruit had caused their many unpleasant clashes with the unusual ape-like creature in the strange tree-nest. He had come to be an object of curiosity to them, as the apes or “wild men” had been an object of terror to the Gypsy.

“Fur-nose” was what the apes called the otherwise hairless creature that lived in the tree-nest because instead of having hair covering his body he had sprouted long fur all around his nose for a purpose the apes were unable to comprehend. That oddity and his peculiar habit of wearing the skins of other animals over his own pale flesh caused an outrage among the apes that would be remembered for generations.

None knew where Fur-nose had come from for he had only appeared one cycle of wandering past, and he had resisted all challenges to this invasion. Being dubious possessors of some degree of sentience, these apes knew this was not his territory, but his thunder-hand had won in each challenge to its ownership.

So far, only one of the apes, an adolescent blackback male, had died from an infection that came on after the thunder-hand had put a hole in his arm. Others

touched by Fur-nose were more fortunate and had suffered painful wounds but escaped with their lives.

After their initial terror at the sight and sound of the thunder-hand, and understanding the danger it represented as evidenced by the scars that many bore afterward, the apes had studied Fur-nose and learned his behavior.

It was simple. He stayed under cover to work the thunder-hand, but he could only reach so far with it.

So long as he was closed in the tree-nest and the apes kept a respectful distance, they would be safe from his power, though knowledge of this did not diminish the fright they felt when the thunder-hand roared, nor diminish the terrifying disruption it caused in their routine.

Only the bravest or most foolish ape dared to leave the berry bushes and cross the broad clearing toward the tree-nest. Displaying their courage in front of Fur-nose became a frequent occurrence as the tribe's blackback males challenged each other.

The last time the group had visited that place, the silverback Goro, king of the tribe, had led them into the berry patch that circled Fur-nose's lair but held them at a safe distance to forage.

Before long a huge blackback male named Tobog, worked up by the admiration of his lesser blackback brothers, had led several charges toward the strange nest only to be met by thunder-hand's ferocious howl. None were slain or injured, and Fur-nose seemed reluctant to use his power, so the blackbacks had made several more charges without receiving injuries.

Goro had watched this series of challenges somewhat bemused, for he knew that a challenge for his crown would one day come from Tobog; and he had already seen the vest of silver hairs starting to grow across the younger bull ape's shoulders and hips.

The silverback had been made uneasy by Tobog's successful charges against Fur-nose because it was also a show of strength meant to challenge Goro's authority. The king wasn't jealous of the praise given by the young blackbacks to the future challenger, but Goro had been wise enough to flex his own considerable muscle by casually ordering the troop away from the area while Tobog hurled rocks at the tree-nest and thunder-hand barked.

The silverback had been pleased to see Tobog bristle at the command before submitting as was demanded by tribal law. The younger male had to learn patience if he hoped to lead the group one day, for Goro would not be defeated by muscle alone.

But Tobog's reason for testing Fur-nose's defenses and power was unknown to Goro. He had been convinced by the other males to kill the strange creature, and take the thunder-hand so that he could use it to take the kingship away from Goro. All the apes expected Tobog to some day dethrone the silverback, so were easily convinced that the destruction of Fur-nose would speed up the succession.

These young blackbacks possessed more brawn than brains, and forever dreamt of being kings themselves, so they had been easily manipulated by a sly ape named Omag who told them challenging Fur-nose would result in either Tobog's death or his succession and either outcome would shorten the distance to the throne for each of the blackbacks that remained.

In truth, Omag had also been jealous of Fur-nose's power, and he very much wanted it for himself. He could tell—just as Goro the silverback knew—that the thunder-hand was a tool that the creature Fur-nose carried, like a rock used for opening nuts or a stick for spearing monkeys and bushbabies, though Fur-nose's tool was far more powerful and threw painful injuries and death greater distances with its invisible but noisy touch.

Omag was a cripple by ape standards, but his mind was fleet and supple, far more able than any of the others.

Of course, all of the apes in Goro's tribe were beyond the expectations of apes that are now left in the world, and so, such machinations could be expected, if unforgiven.

Cousin to the more familiar lowland gorilla and all but extinct from the world, these were like the apes known to the greater biological sciences, but also like humans in ways hypothesized by the philosopher Darwin who conjectured that humanity's branch on the tree of life grew from a place on the trunk none too far from whence our many hairy cousins' had sprouted.

It was a garden rich with fossils that had spawned Goro's tribe of 62 apes, whose members were a molecule or two more like human than their lowly cousins, and possessors of a rudimentary language and understanding of the world because of it. A study of them would have made a fascinating contribution to evolutionary science had their line not died out.

But at the time of this narrative, they still ranged in small groups throughout the wildest parts of Africa, competing with the other lesser anthropoids and with man for space and resources in the jungle.

They were alike enough to the ape to look like him and have his habits, and so they foraged and traveled, feasting on plant-life, bugs and small animals. Their favorite foods were cabbage palm, gray plum and bananas—they had a passion for berries of any kind, and the wild pineapple that grew around the swamps to the south.

They went to considerable lengths to secure sources of the delicacies they craved. The apes loved nuts although cracking the shells between stones took considerable dexterity and patience—with bruised fingers being a common side effect—and figs were highly prized, though gathering them often left the apes battling troops of baboons or chimpanzees over rights to the delicious fruit.

The tribe favored meat also, and supplemented their diets by scavenging flesh from carcasses killed and abandoned by large carnivores. Sometimes the apes killed their prey themselves, forming cooperative groups to hunt smaller animals using their claws and fighting fangs, and using crude weapons of their own design. All members of the tribe might participate in these "hunting" expeditions, though it was a cultural preoccupation of the blackbacks who often bragged about their prowess.

The apes of Goro's tribe hungered for flesh but would not eat any of their own. They hunted rodents, monkeys and young bushpigs, while occasionally savoring a larger prize like the speedy bushbuck, peaceful gorilla, or the wily chimpanzee.

Chapter 2

The Tribe.

Omag was an ambitious bull ape who might have been king of the tribe had he luck to match his addiction; but his political aspirations were dashed when he contracted a wasting disease from the rare flesh he craved. After its onset, the illness had left him demonstrably weaker than his peers with a disfigured face, mangy fur and the slow deformation of his limbs.

But despite the ravages of the disease, he remained an adult bull ape of great strength, and so it had come as no surprise when he made an attempt upon the kingship some years before by challenging his contemporary Goro when he had become their new, young leader

Goro had only recently taken the kingship from old Baho, and as the silverback then, Baho had fought well but wisely, capitulating quickly to his massive young challenger. It was after that victory that many in the tribe had started to believe that Goro was too young for his position because he broke with tradition and refused to slay Baho or exile him.

None had dared to challenge this outrageous decision except Omag, who after days of grumbling had ignored Baho's warning and charged at Goro anyway—in a battle that he lost moments after it began.

Goro was a terrible force in a fight, but sentimental when it came to his tribe, and so after their brief but vicious struggle; the silverback had allowed Omag to live and stay with the group as he had old Baho; even though the deformed ape carried his shame and vengeful nature for all to see, grinding it between his teeth where his disease had caused the lips to rot and wither away exposing the fangs on the left side of his face.

The king's pity had only served to twist the thorn in Omag's pride, but the crippled ape stayed—some thought because he had future designs on the kingship, while others understood that Omag's affliction made him incapable of surviving on his own.

Afterwards, Omag remembered his place for the most part and hated it, as he reminded the tribe whenever he flew into his rages or took his frustration out on the females and the younger members of either gender. Even the infants and nursing babes were not spared his fists.

His violent outbursts were short in duration, and always stifled by a rumbling growl of warning that rolled out of Goro's mighty chest wherever he loomed protectively near. Still, the mothers were especially wary of Omag's moods, and would keep their infants away from the brooding beast.

Yet a mother could not be ever watchful.

The tribe had hunkered down to feast on a patch of sweet berries and tangy grasses in an open space ringed with trees. They were headed back to the coast aware that fruit near Fur-nose's lair was coming into season, and on their last visit, they'd left many of their favorites to ripen.

Omag squatted by the trees with his hands full of berries, and began carefully dropping them into his ruined mouth. Many of the delicious fruits rolled out of the hole in his cheek as he munched, causing him to bark angrily at each loss.

And each time he barked, the tribe's anxiety rose, calmed only by degrees when Goro's rumbling voice offered comfort. The silverback was lying among the foliage where the patch bordered the trees to the east while the females picked berries near the center of the clearing, their infants staggering wide-eyed among the stems. The plants grew high enough that only the chests and shoulders of the adults could be seen.

Three of the females had found eggs in a bird's nest that hung beneath the thick leaves. They carefully cracked them against their foreheads before pressing the shells to their large lips and sucking the contents out.

One of these females, Eeda, was a beautiful young ape covered in sleek black fur. Her eyes were large and round and her features soft and pleasant. She had a long tuft of hair hanging from each temple that grew into a silky fringe following the curve of her jaw. All the apes in the tribe had this particular feature, though Eeda's and the silverback Goro's sideburns were exceptional by comparison.

Eeda's little son Kado, her first and so her most precious, was moving about the plants, playing hide and seek with his friends. Or so it seemed. The little males were actually mimicking the scene that was unfolding around Goro even as the tribe grazed.

Two big blackbacks were stealthily closing on Goro, taking advantage of the high green underbrush to disguise their movements. They were adolescents so they were only going through the motions, training for a day when they might actually challenge the king.

But the training was not something to be taken lightly. Challenging a 450 pound silverback, even in mock preparation such as this, could be lethal. Goro was a giant of muscle and iron-like bone. Leaning forward on massive forearms he was a figure of immutable strength.

Goro had already sensed the approach of the upstarts and grunted his grim amusement. The fools were coming downwind, but the mock challenge made the king wonder again about the whereabouts of the giant Tobog for he had not seen or smelled him for many days. The prideful blackback was likely angry at the silverback's insult at Fur-nose's lair, and was probably seeking solace from his supporters.

The king could sense the other blackbacks in the trees plotting and planning, hunting or wrestling, and reveling in their strength as they guarded the group.

Then Goro remembered seeing Tobog leaving the tribe some few days after their last visit to the berries near Fur-nose. The big blackback had flung himself through the trees toward the west and he had not yet returned.

Tobog had stopped making mock challenges to Goro's kingship some time ago, instead foraging in the jungle away from the troop with Omag, or sitting with the crippled ape under the pretense of grooming while they watched the silverback studying him for—weakness?

And the king thought again that perhaps he should have slain Omag long ago, or sent him into exile. But, Goro felt that his former challenger's mind was damaged like his body, and that on his own his brain sickness would only fester.

The king believed that Omag would heal if he were allowed to live with his tribe and since Goro knew no dishonor or weakness in his own heart; he was blind to its existence in others.

The young blackbacks charged out of the dense foliage with a shattering roar that was met with Goro's own battle cry as he surged to his full height. He heaved the closest challenger into the air and with a thunderous bellow threw the blackback end over end into the tangled underbrush beneath the trees.

The second blackback lost his nerve when Goro's fighting fangs turned toward him, so the ape retreated, speeding to the closest tree where he leapt into the lower branches.

Goro gave chase, as the other challenger gained his feet and followed, growling and screaming—embarrassed by the outcome of the first exchange.

The rest of the group watched this confrontation expectantly, listening carefully for the timbre of the voices and registering the undertone of merriment that thrummed in Goro's cries. He was enjoying the mock battle. There would be no blood. The other blackbacks cried and hooted happily from their places in the forest and moved nearer the sparring to watch.

So the other apes breathed a collective sigh of relief and continued gorging on berries.

All except Eeda who was hooting worriedly, searching in the dense brush for her son.

Little Kado had crept closer to Omag to watch the disfigured ape from the cover of leaves near the beast's feet.

As Omag tipped another handful of berries into his mouth, some of the tasty orbs he was already chewing started rolling out the hole in his cheek. Growling and frustrated, he attempted to wrangle them with his tongue, and in the action he made a wet, sucking noise...

...that Eeda's little son mimicked.

"*Sip. Sip,*" he echoed, cheerfully, adding a high-pitched squeak of surprise and wonder as the great bull ape's eyes flashed in recognition.

Omag swung his massive face down toward the insolent one-year-old, his deformities distorted into a hideous mask as he roared. His long canines hung through the dripping rent in his face and his eyes burned with fury, for Omag could only see the little one's simple observation as mockery.

And such mockery was punishable with death.

Eeda shrieked as she recognized the source of the angry sound, and hurtled across the ten yards that divided her from Omag, her instincts sharpened by fear for the object of the big ape's rage.

Omag stood half again as tall as Eeda, towering over the plants that grew around him and hid the focus of his wrath. He lifted his mighty arms, his clawed fingers curled to strike a murderous blow.

But Eeda flew into the space before him and crying out, she snatched Kado up against her breast just as Omag pounded downward with his fists; the blow glancing off the lithe young female's muscular back.

Omag howled in rage as Eeda raced away, plowing through the thick undergrowth, her little son clutched to her chest.

The big ape gave chase, lurching after her, his head swinging side to side, jaws snapping with great strings of saliva hanging from his damaged mouth. Omag's disease had not then progressed enough to twist his back and bones or force the unusual limping, and sidelong stagger that dogged his later life.

He was still a bull ape in his prime then, and filled with rage he was unstoppable.

Eeda knew this, and the knowledge spurred her flight. Her little one clung to her and made fearful squeaking sounds as she charged out of the underbrush and scrambled up the rough bark of a towering iroko tree.

Omag bellowed his fury and leapt into the branches after her, his longer arms and more powerful body quickly closing the gap between them.

Below them, the other apes had gone silent at the storm of emotion and action, and had quietly moved closer to each other to form tight groups, embracing and watching the high branches as the chase unfolded.

Goro and the blackbacks had settled their dispute some quarter mile distant and were celebrating their courage and prowess beneath a tree, eating fresh green shoots to cool their heated throats.

Many of the other young blackbacks had followed the action, and ambled out of the jungle to recount the mock battle and boast of the fights that were yet to come.

Goro tensed as they crowded around, and gave a powerful shout that caused them all to cower and offer their open hands in friendship. The king panted at his joke and soon the younger apes hooted their merriment in turn, some dropping to their backs as Goro pretended to savage their throats with his fearsome teeth.

Some of these were his sons, all were of his tribe.

The silverback was first to hear Eeda's cries.

He climbed to his feet and stood erect; the action and his stance immediately copied by his underlings. Then Goro stood listening; interpreting the voice he'd heard. A female, but it was not the call made to describe any of the fanged cats or choking snakes that hunted apes.

Also, the riot of noise from the thick jungle continued unabated. If it were a carnivore, it would be silent. Instead, the jungle's inhabitants squawked and screeched at trespassers.

A chase through the treetops, it seemed. There, Goro heard more birds cry out, swooping and dodging to protect their nests.

The danger had not come from outside of the tribe.

Some female was unhappy with her mate, or had refused him and punishment was being meted out—perhaps...

He grunted powerfully, and started moving, leaning forward on his thick arms, strutting on all fours toward the tribe with a force of blackbacks at his heels.

A king's work was never done.

But he would arrive too late, for Omag had chased Eeda far into the high canopy where the trees stretched for the sunlight. In her fear and desperation the female had chosen the tallest tree, and this lapse of judgment meant she soon found herself scrambling upward through the thinnest branches with the treetop shaking.

Omag bellowed, driving her upwards, his rage blinding him to all danger. The branches under him were already cracking from his great weight, but he pushed

on, gripping the ever-thinning trunk with his powerful hands and feet as Eeda screamed above him

He shook the tree as he lunged and snapped at the female's legs, as she made a desperate leap for a tree that grew near...

...and fell. For Omag's contortions upon the swaying trunk had caused her to misgauge the distance of her jump.

Branches slashed at her as Eeda hurtled earthward, grabbing for them, seeking anxiously for any purchase; until she caught hold of one that held her weight. But the sudden jolt of her body's deceleration caused Kado's little fingers to slip through her glossy fur, and without a grip, he fell.

She made a desperate grab for him, but her fingers only brushed his coat.

Eeda watched, horrified, as her son plunged a hundred feet to the jungle floor.

Goro charged out of the forest roaring and pounding his mighty chest as Eeda crouched over her dead infant. The jungle behind the king shook and rumbled as his escort of noisy blackbacks arrived and spread out to take protective positions around the anxious tribe.

Omag dropped out of a tree and squatted by Eeda's side.

The king flashed his fangs as he charged, his momentum causing him to surge against his old challenger, wedging Omag against the tree with his heaving chest.

The crippled ape lowered his head and extended an open hand of friendship and submission.

Stepping back, Goro snarled at Omag's gesture, but brushed the fingers with his own knuckles before he turned to Eeda who knelt whimpering and keening over her son.

The silverback grumbled and leveled a fierce look at Omag as the series of events was described to him. Goro glared at the rest of the tribe who had begun inching closer, reaching out and sniffing the air near the dead infant.

The jealous old queens Oluza and Akaki came forward, moaning and panting with sympathy, but generally approving of Omag's fury at the glossy-haired young female's son. Eeda should have taken better care of her little one and kept him out of Omag's reach.

They scornfully suggested she'd do a better job with her next son for both older females knew that unlike themselves, Eeda was well-favored by the males, and coveted by all.

Their harsh message was: There will be other offspring—mourn this one quickly and move on.

After bending low to sniff the dead infant, Goro looked at Eeda with sadness, and then lumbered away with only a quick glance at Omag.

Whatever the insult, as a bull ape Omag had a right to demand respect from the females and the young whether crippled or not. Goro felt the big male had overreacted, but he would refrain from judgment, lest the other mature blackbacks felt their king did not respect tribal law.

Eeda should have let Omag punish her son, or taken the punishment upon herself. Fleeing from him into the high branches had been rash and only invited the calamity. She should not have been so careless with her child.

The silverback or another male would give her an infant to fill the little one's place after an appropriate period of grieving was observed. Goro paced away, his

sadness lifting. He was certain that the apes of his tribe would support the young mother in her anguish. Life would go on as was the way.

But Eeda was incapable of being practical.

She ignored the generous offers of grooming and comfort from the other females and then further their curious snorts as she lifted the dead babe, and carried it with her, cradling him as if he were still alive.

Chapter 3

Eeda.

Goro's tribe had been on the march for a day, and was now getting close to the berry patch that surrounded Fur-nose's lair; yet one member of the troop lagged behind. She stumbled along after the others, her head low and her eyes haunted. She moved awkwardly, using only one arm to support her forward-leaning gait while the other was folded over her chest to cradle the body of her dead son.

But now all such distinctions of life and death seemed lost, blurred by the tragic circumstances that had wounded the mother's heart. Eeda's eyes were flat now, devoid of their usual gleam, focused inward to the days before when her little Kado rolled and played in the grass.

It was late in the afternoon when the apes approached the lair of Fur-nose. A pair of blackbacks that had gone ahead to scout returned to report that something had changed. The clearing and the tree-nest were quiet, and the entrance to the structure that had always been shuttered and unassailable to them now stood open slightly. A finger's breadth, and no more—a gap that showed a strip of shadow within.

Goro ordered the females to wait with the young at the trees as he moved forward with the blackbacks in a group. These apes that had never been so close to the tree-nest before now approached very cautiously. Those who had survived previous encounters remembered the sting of Fur-nose's thunder-hand, and were reluctant to invite its roar.

Suddenly, a group of adolescent blackbacks were overcome with excitement and charged ahead—pushed to recklessness by their warrior natures. Goro growled low, but the foolhardy group ignored him. And then, they suddenly stopped and veered left and right, barking and snapping at something hidden by the plant life.

The largest of them turned to catch Goro's eye and hoot a warning, as the king pushed through the high brush, snarling and growling at his underlings until he finally thrust through the ring they had formed.

The body of Tobog lay on its face. Old Baho came forward to bend over the larva-riddled corpse to sniff at the dark hole in the back of its head.

"Tobog fought thunder-hand," Omag said from over Goro's massive shoulder, and the silverback grunted in agreement as a curious chorus of barks issued from the assembled males.

"Tobog was brave," Omag said, insolently, and then sipped at saliva that was leaking from his broken face.

“Tobog was stupid,” Goro rumbled, and old Baho panted his assent.

The blackbacks had formed a defensive wall of muscle around Goro while he leaned over the dead ape, and it was Baho who rose from investigating the rotting corpse to say: “Fur-nose was hurt but lived.” He lifted his leathery hand and sniffed the thick skin, before lowering it and pointing at the crushed grasses. “His blood trail washed by many days going there...” He gestured toward the strange tree-nest. “To his lair.”

The king chomped his powerful jaws and ordered three of the blackbacks to stand guard over the females and infants where they were already eating berries and digging into the black earth for grubs.

Goro led his cadre of lieutenants toward the strange structure. Hypervigilant in an old foe’s territory, his silver hair prickled on his mighty shoulders.

None could deny that the tree-nest had changed since they’d last been near. It wasn’t just that the nest was open; the very scent of it was different.

Omag stayed by Tobog’s corpse, ever anticipating the day when the king’s bravery would get him killed—and quietly hoping this was the day.

“Stupid Tobog,” he muttered, echoing Goro’s sentiment.

Omag had been close to Tobog and would have benefited if the young bull ape had come into power. With his death, Omag was left with allies in the aging queens Akaki and Oluza who had been prepared to back dead Tobog in a bid for power over Goro. A new silverback would have rewarded such loyalty, which would have opened a doorway for Omag’s designs on the kingship.

He grunted once, and his disfigured lips flapped and made a farting noise that caused him to glare around angrily, looking for any mockery or dissent; but there were none to witness and deride him—only Tobog’s corpse was near.

Omag growled. He would reward such mockery with death. Already on the trail had he overheard a pair of blackbacks panting happily as they retold the story: *Sip-sip* and the flying infant.

Sip-sip! Omag would not have attempted to punish both the younger males at the same time, but he knew them by name: allies of old Baho, one of them his son. The crippled ape would remember their joke when he caught them alone, and then they would remember his rage.

Omag’s loyalists had told him that such insolence had long been shared among the adolescents and young apes. Likely, Eeda’s son had mimicked them to earn the crippled ape’s fury.

“*Sip-sip!*”

Omag had repeated the sound himself by reflexively sucking at saliva that dangled from his ruined mouth. He bared his fangs when he noticed the dazed, young female passing by him.

Eeda seemed deaf and blind. She walked through the grass toward the tree-nest trailing after Goro and his blackbacks, her dead son still in hand.

Again Goro’s weakness has failed him, Omag thought. The king should have forced the female to end this mourning for the dead infant had begun to stink worse than Tobog!

Goro grunted, and the other apes halted in the long grass to sniff the air. The smell of death lurked around the tree-nest, but something else was loose upon the breeze. Past Fur-nose’s lair toward the beach came a cold and sickly smell that

reminded them of decay and rotten wood—and something else—a metallic taste it brought to mind, of blood.

Nosing the air with his blackbacks, Goro quickly discerned the source—a small cluster of trees of a kind they knew normally offered juicy leaves and succulent bean spears.

Normally, the apes would have fallen upon such a find with relish, but there was something wrong with these in smell and the look—the leaves had wilted. The tree bark was dark and greasy and underlaid with sickly purple veins.

With a very quiet cough, pant and shake of his head, Goro ordered the other apes to avoid the noisome trees as he led them toward the lair of Fur-nose.

The group's courage swelled the closer they got to the tree-nest for thunder-hand had not spoken with smoke and flame, and Fur-nose had not come out to challenge them...

...and by the smell they judged he never would.

Now death inhabited the tree-nest.

Goro's spirits began to rise, for without the thunder-hand to dispute his claim, he would be king of all the land within his territory. He growled deep in his chest to show his satisfaction. This was an ambition he had long desired, but the silverback had quietly feared the thunder-hand when he feared nothing else in the jungle.

With the others, Goro climbed the trees on which Fur-nose's lair rested, then halted on the flat wooden shelf outside the opening. The big blackbacks crowded the platform around him or hung from the edge or in the supporting branches and attempted to peer in.

Eeda had crossed the clearing and climbed over the cluster of blackbacks and onto the flat wooden space before this narrow opening, deaf to the angry grunts and growls that answered each of her movements. She ignored their protests; part of her hoping that one of the annoyed blackbacks would be provoked into killing her.

Her stinging breasts were swollen with milk, and her heart and mind were awash with emotion over the loss of poor Kado. Part of her wished for the thunder-hand to speak so she might feel no more.

There was no way for her to express the pain she felt. A constant ache had kept her from enjoying food and fresh air. Even grooming and the warmth of the sun had left her cold for she could only think of the infant she still held close; its lifeless limbs dangling where she cradled the body between her neck and shoulder.

A reckless impulse surged through her then, and she pushed between old Baho and a blackback lieutenant until she could crouch by the king who cautiously sniffed the gap at the opening to Fur-nose's lair.

Reckless was her action, for this was a place of males; a place for violence and strength that could easily be turned toward her for this transgression. Still Eeda was blind to the consequences or desired them and the dangers that waited inside the nest.

Goro had smelled her approach, but glancing back from the door, he growled, warning his blackbacks to accept her presence. The young mother had been struggling since the death of her infant, and the present situation was too dangerous for normal law to be enforced.

The king or other would give her a child when her madness had departed.

But for now...leave her alone.

Goro gingerly pushed against the flat sheet of wood that covered the opening, and while the pressure enlarged the dark gap on one side, the shifting panel resisted. The younger apes coughed a warning, hair bristling as they suspected Fur-nose himself was inside pushing back.

But the silverback ignored them. The smell of death was strong and told him all. He lowered himself flat on his forearms to investigate a rough piece of green branch that was caught and wedged between the lower edge of the panel and the floor. His thick fingertips closed on it and twisted as his other hand pressed the panel.

The branch pulled free with a *snap*, and the sudden conflicting forces caused the panel to swing inward, opening the doorway wide.

Several younger blackbacks completely lost their nerve as the strong smell of death rolled out of the darkness. These adolescent apes leapt from the platform and charged a safe distance to where they could watch from the grass.

Goro snapped his fangs at their foolishness and to bolster his own courage, for with Baho and Eeda close behind; he moved forward growling. The hair stood up on his neck and shoulders as he angled his broad frame into the cramped opening.

Baho coughed a warning over his king's shoulder.

Fur-nose's body was propped up on a fragile-looking structure of sticks that rested against the far inside wall. He was easy to see despite the shadows. The smell drew the eye, and enough sunlight filtered through the open door and holes high in the walls to show the rest.

Goro bared his fangs and snarled for there was thunder-hand clutched in putrefying fingers.

So close was the terrifying thing—in their old enemy's dead hand still, but both were silent. The bristling Goro moved into the tree-nest with Eeda close behind as Baho and a couple brave apes squeezed in after. Other blackbacks outside the door hooted their worry but remained in place at a distance.

The silverback leaned in to sniff at Fur-nose's legs, and he watched as wriggling maggots boiled out of the swollen flesh. Then gritting his teeth, Goro moved closer still so he might investigate the thunder-hand—a tool that seemed comprised of shiny stone, and wood.

Goro growled at the strange device as Baho and one of his sons first grunted worriedly, and then started whimpering fearfully as their king reached for the hated thing.

Eeda, meanwhile, had grown sick of looking at the rotten corpse of Fur-nose, at the long hair straggling over the blackened flesh and at the torn skin upon its throat and breast. She felt no fear, only sadness to see where Fur-nose's belly was ripped open by birthing maggots.

She squeezed her infant's corpse, and despaired. The thunder-hand was dead like its master, and would not stop her pain.

Then she froze in place as a new scent struck her.

This was something different in that closed place, not death, but life! She smelled blood and breath, and turning feebly in place to catch the scent, her eyes

fell upon an opening in the wall like a cave framed by tree trunks. Blackened, it was, with burned wood, but the scent came to her keen nose from inside it. The blood smell and breath wafted from the darkness within, and Eeda hooted quietly when her eyes detected movement.

She coughed in recognition as a pair of small eyes gleamed out of the shadowy recess. These were locked upon her own as she hooted, and a quiet hooting hiss came back.

Goro drew his fingers away from the thunder-hand and grumbled for silence; then he looked up at the ceiling—listening.

Eeda moved away from the king with her eyes set lovingly upon the small red eyes in the cave for she saw now that a little infant hid in the shadows. Pale it was, and strangely formed, but it tipped its head left and right to mirror Eeda's own curiosity. The others had noticed her movement and their nostrils flared as they realized what had caught her attention.

Goro growled at this new scent, and old Baho coughed repetitively as he moved into place at the silverback's side where together, their noses twitched at the strange smell.

As Eeda drew near, she saw that the little infant's limbs were white and trembling as with cold, and then her breath left her with excitement. She threw dead Kado's corpse aside and leapt toward the cave in the wall, and reaching in, she swept the creature from its perch and into her embrace.

Warmth filled her powerful breast and caught at her throat as the creature's tiny fingers twined in her fur.

Goro grumbled and turned to challenge her, but Eeda answered him fiercely. She shrieked, and snapped her teeth at the silverback with her shoulders half-turned to him, jealously guarding the infant with her body. Screaming she leapt away, first climbing over the shoulders and backs of Goro's surprised lieutenants, and then outside rushing toward the jungle through the long grasses.

The assembled blackbacks snorted uncomfortably and showed their fangs at yet another breach in etiquette in Goro's presence, but all of them were too unsettled by the thunder-hand's proximity to challenge the disrespectful female who was already out of their reach.

Goro shook his head at Eeda's histrionics and followed his thoughts back to the dangerous tool lying in his dead enemy's lap. He reached out with his massive fingers to pluck it from Fur-nose's hand.

Something in its precarious placement, and in the clumsy way the silverback handled the hard thing caused the device to suddenly *clink* loudly, and thunder-hand roared with a deafening *crash*. Flash and smoke blinded the terrified apes in the crowded lair.

Goro dropped the thunder-hand on the floor and turned with his blackbacks to charge out of the tree-nest as a mob.

And somehow, in the mad scramble to escape, the flat panel that hung in the doorway was batted and knocked about so hard that it swung shut.

As the last frightened ape leapt to safety, the door hit the frame hard enough to throw the latch and forever lock them out.

Eeda climbed high into the jungle canopy with her strange discovery until she came to a crossing of stout branches where she quickly built a nest of woven twigs and leaves that she lined with blankets of hanging moss.

The little white ape—for so she thought of him—seemed in form and shape similar to her, with the same number of arms and legs. Male he was, and possessed of a strong grip despite his fragile look.

She settled onto her comfortable bed, and on her back gazed up admiringly at the infant as his great round head rolled against her hairy chest, his sharp fangs gleaming when he opened his mouth wide to cry and fuss.

Eeda shifted positions, elevating her head and shoulders so that she could look down into his eyes. No longer red there in the daylight; they were dark. She could barely contain her excitement, panting and hooting as she cradled the foundling in her arms.

She caught a scent of blood then, so pressed her nose and mouth tight against his belly, legs and body to see if he was injured.

“*Eek—eek!*” the infant chortled, and Eeda was pleased that her snuffling inspection had brought a squeaky giggle from his bony chest. Panting and nodding, Eeda shared the laughter as her mind registered the scent of blood on his breath and thin bare skin. *Musty* he seemed, and she thought of how the poor thing had been closed up in a cave in the tree-nest with the rotting Fur-nose.

His eyes caught hers again and gleamed as they focused. A red heat grew in the orbs all of a sudden, and Eeda’s breath caught as the jungle went quiet all around her. The eyes probed, and the female’s slowing heartbeat grew loud in her ears. Lips going slack, she moved her face toward the infant’s until a wind came up to rock her nest, and she hooted joyfully before licking the little thing’s cheeks and neck.

Gazda. The name had popped into her mind as her eyes were locked on the white ape’s little face.

“*Gazda*,” Eeda repeated as she panted at the infant’s red smile, before her ridged brow furrowed, wondering at the source and meaning of the word.

She coughed and hooted happily then, pointed at her own chest with a sturdy thumb.

“Eeda,” she told her new baby in introduction, lifting him then, and pressing his bright red lips to her swollen breast. She winced as the little thing hungrily pricked the flesh around her nipple with his sharp teeth.

But before she could react to the minor pain, a calm slipped over her, and leaning back she gazed at the bright pink mixture that dripped from the baby’s busy mouth.

“*Gazda*,” she said in the guttural way of her folk, thinking that the name fit well enough. The speech of the apes consisted of crude words and sounds, but much of it was couched in body language, sign and gesture.

If she said “*Ga*” and opened the fingers of either hand, that indicated “bird” to another ape. The word “*zeda*” when linked to a stamping foot meant “snake” to her kind, so that must have been why she had thought of the name. One look at the odd little fellow made her think of birds and snakes, because *Gazda* had the long skinny legs of a bird and the hairless skin of a snake.

He had no fur, save for the dark covering upon his head.

“Gazda,” she repeated, breathing calmly to settle back into her leafy nest. Suddenly, Gazda made a rapid-fire clicking sound before moving over to suck upon the other engorged breast.

At the noise, Eeda was startled a moment, before panting with humor, thinking that she would have chosen their word for “cricket” as a name had she heard that sound first.

The she-ape’s wounded spirit surged with love, as the heartbreak for her dead son Kado departed like a sad breeze.

She watched Gazda nurse and smiled when he glanced up from his meal. Eeda winced as his little teeth nicked her flesh again, before she settled into a pleasant drowse.

Like all things in the jungle, life was too terrible and urgent for Eeda to take anything for granted, and she knew too well the harshness of existence and the fragile relationships that kept things alive. A bittersweet moment of calm was as good as it got for her, but she had learned to relish each she found.

1894-1899 — One to five years of age.

Chapter 4

The Night Ape.

Eeda’s new baby fit into Goro’s tribe more easily than any outsider would have thought. The intelligent anthropoids’ lives revolved around their individual families and the larger group they comprised, and so they craved “proximity” and “numbers” as much as they craved juicy seedpods, mangos or bushbaby meat.

It was understood by all that the group was greater and that all were safer the larger the group grew. Famine or drought was rare in the jungle, so this simple equation of “safety in numbers” gave them all a better chance for survival.

Death was never considered for long or feared, as much as the act of dying was. Once life had left a body, there was no evolutionary advantage to dwelling on what could not be changed. This is why the other apes had been so confounded by Eeda’s utter despair at the loss of her firstborn.

It was natural for the tribe to acknowledge the death of one of its members and in its own way grieve, just as it was understandable that a mother would mourn such a thing; but Eeda’s unsettling insistence on carrying the infant’s corpse around with her had been outrageous.

So for Eeda to adopt an infant, no matter how strange or ugly he may have been, suited the other apes well enough, especially since it ended the young mother’s morbid attachment.

The new baby also appealed to their active minds. The apes were clever creatures with a penchant for problem solving, and so Gazda was a mystery that many of them obsessed about.

Each member of the tribe had something to say about the small creature's origins, but some apes became downright intrusive with their curiosity, and things might have gotten much worse if Eeda had not answered the most inquiring apes with her fighting fangs.

So in time the apes settled back into their daily tribal rhythms, though the other mothers and the young apes remained keen to observe the foundling, but learned to do so from a safe distance.

Baby Gazda's pale skin was lined with thin blue and green veins and drew the eye of any that ventured near; his generally hairless state stood out in stark contrast to his adoptive mother's dark pelt.

True, Gazda was growing a good-sized tuft of black hair atop his round head, but the rest of him was sickly white, and clammy to the touch, much like a snail pulled from its shell.

The foundling's flat face was a horror also, though he did have small bright fangs. They were set in pink gums behind full red lips that pouted between a pointed chin and a nose that was shaped like a bird's beak with tiny curling monkey nostrils.

Despite the obvious differences, the most circumspect ape in the tribe still had to admit that Gazda looked very much like the beasts who had adopted him, though he was of a most pathetic variety.

The aging queens Oluza and Akaki could not resist teasing that Gazda was a monkey and they made several coarse jokes about Eeda's mating habits.

Eeda endured the teasing and the joking because she was enrapt with her little foundling. His true challenge to fit in would come later in life, though, for Gazda was already attracting the attention of superstitious and aggressive blackbacks and adolescents. Those combative forces would have to be dealt with when he matured enough to leave his mother's protective embrace.

Any bullying behavior to one at that delicate age would not be allowed and the majority of females and most of the males would have gladly protected Gazda or any infant in the tribe, as their own.

When he wasn't being a nuisance.

Gazda made a high-pitched cricket noise, usually at night, repeating it until every ape in earshot was annoyed. Old Baho and the aging queens decided some deformation of the infant's lips had caused it.

But since the jungle at night was never a quiet place that complaint soon died down as his clicking faded into the raucous background sounds that usually disturbed their sleep.

However, they were less accepting of his peculiar behavior. Gazda rarely slept, and spent most nights skittering about on the shadowy branches that supported his mother's nest.

Goro the silverback was perturbed by the young one's nocturnal activities. Since the king and the blackbacks were tasked with protecting the tribe, and keeping a watch at all hours; Gazda's activities could be mistaken for a threat.

So, the bull ape had commanded that all apes would sleep at night; but the wisdom of that decree faltered soon after its issuance, when it was learned that Gazda was unable to comprehend it.

Eeda had struggled to comply with the king's edict, but she could not keep Gazda wrapped in her arms while she slept, and he was skilled at escaping her clutches. So she couldn't sleep!

Goro saw that the female was soon exhausted from the watch she was forced to keep against her son's truancy, and her temper was fraying to the point that her struggles with him were growing disruptive and waking other apes in violation of the silverback's command.

So Goro and Baho observed the strange infant over the next few nights in an effort to resolve the situation, and both soon remarked that he didn't click as much while roaming the tree. He was adept at climbing, and showed no interest in wandering far. They also noticed, although they did not discuss it, that while Gazda's eyes were dark during the day, at night they glowed a feral red.

The silverback and Baho recognized the benefit of having a set of busy eyes awake all night in a jungle full of predators, and so the king issued an altered decree that all apes "except for Gazda" would sleep at night.

The tribe accepted this unnecessary piece of legislation without much fuss. For the most part, the apes were rough and ready individuals that soon adapted to the foundling's unusual nocturnal ways.

Many of them even grew used to waking in a sleeping tree and seeing Gazda's fiery red orbs seemingly afloat in the branches overhead and they took some comfort from his watchfulness.

And despite their rugged lives, the apes were gentle at heart and none wished to compound the poor mother's difficulties or confront her with the truth. It appeared that Eeda's foundling was crazy as well as ugly, and for those reasons, was unlikely to live very long.

But Gazda surprised them. As the months passed, the hair on his head grew from a tuft into a sleek black mane that cascaded down his back, and his body darkened considerably with several layers of dirt. The tribe grew optimistic about these improvements but remained cautious.

Despite this slow acceptance, Eeda kept her son away from the others as much as she could, since she would never forget what Omag had done and he was ever lurking about. So, she remained distant when feeding Gazda or preparing for sleep: crouching atop a defensible mound of rock or earth, or building their nest in a safe place high in the trees.

From the ocean on the west, Goro's territory ran 30 miles inland almost as far as the river on the east, and was the same again in distance between northern mountains and southern swamps.

The apes had lived within this range for generations, and rarely found reason to pass beyond its farthest borders where the territory was guarded by wild lands filled with savage predators and poisonous snakes and plants. It was a dangerous and tangled forest impossible for anything not native to it to navigate.

Goro was not about to challenge the wisdom of his forefathers, and preferred protecting the group against the dangers that he knew, over those that he did not.

The silverback like any leader knew success lay in his ability to find food for his tribe, and as long as his territory was bountiful there was no need for change.

He kept his troop moving in a meandering often overlapping, vaguely oval path that led from food source to water and back again with various special places to stop along the way. Because their diet consisted of moisture-rich foods, a water supply was not a necessity, though it was preferred, so their special places usually had access to spring, stream or pond—access but no close proximity since such water sources were watched by predators.

This far to the west the apes had stopped at the Grooming Rock. It was a tall gray block of stone jutting up from the center of a broad, grassy clearing. Goro would climb the rock, as other kings had before him, and watch over his tribe as they fed on thistles, shoots, grains and seeds, fished for termites or indulged in grooming.

Grooming was something that the apes did wherever they pleased, but all felt a special comfort grooming by the rock, under the watchful gaze of their silverback.

They passed Grooming Rock going to or coming from Fur-nose's lair and the great blue water where they fed on berries, nuts and fruits that came into season bathed by the warm ocean breezes.

The open space around Grooming Rock was bordered by neatly spaced trees that offered low branches for the infants to play upon, and for sentinel blackbacks to climb and stand guard.

The ground in the clearing was flat and offered no holes or humps by which predators could hide, so the tribe would linger there on their way—always if it bore fruit and food enough—as the seasons and their wandering only put them in the grooming place some few times a year.

The tribe would while away the days by the rock for feeding and frolic, and the females brought forth young.

The tribe's territory was vast, but to a mother and infant the world was a much smaller place bounded by feeding, resting and playing. Baby Gazda's favorite comfort was to suckle at Eeda's breast while she combed through his hair with her thick fingers.

He'd lie there in her arms while she groomed him, watching her big brown eyes as he drew the pink mixture of blood and milk from her rough teats. Gazda would wind his small fingers in his adoptive mother's sideburns and tug on the long fur the whole while, or he would reach out for her long lips and pull at those.

The loving she-ape would only smile at the minor discomfort, gazing upon him with all the love her savage heart could muster, while hoping he'd soon stop being so clumsy with his teeth.

As Gazda grew stronger, he would smile up at his mother with an impish look, before tugging her fur hard enough to make her gasp. This cheeky abuse was not enough to raise her ire, but she always answered with a playful bout of wrestling between mother and son.

They would pant and hoot their satisfaction as they rolled upon the grass or hung from their perches struggling in mock battle until the she-ape tired.

Eeda had not been prepared for how draining adoptive motherhood could be. She was young, just 12, but she was often exhausted by their daily activities,

sometimes lying dazed upon the ground after Gazda had fed—napping in fits and starts as the tribe foraged around her.

She did not understand this reaction. It had not been so taxing with her firstborn. Then, like the other mothers she had felt relieved after feeding her infant—of course, none of their babies had been like Gazda.

Gazda had developed quickly in his first six months with his adopted tribe, not so much in size, as in toughness. His body thickened, and his skin coarsened. He remained pale, but there was a dense quality to his flesh that drew a sigh of relief from Eeda for he had been like a baby bird before.

But Gazda grew sturdier, and little wonder: he was always eating. In fact, there had been times his mother tried to stop his suckling when she grew tired, but Gazda had worn her down with his insistent strength. Many times as she drowsed after feeding, she would remember that strength and ponder weaning him early.

He moved well on all fours like the other apes, and he'd become so adept at climbing that she had to keep a careful watch when he played to guard against him joining the older apes in the high branches.

Eeda tried to keep him clean by licking the dirt off him, but exposing the odd little body beneath often stopped her. At least some grime kept him from looking like a grub, a look that was exaggerated by his habit of taking daily naps on the black earth in the shadow of broad-leafed plants.

No doubt fatigued by his sleepless nights, Gazda would crawl into the underbrush as the rising sun cut golden swaths through the canopy. Yawning, he crept under the leaves where he'd cover himself with any dead vegetation he could find before stretching out flat and falling asleep.

Eeda had been concerned when this first happened, since he went completely still; but whenever her fears drove her to act; he came awake as her rough hands shook him—sometimes nipping at her in the process. If the tribe was on the move, he would wind his fingers in her fur and sleep where he clung to her back or hung beneath her as she followed the group.

He did not sleep at night at all. Eeda would awaken in her nest with a twitching between her shoulders, and there Gazda would be perched on a nearby branch of the sleeping tree—watching her.

His pale body was plain to see in the dark, and his red eyes flashed when he blinked. She'd scold and he'd scuttle up the tree trunk, his pale torso pressed against the dark bark with his long, thin limbs splayed like a spider's.

She'd been unsettled at first, but in the time since, like any mother of an unusual child; she simply grumbled at his antics before rolling over and going back to sleep.

The other apes rarely complained about his strange ways anymore, or about Eeda's, but had started referring to Gazda as a *night ape*.

Something that only a mother could love.

As Eeda did, so much that the concerns of the tribe were often lost to her. She had Gazda to care for, and she would not lose another infant to chance, or to a wicked ape's fury.

So her child slept in the day? There were worse things an infant could do, and if the tribe was on the move, she never lagged while carrying him.

Chapter 5

Grooming Rock.

As time continued forward and the years passed, Eeda came to relish Gazda's daily naps beneath the green for they allowed her to turn outward for interaction and share in grooming with the other members of the tribe. The apes would gather in the undergrowth with the blackbacks sharing sentry duties, and there they would communally clean one another's thick coats from head to toe.

So if day-to-day grooming was a simple, shared sigh of relief, then doing it at the Grooming Rock provided a comfort far more spiritual. Under the watchful eye of their king and blackback guards, the anthropoids would pick through each others pelts hair by hair, enjoying the physical contact and the emotional restoration that came from the ritual.

The blackbacks took part in the grooming, too, but often preferred the company of the other males, seeming aloof within their aggressive culture of competition—unless they were at the Grooming Rock. There every member was sure to share in turn.

Even Goro could not resist joining in at such times. He would guard the tribe awhile, until his gruff demeanor softened and then disappeared with a happy hoot, as he climbed down from the Grooming Rock to join in the activity.

Then the day would grow hazy as his thoughts shifted into a blissful state while a trio of she-apes picked his fur clean of insects, dead skin and dirt. But, the grooming was not exclusive to pairs or mating, and was shared by all members of the tribe.

After Goro had been preened by his handmaidens, the other males would often take a turn, giving and receiving a release of calm and comfort as they took up positions around the silverback's mighty bulk.

Even Omag took a turn, and with his ambitious blackback supporters would join the ritual of cleaning King Goro's fur. Of course, the crippled ape had other reasons for participating because he did not like to be groomed himself. The disease that was eating a hole in his face, was also causing his fur to fall out and the raw skin beneath to form sensitive lesions that when touched caused him tremendous pain.

Omag could still observe his duty and groom the silverback, though Goro would have been dismayed if he had seen the looks his old challenger shared with the aging queens as they performed their duty.

Akaki and Oluza were both suckling infants at this time, but knew that after these offspring or the next, their milk would dry up and they'd be of no use to Goro.

So, forming alliances with "lesser" males was all they could do to stay ahead of the tribe's naive young she-apes that were maturing, and easily capturing the interest of the blackbacks and of Goro the king.

Despite his illness, Omag was still a powerful male with silver hairs on his muscular shoulders and back. His face and chest grew more ravaged by the day,

but male apes were judged by their strength, not beauty, and it was clear that the crippled ape's physical deficiencies were compensated by a ruthless mental acuity. So, when Omag was not away hunting and eating the sickly flesh he craved, he'd squat near Akaki and Oluza, and encourage their dreams of power.

They would find a place to talk away from the Grooming Rock and the king. Away from Goro either Akaki or Oluza—or sometimes both would offer to mate with Omag, but the crippled beast had an appetite for something far more subtle and primal than sex.

"Goro is weak," Oluza said in the grass by the trees. Of the aging queens, she was the most reckless with her words.

"Challenge him Omag," Akaki would say, nudging his great shoulder, but Sip-sip, for so the queens called him in their thoughts, would only shrug.

They secretly used the name as did others in the tribe because there were few who liked or trusted the crippled ape, and fewer who had not suffered during his rages. Additionally, the queens had long suspected the true nature of his ill-favored cravings, and scorned him for it.

"Not Omag," he lisped, sputtering as saliva dripped from his ragged mouth, before pointing at the young males at play. Among them, a large sturdy ape of six years led the games. "Ulok son of Goro, child of Akaki must challenge."

"Ulok is young," Oluza said jealously, munching a fistful of grass.

"It will take him many years to be so strong," Akaki added, heart racing to know that her own offspring might hold the key to power. "But he is Goro's son."

"He is Goro's in body," Omag said, his tongue falling out of the hideous hole in his face to lick at spittle that dribbled from his jaw. "But Omag speaks to Ulok's head and Ulok eats Omag's sweet words like fruit. Omag makes him fat with pride."

The aging queens nodded before Akaki yelped when her drowsing infant bit her nipple. She dealt a heavy slap with her leathery hand and the little she-ape squeaked.

"So Omag is like Ulok's father," Oluza grunted, her lips rolled away from her monstrous canines as she nodded her head up and down panting rapidly.

"Ulok is weak of heart, and strong in body like Goro," Omag said, climbing to his feet. He leaned forward on his powerful fists. "Ulok will be king for Omag—*sip! Sip!*" The disfigured ape slurped, and his deformed lips writhed. He turned and scowled at Akaki and Oluza, daring them to tease him. "Tell Ulok to love Omag and you will be Ulok's queens."

Omag flinched when the sickly white foundling, Gazda, suddenly appeared from behind a nearby tree. He was clinging to the rough bark by his fingers and toes, and making a repetitive clicking noise.

Omag glared up at the young one and bared his fighting fangs as Akaki and Oluza rose beside him, the long fur on their necks and shoulders bristling.

While the group had grown to accept the foundling, his appearance was still unnerving. This was Goro's work again; the king should not have allowed the weakling into the tribe.

Omag leaned toward Gazda and barked up at where the strange creature perched, his eyes burning from under his thick brow ridge.

But, Eeda swung out of the branches overhead and picked the little white ape up in her arms. She glared at Omag before snatching at a hanging vine and swinging away with her son.

Omag watched them go, his lips wrinkling over sharp yellow teeth. He had seen the hatred in the she-ape's eyes—the disrespect. The old queens had seen it too.

“Gazda is sick! Sleeps in day and chases the moon at night,” Akaki said, reaching over to groom Oluza's shoulder. Oluza was some years older and had a higher ranking in the group. “He is a *night ape!*”

“Did the night ape hear us talk?” Oluza asked, glancing up at *Sip-sip*. “Or his mother?”

“The *night ape* is too young,” panted Omag, appreciating Akaki's humor. He'd also seen Gazda sleep in the day when the tribe was picking fruit and living life, and had seen him up in the night, sitting in the dark, or like a white frog on a tree trunk. *Night ape*. “Eeda hates Omag, but only thinks of Gazda.”

The crippled ape hated Eeda's foundling, but like all of his kind, Omag was plagued with curiosity that sometimes overwhelmed all other instincts. It had not taken long for him to discover the night ape's strange day-weakness.

Omag had pondered the orphan many times before, and had fantasized about hunting him, and eating his flesh. The night ape's pale body reminded him of the *bone-faces* that lived across the river. They were hairless and pale, and similar to Gazda behind their masks and beneath their strange coverings of other animals' skins.

Omag relished the flesh of their females so much that he often awoke from passionate dreams of devouring them. He had been hunting them for years now, at any opportunity.

Their lair lay days of travel from the Grooming Rock, past the eastern border of Goro's land where they lived in many huts within a large ring of sharp sticks. Omag went there when the craving for the flesh grew too strong to deny, though he could not stay long so far from his own tribe.

It was easier to satisfy his appetites when Goro's group foraged eastward for bananas, shortening his journey to the bone-faces. If the tribe ever lingered near, then Omag could make the trip so often that he could grow fat on the mottled pink flesh before the other apes resumed their trek.

Omag caught the bone-faced females at the river where they'd kneel by the low water to drink. Always their eyes would glance this way and that as they trembled in sickness and fear. They smelled of decay and in places their skin had opened and wriggled with tasty maggots.

Man and woman, all would come to the river, and while the males dabbed mud on their wounds and kept watch, the females sank in the brown running water and scraped at their damaged skins with their fingers.

Omag liked to wait until they came up on the muddy bank, where they'd look around in fear coming closer to the thick bushes in which he hid. Their wounds would be clean and red in dappled hides of shiny scar tissue and decay.

Omag would catch the slowest of them in his powerful arms and the rest would run away in terror to hide behind their wall of sticks. The crippled ape would carry his prey to a stone lair he kept nearby where he could eat them at his leisure.

Their flesh was succulent around the rosy mounds of purple rot, and their cries of terror and pain pleased him as he gorged.

A sudden yearning for the taste of such raw pink flesh caused his heart to race and his muscles to swell with desire. Omag turned to the aging queens and then rising upright on his legs, for a second the ravaging disease melted away from him and with arching back he pounded upon his chest.

The aging queens cowered before him as he drummed, until the sudden outburst ended.

Eeda carried Gazda away from Omag and the aging queens. She hated the crippled beast and did not like the burning looks that he and the old females gave her son.

Gazda had wound his fingers in the hair on her shoulders as the she-ape swung hand over hand through the trees until she spotted a group of her contemporaries at the north side of the clearing. The females were crouched in the high grass and leafy underbrush, huddled around a tall, hard mound of earth.

She landed near them with a *thump* and set Gazda at her side. He quickly scrambled over and tackled a pair of youngsters that were playing by the mound.

The other females grunted and extended their open hands in greeting before Eeda left to search in the brush for a termite stick. She quickly selected a long, rigid stem that she carried over to the mound where the other mothers were carefully inserting their own sticks into small holes in the hard-packed dirt.

Then after a few cautious shakes of the hand, they'd slowly draw their sticks out again with many plump warrior termites clinging to them. There'd be a celebratory pant and hoot, before the she-apes plucked the insects off with their dexterous lips.

Eeda joined in, grunting several times for Gazda to come closer for she wished to teach him this method of collecting food. He resisted her though. Having been bitten by the insects during previous lessons, he had grown shy of eating the aggressive delicacies.

Eeda knew the sting well herself, but termites were delicious.

Surprisingly, as Gazda had aged, he often refused to do more than mouth any of the foods that the other apes ate. He'd chew up the bugs, nuts and fruits—even monkey meat—but he wouldn't swallow, seemingly content to spit them out, and return to feeding at his mother's breast. He was not the only young one that still suckled—many stayed at the breast past their fifth year—so she was pleased that he tried the solid foods at all.

His mother was already preparing to wean him, and had taken to shortening his time at her breast. This led to disputes, but as Gazda had grown, Eeda no longer feared being firm with him. Despite his fragile look, he was sturdily built, and could take all of her strength to repulse if he insisted on milk.

In time he would learn, and begin to accept other foods.

Eeda sat with the other mothers fishing for termites as her strange white infant rough-housed with his young friends: Ooso, a little she-ape that everyone had thought too sickly and small to survive; and Kagoon, a gangly young male who had fallen from a tree and onto his head and still showed no sign of recovering his wits.

Eeda approved of these playmates for few in the tribe had friendly dealings with her child. These ones he counted close were also outsiders and in ways were different, too. Still, she knew that Gazda could learn much from such interactions, and like any ape he needed to know where he fit in with the tribe.

The little ones wrestled and picked up sticks and beat them on the trees. Ooso panted happily while Gazda and Kagoon drummed on their chests.

Some distance from them, a large group of youngsters played and watched the adolescents who crowded around some blackbacks. Each group coveted the powers of the apes higher in the chain, mimicking and making heroes of those they wished to be.

The mothers enjoyed the break. Nuklo, who sat closest to Eeda, suddenly pushed at the round copper-tinged head that fed at her breast. It was her youngster Poomak's reddish hair that had caused his mother's social undoing, for he was suspected to have come from a union between Nuklo and a wandering red-capped blackback who had haunted the borders of Goro's territory for months until the king and his lieutenants chased him away.

Nuklo had told the king she had not mated with the stranger, but when Poomak was born the she-ape had been unable to explain his red crest, and the fact that it did not match the thick black fur on the males in Goro's tribe.

The other apes had looked down on her after that, and she was eventually forced to take up with Wogo, an unpopular blackback whose relative small size made him no threat to the king, or other ambitious apes.

This shift in social station had left Nuklo and Eeda in like status because of the dubious parentage of their offspring—even though Eeda was still considered one of Goro's mates should he wish to claim her.

Chapter 6

Mates and Playmates.

Attracted by the loud shrieks of horseplay, Goro turned from dining on juicy leaves to watch the little ones play. He had climbed down from his place atop the Grooming Rock to eat. His enormous body required constant feeding, and the plants with the circular leaves that grew in abundance beneath the rock were his favorite.

As they often did, the silverback's eyes slid over to where Eeda sat fishing for termites with a handful of females. Goro as king had mated the most beautiful she-apes in the tribe and was father to many of the young that gamboled about in the high grasses. He undertook his duties as master of his mates, though some among them he favored and from them he would eventually name his own queens.

Females so honored carried the title for all their lives, and so the aging queens of Baho were still extant within the tribe: Oluza and Akaki, though they were almost past their mating time.

Goro had no interest in the dour Oluza the eldest, but had sired a young male Ulok and a female with the latter. Despite her age, Akaki still cut a fine figure among the other females and she was persuasive.

The blackbacks accepted Goro's leadership and his rules of engagement under tribal law. The silverback had the right to any female in the tribe but rarely took the mates of others because that caused unnecessary tension—except when it came to his kingship. It was well known that challengers to Goro's leadership often found their mates in his embrace.

Males were free to take mates that did not belong to Goro and would accept them. They could also leave with their females and start their own bands and be king if there was unoccupied territory available.

However, the tribe was important to all its members and most when given the chance would stay under Goro's protection for a larger group was a safer place in the dangerous jungle.

Many males enjoyed this arrangement and would support Goro's leadership if a potential challenger for the crown was not to their liking. These trusted lieutenants would also go with the king to protect the borders.

At other times these males would go singly or in groups to search for females from other tribes that they could steal as mates and return as victors. Goro would rarely challenge them for their new brides.

Goro had always thought Eeda a fine-looking creature that would make a good mother. It hadn't surprised him that she'd adopted Gazda to replace the infant she'd lost. The fact that she'd done so well with what was obviously a sickly waif only encouraged his admiration of her.

It was good for the tribe to have females such as Eeda.

He had mated with her long ago as had other males, before any had wanted to lay claim to her. Those couplings had resulted in her first child's birth, but he had died before any had recognized his father in him.

Since then, Eeda had been busy with the special requirements of raising an ape like Gazda, and so she had not offered Goro mating overtures or reciprocated any of his own.

That was no matter. There were several females that the king regularly mated with. He would give Eeda the time she needed.

Goro watched the ferns and bushes shaking at the edge of the forest, and saw her little foundling's white flesh flash behind some leaves in the undergrowth. The silverback was pleased that Gazda had survived, and he was impressed by the youngster's spirit, who was quick to play at hunting games, fast and strong when required; and he seemed intelligent.

Then the silverback's attention was drawn to the simple, noisy shambling of Kagoon, and he sighed. If Gazda's friend did not start learning faster, he might be a drain upon the tribe. The king could not resist a glance at Omag who had gone off by himself to sit with his arms wrapped around his mangy chest. He knew the crippled ape would think that, too. That Kagoon might be a luxury the group could not afford.

"But Kagoon will make an excellent blackback, so long as he does not have political ambitions," Goro grunted quietly before thinking. *Then again, the damage to his head might serve him well in both cases.* The king smiled and panted

mischievously at his own jest before rolling from elbow to elbow casting about the long grass for Baho. The old silverback would appreciate the joke.

Poomak screeched wildly as he bowled Gazda and his friends over. The four apes rolled in the underbrush before leaping up and grappling; the three males making joyful coughing sounds as little Ooso escaped the crush. Some distance from them, she stamped her feet and barked before darting into the thick brush that edged the clearing where their mothers fished for termites.

The little males panted happily as they quickly picked up sticks, and shook them in their fists, shrieking and hooting as they chased after Ooso.

“Great hunters,” Nuklo said, wincing as she licked angry termites off her stick.

“Little Ooso is the monkey today,” Eeda said, savoring a mouthful of insects before leaning over and grooming the thick fur on her friend’s back.

“Better than Kagoon,” Nuklo answered, moaning with pleasure as Eeda scraped dried skin from between her shoulders. “He’s not smart enough...”

“To be a monkey!” Eeda laughed, and the pair panted in good humor.

Meanwhile, the three young males had come to a halt just inside the thick brush. Gazda was crouched in the lead, holding a sharp stick in his hand. He looked to his friends and nodded quickly, before pointing to his left and right.

All of the apes in Goro’s tribe enjoyed eating monkey meat, and the hunt was an important part of their lives. Everyone of age could take part, but it was the blackback males who made the most of it, often teaming up and using their techniques for cornering and killing prey on larger animals.

However, such projects met with varied success. On one occasion, a reckless young blackback had been killed when a “bushbuck” he chased into a thick grove of saplings had turned out to be a leopard.

Hunting and killing were skills the apes learned and used to fetch meat, but also to protect the borders. There were other tribes of apes, and there were gorilla territories in the south and the smaller but vicious chimpanzee bands that ranged the north. Those border skirmishes reinforced Goro’s dominion over his lands but often produced meat for the tribe.

So, Gazda and the other little apes played at hunting, with one of their number performing the role of prey. Ooso was smallest and no match for the strength of her male friends but she was very nimble and quick, and her mind was fleeter than theirs also.

Except for Gazda’s. He was a very intelligent ape, deformed though he was, but it was this meeting of minds that had made them such fast friends.

Poomak crept forward on Gazda’s left when the night ape nodded, and Kagoon panted happily before rushing off to his right.

Gazda knelt low then with his stick-spear ready, knowing that Poomak and Kagoon would flush their prey out of the thick vegetation and chase it toward Gazda and into the waiting trap.

He sniffed the air and caught a scent, but he did not have time to react.

Something hard struck him in the back of the head, and he tumbled forward; his senses reeling. But Gazda came up quickly to see Ooso standing just back of where he had been, a thick branch gripped in her little hands like a club.

“Gazda is the monkey now!” she cried, and then panted happily, crouching low and mimicking Gazda’s surprised face.

“Ooso tricked Gazda!” he said, rushing forward and leaping onto his little friend. The pair wrestled until Poomak and Kagoon crept out of the thick verdure.

“Ooso caught the *night* monkey!” the she-ape teased from where Gazda held her against the ground.

He nipped at her arm and she shrieked playfully as they got to their feet.

“Ooso is smarter than you!” She beat her hands against the earth and the young males growled, turning their noses up disdainfully at the little she-ape’s disrespect.

The jungle went quiet...

Gazda looked to Ooso, who glanced at Poomak and Kagoon.

A deafening roar shook the trees around them, caused the earth to tremble underfoot as the youngsters sprinted toward their mothers. The she-apes were already speeding to collect them in their arms.

The others in the tribe had also abandoned the termite mound or foraging, and were climbing the surrounding trees to get away from the ground, for they had recognized the sound, and knew the rule: The jungle belonged to “Magnuh” if his wandering brought him near.

Gazda leapt into his mother’s arms and she swung up into the trees with the other apes.

Magnuh roared again, and the sound crashed through the forest, echoing in the maze of trees like a thunderstorm.

Eeda reached a safe height and then found a shady hollow against the trunk where she pressed her back. Gazda watched the other clambering apes in the trees around them, and saw Ooso’s little face peering over her mother, Amak’s, shoulder where they climbed even higher.

None dared to challenge the bull elephant Magnuh—not even Goro, though no one within the tribe could say what would happen if those powerful beasts were to battle.

Goro refused to speculate knowing that there was nothing to gain from such a fight, and if any ape in the tribe wished to challenge the elephant, he would be only too happy to watch. The silverback did not see the monster as a rival for his power but instead viewed encounters with Magnuh as something to be avoided or endured like a thunderstorm.

Magnuh and his kind followed an ancient elephant trail that cut a wandering path through Goro’s land, entering on the east and meandering the thick jungle forest before exiting again back the way they had come near the river. They lived on the grassy plateau that swept up into the mountains, and only returned to the jungle when certain fruits and trees were ripe.

Magnuh was a giant. The bull elephant stood some 13 feet tall at the shoulder and weighed 6 tons. The creature had terrorized the landscape for 20 years and without any natural enemies to prey upon him, promised to terrorize for decades to come.

The bull elephant roamed the jungle in search of fruit and lush vegetation, raking and thrashing at the undergrowth with his ten-foot tusks, or knocking over the thickest of trees with the brow of his mountainous head—all while crushing the life out of anything dull-witted or slow enough to get in his way.

Magnuh was a rogue, and a curse to others of his kind, wounding and killing any bull elephant that challenged him for the females of the various herds that traveled the inland plateau. Once he'd finally driven off all other competition, Magnuh would take supremacy over the herds as the cows came into heat.

He would go mad with desire and follow them as they traveled migratory patterns leading east to the grassy plains inland and back again to the jungle as the seasons dictated.

Magnuh protected the herd more by reputation than intent, and so his harsh rule was rarely challenged. The very sight of him in a rage protected the females and their calves from the fiercest of predators.

Few of the apes had done more than catch a glimpse of him—a deafening mountain of flesh hurtling through the dense jungle.

Old Baho, as the tribe's *former* silverback could have been more accurately called a “whiteback” since in the years following his kingship the thick covering of silver hairs on his shoulders and hips that denoted his authority had gone as white as the long sideburns that trailed to either side of his scarred and wrinkled face.

But there was no such term since a dethroned king was traditionally exiled or killed, and any aging male to have worn the mantle would not give up the name “silverback” without a fight.

So the old silverback Baho would often sit and share his wisdom with the younger apes, telling stories of his time as king, and he had always warned them of Magnuh.

“The beast hates apes,” Baho said later, chewing a mouthful of worms as Gazda and the other young apes now well past their fourth year sat raptly listening. “He has legs like tree trunks, and his body is made of stone—and he has one long arm that stretches out from between his eyes.” Baho used his own arm to illustrate and frighten the youngest listeners. “And he has fangs so long you will be dead before he can taste you.”

The young apes listening to Baho shivered as he spoke.

“If you see him first, you will know, Magnuh,” Baho said, crushing a nut between his cracked molars. “If he sees *you* first...” The old silverback intoned matter-of-factly, “You will be dead.”

The youngsters squawked and ran shrieking back to their mothers, who in turn chattered angrily, scolding Baho for telling such tales to their little ones.

Was life in the jungle not terrifying enough?

1900-1902 — Six to eight years of age.

Chapter 7

Friends and Enemies.

Time passed and Gazda grew, but at the core he remained a puzzle to his adoptive tribe, and a mystery to himself. He knew he was different, but no one—least of all him—understood why.

In his fifth year, many of the other apes remarked how much he'd changed. He was still ugly, but all remembered how he had looked when he'd first been brought into the tribe. Then, his flesh had been like white overripe melon, and his facial features soft and undefined. He had been like a dead tree frog then, better for eating than raising as an ape.

Over the years, his features and flesh had refined and grown firm. He still had a puny nose, eyes and mouth, freakishly small compared to the expansive features on the apes around him, and the same disparity applied to his limbs that were stick-like and spindly when contrasted with the muscular arms and legs of the apes.

But he seemed more tangible and distinct to his anthropoid companions.

As his hair had grown in long and black on his head, it was joined by two horizontal tufts over his eyes, and few in the tribe could miss the night ape's similarity to their old enemy Fur-nose and so they began to watch Gazda's nose and mouth expectantly—waiting for the characteristic hair to sprout.

As his fifth year came to an end, still nothing had grown there, but the apes waited and watched.

One odd thing had stood out to Eeda, for only a mother could notice such a development, but a scar had appeared that ran across Gazda's forehead just up by the hairline. It stood out to her for neither she nor her son could remember an injury that would account for such a scar.

She noticed it during one of her weaning sessions. The dark red line had blazed angrily against his white skin as he fought for access to her milk.

The mark had faded with the strong emotion; but the scar remained ever after, and Eeda always pondered it when she groomed him, or at other times when it flared up again with his passions.

She was still very protective of him, and would fly into a rage if her son was the object of too much scrutiny. The she-ape could put on a display of strength that would shame a silverback, stamping her feet and tearing at the jungle plants with such fury, that on occasion Goro was brought rumbling from his circle of grooming courtiers determined to show the tribe that he was firmly in charge of the unruly female.

He disliked using violence upon any of the she-apes, but few escaped the dirt, stones and sticks that he'd fire in every direction during his titanic shows of strength.

But with Eeda, the silverback often withheld his judgment, and with the tribe would watch the mother protect Gazda and redefine her offspring's borders. Goro could see that the female's wrath would only be fed by his own, and so he held his ground and allowed her rage to dissipate in the display rather than force a dangerous, and possibly lethal, confrontation.

Such outbursts of emotion were not uncommon in a tribe of apes, though they were usually muted when the king made his displeasure known.

“Another sign that his time is coming to an end,” Omag and the aging queens whispered among themselves as they sat grooming young Ulok in a protective circle of loyal blackbacks. “The king respects a *she-ape*’s display!”

“Goro is a she-ape,” Ulok snapped, and then he screamed as Omag savagely bit into his muscular shoulder.

Slinking aside to rub at the wound, the shamed young male gaped at his crippled mentor.

“*Ulok* stupid!” Omag snarled. “Dumb monkey cannot be a king.”

Ulok trembled, hanging his head and slumping against his attendants. Akaki and Oluza watched Omag’s cunning, bloodshot eyes study the youth. Then, he grunted loudly, and with a hoot grabbed the young ape and rolled with him on the grass until Ulok was laughing and the tension bled away into the hot day.

“Ulok must not speak of Goro until Omag says,” Omag cautioned quietly, where he lay upon the grass with the adolescent pinned beneath him. “When Ulok is big and strong, then Ulok can call Goro whatever he wants.”

“Please, father. Ulok has much to learn,” the younger ape pleaded, before attempting to shake off Omag’s grip, and surprising the crippled ape when he almost succeeded. Omag was shocked by the show of strength. Perhaps the time was coming sooner than expected.

He panted good-naturedly and rolled off Ulok as the aging queens moved in to groom the young blackback. They crooned and complimented the adolescent, and Ulok’s heart swelled with pride.

Omag sat apart from them, his diseased flesh inflamed by the wrestling and physical contact, but he was very pleased. Ulok was learning quickly. Indeed, Goro was like a she-ape.

Though Omag had to admit that Eeda was a special case, for even he had learned to avoid her anger. Especially, when it concerned her sleeping son.

A sure way to awaken the she-ape’s most concentrated fury was to draw attention to Gazda’s sleeping habits. The entire tribe had always found the night ape’s day-time sleeping odd, and some considered it a sign of laziness, and a few went so far as to say as much.

Those apes Eeda met with her fighting fangs and her powerful arms. They were given a beating and tufts of hair were sure to fly.

Fewer still took it upon themselves to find the places where her son would hide and sleep, and there attempt to wake him on their own.

Any who so provoked Gazda soon regretted the action for then the night ape’s mother became an incarnation of maternal retribution. She viciously attacked whoever or whatever dared to molest her son and rarely stopped before blood flowed.

Indeed, Omag had learned that lesson himself one day when his curiosity over Gazda’s napping had caused him to search the sleeping creature out.

He did not find him, but he must have wandered near his hiding place for out of the trees came Eeda in full fury. She had been guarding the night ape from behind some elevated blind.

The she-ape had landed on Omag’s blistered back like a leopard and tore at him with her claws and teeth. Indeed, so severe had been the initial mauling that the

crippled ape had imagined that very thing was occurring and like a little infant had run shrieking in terror.

When Goro and the blackbacks later investigated Omag's claims and found "the big cat" to be a she-ape, many panted in humor and others with disrespect at the crippled bull ape as he huddled on a high branch with the old queen's gingerly tending his wounds.

Disrespect, Omag remembered overhearing from the blackbacks who had joked with Goro and old Baho beneath the tree, and somewhere in the laughter he had heard someone quietly make the *Sip-sip* noise.

SIP-SIP! Despite the fury that slander always stirred in him, and the suffocating shame that Oluza and Akaki had tried to groom away, Omag had yet to launch any reprisal against Eeda—though he had vowed he would. But Omag was patient...

Eeda shielded her son from the other apes as she always had because their curiosity was annoying, and their accusations of his laziness unfounded.

They did not know that Gazda slept in the day because he was becoming a great hunter at night. Not long after she had started weaning him, he had begun returning from his nocturnal wandering smelling of flesh and blood and sometimes bearing gifts for her.

The night ape, as all the others in the tribe now called him, was a hunter and he did not fear the dark.

Small things he brought to share: frogs and toads and snakes, and furry things that leapt from tree to tree and from that flesh had his mother grown strong.

The tribe, even Goro, hunted in the day for only then could they see their prey; but also it was because they feared the beasts that roamed the night.

Eeda would always fret over her son even though he limited his stalking to the sleeping trees, but how could she be anything but proud?

After all, why did the apes sleep in the branches of trees at night? Because they feared the carnivores that sniffed around the roots.

And the tribe only rested on the ground in the morning and when the day was at its hottest because they knew the hunters were asleep—asleep like her son—and resting for the night to come.

One day in his sixth year, Gazda and his friends Ooso, Kagoon and Poomak were swinging in the branches that hung low over the tribe. The apes had stopped in their southern-trending migration to break apart a gigantic fallen tree that was rotten and filled with tasty grubs.

The sun was directly overhead in an azure sky, but was lost to the dining anthropoids, as barely a glimmer of its burning rays could make it past the thick green canopy that grew upward in successive layers of dense foliage.

After the night ape's playmates had eaten their fill of the squirming delicacy, Gazda had endured a round of taunts for passing on the tasty treats.

The teasing faded quickly since all were young, and his friends knew Gazda had a powerful bite that his mother had taught him to use freely in his own defense. Also, they were all outsiders to the tribe, and had themselves been objects of scorn, so they rarely bullied one another in a prolonged or mean-spirited way.

The youngsters had climbed into the trees for a game of tag, and they were soon a quarter mile from the others, leaping from branch to branch until they came

upon a line of tall moss-covered rocks that rose up from a misty profusion of ferns growing around a circular pool that was 20 feet across.

They dropped silently to the black earth by the pond, and started wrestling to determine who would be the first allowed to drink.

In the end, they broke from their play and all but Gazda crouched at the water's edge to slurp up the cool, clear liquid. Their friend, the night ape, had never been comfortable around such an abundance of water, and as an infant had run screaming whenever his mother had tried to get him to drink.

Gazda did not know why he disliked the open water, but approaching it had always caused his heart to race, and made him anxious and feel smothered. This was a strange response when considering that unlike the tribe, he enjoyed the rain when it came and the mists that it produced.

The other apes were miserable in such circumstances, and would grimly endure the precipitation crowded beneath crude umbrellas they fashioned from the large leaves of the elephant plant.

Gazda was not bothered if the raindrops ran over his slick body when he was out at night. In fact, the fog and rain helped obscure his white skin while he was at his hunting games.

But for some reason silent pools like the one by which his companions knelt always sucked at him, always seeming to draw him toward their darkest depths—even there where he crouched well back upon an earthy bank.

“Drink!” Ooso peeped, and the others chimed in, leaning forward to lap at the pool.

“Drink, Gazda,” Poomak encouraged. “You are thirsty...”

“Look at Kagoon!” Kagoon said, rising up on his fingertips and toes to stare at the reflections in the water's surface.

“Kagoon is a *bushbaby!*” Ooso chortled. “Gazda too! Come see your face!” And she slapped the water, sending a spray into Kagoon and Poomak's eyes. Immediately, all three were rolling and wrestling again.

Gazda was very curious about this strange phenomenon that allowed the others to see themselves, and he had often been challenged to look at his own face upon the water's surface. He knew that water reflected the jungle trees and plants that grew around it, and he'd seen curious inverted apes running in reflections, but he'd never gone close enough to see his own face.

He was curious to know what he looked like because so many had said he was ugly, and he already knew his body was different from the other apes.

Perhaps he was afraid to see just how different he was from the others in his adoptive tribe.

But the thought brought back his anxiety and the water pulled at him again. His heart pounded, and he gasped, caught between his burning curiosity and fear.

When his friends broke from their play to kneel by the pond and drink again, Gazda took a deep breath and crept closer with jaw clenched.

He set his trembling hands on Ooso's furry back and on Kagoon's, and grinding his teeth against his racing heart; he rose up and peered over his friends' shoulders. There they were, each of them, the faces of Poomak, Ooso and Kagoon floating on the pond like in a dream.

But where was Gazda's face?

Ooso whistled, craning her neck to look up at her friend, realizing what he was doing and she turned back to the water, tilting her head as she squinted at the reflections.

“Where is Gazda?” Ooso asked, and the others also leaned forward on their arms to search the pond’s surface.

“Gazda! Lean over more and look,” Ooso scolded, as Gazda crawled forward on shaking limbs until he was perched entirely upon her back and on Kagoon’s.

There was nothing on the water but his friends’ puzzled faces.

“Where is Gazda?” Poomak blurted, nudging Ooso.

A sudden shrill scream rent the jungle and the young apes by the pond tensed every muscle... and then moved!

Gazda leapt forward away from the sound and over the water, as Ooso and Kagoon broke to the right and Poomak bolted to the left.

What happened next was lost in part to Gazda for his mind was paralyzed by fear. He saw the water there beneath him, a great flat reflection of the high trees above him—behind.

But still there was no Gazda mirrored there.

Another vicious roar froze his heart—a leopard! NO!

Then came a shriek of pain and a great fear gripped him.

His friends!

A strange sensation came over him that dispelled the instant terror of the carnivore’s cry—and his panicked sense of sinking was replaced by another. Surging outward from his heart a heat rose up to buoy him, and Gazda did not fall!

He moved through the air! His vision flickered and his ears echoed uncannily—noises were everywhere beset by a sharp clicking noise—and over this came the splashing, and growling as a beast attacked its prey.

Gazda’s friends.

The night ape burned with anger, but he could not turn or look back or help. For a moment, it was like he had no substance, as if he were made of drifting mist, and then for a fleeting second it appeared that his hands had changed; his fingers had grown long and spindly with shadows of dark skin between them.

And just as suddenly his vision and hearing returned to normal.

The night ape glanced back across the water, and saw a yellow and black-spotted leopard dragging poor Poomak into the undergrowth.

Gazda gripped the thin branches of a tree that grew on the far side of the pool some 25 feet from where he had last crouched with his friends. His heart was racing and a clammy sweat covered his naked limbs, but his breath was slowing.

He cast about fearfully for his other friends and was relieved to see that Ooso and Kagoon had leapt over the rocks and into the trees by the ferns, and there they clung in the heights noisily scolding the leopard.

The night ape scurried along the branches to where they grew thicker near the tree trunk as his friends screamed angrily at the beast.

Gazda studied his hands, opening and closing them, holding them to his face with the fingers spread wide as he sniffed the nails and skin—normal now, but he was remembering—and when he looked up again, he saw that Ooso was watching him from across the pond.

Her eyes were shining with emotion.

Chapter 8

Mystery and Danger.

Months passed and the tribe rarely spoke of the red-headed ape, though some of the mothers used Poomak's story as a warning to their little ones. The jungle was unforgiving to careless creatures.

It seemed that even Poomak's mother Nuklo had put his memory behind her. The she-ape was carrying another infant and the sire Wogo was no doubt anxious to see the babe's black crest upon delivery.

Life was moving on.

However, a silence had grown in Gazda in that time as he brooded over the loss of his friend. Where he had once been a fearless and restless spark, the night ape now had become uncertain and gloomy.

Eeda noticed that he was not clicking as much as he used to. She had learned long before that her son made the sound when he was curious or puzzled, the way some nervous apes chewed their fingernails; and so she hoped that the death of Poomak had not made Gazda aware of his own mortality to the point that he would be afraid of life, or that he would dwell upon each loss.

But Eeda did not know that there was more to her son's silence than a fear of death. True enough, that had marked him, but the night ape was perplexed. He could not forget or understand how he had escaped the leopard.

Ever since that day by the pool Gazda had pondered the experience. On one hand he wished he could have stayed to help his friend—knowing full well that would have likely cost him his life; while on the other he wondered if staying would have even been possible, for he had had no control over whatever force had worked upon him.

How had he crossed the pond? Even mighty Goro could not have jumped so far. Gazda often stared at his upturned hands remembering how they had seemed to change. Had he floated or flown on the air?

Did it happen to apes when they were frightened? He had never observed such a reaction in anyone but himself. He wanted to ask, but he suspected the others would only think him crazier—he knew the stories. They already thought there was something wrong with his head because he slept in the day and not at night.

If floating in the air did not happen to the other apes, then it would only be another thing that was different about Gazda, and another reason for him not to fit in with the tribe.

He needed to talk to someone about what had happened, but Kagoon could barely recall the incident, and Ooso seemed strangely affected by it.

Gazda had first thought she was just saddened by the loss of Poomak, but there was more. The little she-ape appeared to be frightened and would barely communicate with him.

It was almost half a year before she told him more, but her sidelong glances and fearful looks finally drove him to ask: "Is Ooso afraid of Gazda?"

They were high up in the branches overlooking a wide clearing where the tribe had gorged on berries and now lazed under a clear afternoon sky. Gazda did not like the bright light of the sun on his bare skin, so he kept to the side of the tree that was in shadow.

He had come from his sleeping place to find Ooso on her perch where she had carried a handful of grass seeds to nibble. The she-ape had seemed uncomfortable to have him near and had moved farther into the sunlight to continue her snack.

"Poomak is dead," she said, her brown eyes moist.

Gazda nodded. He too missed their friend. "But Gazda is sad not frightened."

"Gazda frightened Poomak!" Ooso said. "No face in pond—no *Gazda* in pond. When the leopard screamed—Gazda changed!"

"Changed?" Gazda asked, creeping around the tree trunk to the very edge of the shade.

"Poomak was surprised when Gazda changed and the leopard killed him for it," Ooso said.

"But Gazda only jumped!" the night ape declared.

"Gazda not jump, he flew!" Ooso gave him a glance as she munched the seeds. "Like a bat."

Gazda thought it was a funny thing that Ooso would say he flew like a bat. There were many types of the strange flying beasts in the jungle, and they were among his favorite prey to hunt. The small creatures had skills in the dark that seemed equal to his own, and they often escaped him because of it.

"Ooso's a bat!" Gazda countered childishly. He was trying to be serious and yet she seemed to be joking.

But the she-ape shook her head.

Gazda frowned at his friend, annoyed.

"And Ooso saw a bat, too!" She held her hands up before her, flexing the fingers in and out, as she turned toward him. "There was fog and light before the bat and then Ooso saw Gazda in the tree across the pond."

"No! Ooso teases," Gazda said, tremulously. He remembered the strange sensations. "Gazda jumped away from the leopard."

"Ooso not tease and Ooso sees that Gazda knows it too!" The little ape nodded her head, scratching the thick fur by her left ear. "Poomak saw Gazda change, and he was eaten."

Gazda slumped against the tree trunk, and Ooso's expression softened. She reached out as the night ape did the same, and the pair brushed palms in friendship.

"If Gazda changes again," she said, with the beginning of a smile. "He warns Ooso first."

"Gazda will never change," the night ape said, puffing up, but feeling relief at his friend's acceptance as she crept into the shadows where they embraced. "Gazda is Ooso's friend forever."

And soon, the pair of them was grooming each other on their perch, overlooking the tribe in the long grass. The little she-ape also seemed relieved to be his friend again.

Gazda's mind kept going back to the pond, but he could feel Ooso's body relaxing at his side. He would never talk to her about it again.

Then he wondered if perhaps old Baho would know something about apes changing.

Ooso cooed soothingly, turning on the branch so that Gazda could pick loose hairs from between her shoulders.

Relaxing as he groomed her, Gazda had just begun to frame a question he might ask the former silverback when the branch under him shook so hard that he lost his balance and fell.

Ooso whistled shrilly, and shrieked.

But Gazda had just managed to grab the end of a long slim branch that grew below them. His fingers slid on the slender limb, and he had just got a grip with both hands, when the tree shook again, and the branch vibrated wildly.

As he kicked and struggled to reach up for a better hold, Gazda realized the other apes were shrieking as they bolted out of the clearing, and into the trees.

Still holding tight to the swinging branch and trying to climb, he saw with some relief that Ooso had not fallen. She clung to their original perch above him—her eyes wide in terror, staring down not at Gazda, but at something below him. As bark shredded from the quivering branch in his hands the night ape looked down between his feet.

Magnuh!

Like a mountain of stone, the great bull elephant stood so tall that his head was just ten feet below Gazda. The rough gray skin on the mammoth skull was covered with pulverized bark from where the giant had rammed the tree in which the night ape had been perched with Ooso.

On both sides of this titanic forehead, great ears bigger than Goro flapped, and snapped in the air. The beast's red eyes glared upward from the hard flesh just behind a pair of gargantuan white fangs. These curved outward to either side and ripped bark from the tree with their sharp points.

Gazda saw the great red mouth full of crushing teeth open, and the mass of flesh over it suddenly come alive. Just as old Baho had warned, a long, flexible arm shot upward from the face, and grabbed for the night ape's legs.

He shrieked, and kicked at the thorny, gray trunk as a weird two-fingered hand at the end slid off his pale leg where it had tried to grab him. The action caused the branch on which Gazda hung to flex and drop him lower, before jouncing him upward...

...only to dangle him lower again!

Eeda screamed and challenged Magnuh from a tree across the open space before she leapt from her perch, and began swinging through the forest that circled the grassy clearing, heading toward Gazda.

The short, spiky hairs on the bull elephant's mighty trunk scratched Gazda's legs as the monster tried to catch him in its muscular coils.

But the night ape kicked to swing his feet away from the beast as the trunk lashed upward at him, bruising his calves.

The other apes shouted, and taunted the monster from the safety of distant trees as Gazda bounced at the end of his slender tether.

Magnuh trumpeted his rage and rammed his mighty tusks into the tree again, shaking the pillar-like trunk, and causing Gazda's hands to slide farther down the limb.

The trees came alive with screaming apes as the tribe moved around the clearing. The braver blackbacks were roaring challenges, and Goro, too, had come closer, drawn by the bull elephant's wrath.

The king of the apes beat his chest and bellowed his rage at the behemoth.

Gazda's heart was drumming and his lungs were heaving as he bobbed just above the giant beast's head.

The night ape could hear his mother's noisy approach. She was a creature of wrath herself, and Gazda feared that her passions would drive her to death in his defense. Magnuh's small eyes blazed for such an opportunity. He wanted blood, and Eeda's desire to protect her son had no limits.

But then Gazda's concern was dispelled by mere chance, for Magnuh rammed the tree again stripping great sheets of bark from it, the branch in Gazda's hands snapped and he fell.

The intensity of the elephant's hatred was such that his eye had shifted from its prize for a single second, and in that moment Gazda landed full upon the monster's head.

Skin crawling at the touch of Magnuh's bristly flesh, Gazda crouched and coiled every muscle—a life of jungle living had made them like steel.

He sprang away from the beast, just as its trunk swung up to throttle him.

And so powerful was Gazda's leap, and so well-timed, that he hurtled in an arc, flying from his tree to the next, where he caught a high branch and scrambled upward, just as his mother arrived at the same tree.

She swept him into her arms, and holding fast to their perch, they scolded and screamed at Magnuh. Gazda's hair was still on end, and his heart raced. He searched for any sign of Ooso, and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the little she-ape on the tree across from him where she had climbed higher during the attack.

Robbed of his prize, mighty Magnuh went mad, tearing at the trees and ripping up the very soil with his enormous tusks, pounding and crushing the berry bushes and grasses in the clearing until there was nothing left alive.

And as he raged, Magnuh turned his burning red eyes back up into the canopy where they searched for Gazda.

Gazda would remember this attack for its savagery, but he would also credit it for the recovery of his courage. He had first escaped the leopard that killed Poomak, and now to thwart the raging giant below. What in the jungle could defeat the night ape after that?

The beast's fury had brought him back to life as it had tried to snuff him out and Gazda would show his gratitude by plotting revenge upon the monster for it was plain that the bull elephant had focused his spite directly at him.

In the months and years that followed Gazda sought out Magnuh whenever the beast's wandering brought him near the tribe, and always from high above would the night ape throw stones and sticks, and he would spit and scold the beast so that it could never rest within the green jungle, or calm its raging hatred in Goro's land.

But a victory was not to be, for as Gazda looked for Magnuh, so did it seem that the elephant kept a special interest in the night ape, and on more than one occasion would a large round stone be hurled to *crack* against the side of a tree very near where Gazda was perched.

Such random attacks were never successful, but they were always answered by Gazda's angry scolding, and by a continuation of their grudge.

While this animosity festered it was given some relief by the roaming habits of Goro's tribe and the elephant herd's migrations to the grasslands on the eastern plateau. This had the effect of both lessening the intensity of the feud and increasing its inherent danger for neither creature could predict their next meeting.

1903 — Nine years of age.

Chapter 9

Special Son.

By the time Gazda had reached the age of nine, he was tall enough to look his mother in the eye if she could be coaxed to stand erect. It was an uncomfortable position for the powerfully built apes to maintain for long, so her son had caused some friction when he had begun adopting the stance as it suited his purpose.

Not wishing to alienate himself further from the group, he had been forced to compromise and only stood that way when an equal footing with his adoptive tribe was required; because upon all fours, Gazda's head barely reached the elbows of his much larger blackback contemporaries.

The blackbacks thought him bold for grandstanding in such a fashion, since standing upright among the anthropoids was primarily done during bull-ape threat displays or in challenges for leadership. This had already led to several misunderstandings with adolescents that were primed for a fight, so Gazda used caution when assuming the position.

At nine or ten the adolescent apes were mostly grown, but Gazda lagged behind his peers in this, and was dwarfed by most of the others. His slow-witted but good-natured friend, Kagoon, had grown into a creature of solid muscle, slightly taller than Gazda when on all fours, and easily four times his mass.

Ooso was growing too, but was still small by female ape standards, though she was twice Gazda's body weight.

So, the night ape took great pleasure in seeing eye to eye with his mother, which put him at just over four feet in height. He was also getting heavier, with ridges of swelling muscle beneath his pale skin—the direct result of his active and vigorous lifestyle—and diet.

Gazda was now far too old to take any food from his mother, so he had begun to depend upon the hunting skills that he had played at as an infant, but that he was now secretly perfecting.

No more scooting up and down the sleeping trees snatching up frogs and rodents and sucking the blood out of them while the tribe rested. His needs now required bigger game, and bigger game demanded better hunting skills.

The vegetation, grubs, fruit and nuts that formed the staple of the ape diet had never appealed to Gazda, though he had gone through the motions in an effort to fit in. Indeed, he had acquired a taste for many plants and nuts—even certain grubs—but he'd long ago discovered that he could not stomach swallowing solid food once he'd chewed it up.

This had been an alarming condition that several of the youngest apes were quick to capitalize upon. They gathered around him as he foraged, waiting to share the pre-chewed "snacks" he threw their way. Eeda did not approve of this behavior if she caught him doing it, but since he continued to grow and mature despite the bad habit, she tended to look the other way.

But as Gazda grew so did his appetite, and the tribe of apes did not hunt together often enough to suit his needs.

So he hunted alone. The night ape moved from catching frogs, lizards and rodents to tracking and killing monkeys, small forest antelopes, bushpigs and birds.

In most cases, he would kill the creatures as the other apes did, by ripping them to pieces with his powerful jaws and hands, but instead of swallowing the dripping hunks, Gazda chewed the bloody flesh until his thirst was satisfied and his hunger diminished.

The solid meat did not agree with him, so he spat it out. Hunting to the night ape was about the blood; the blood was the life.

Eeda had long known that her son desired fresh meat far more than the other apes, and had seen him drink the blood while butchering his small kills; while at other times, he brought the meat back to share with the tribe already drained of the nourishing fluid. Eeda did not condone his strange behavior, but she had grown used to her adopted son's peculiarities. He was not like other apes.

So, by his ninth year, Gazda was hunting, always hunting, to feed his unquenchable thirst.

He hunted most often at night because he had learned that his physical abilities were multiplied many times after sundown, when he was also mentally much more alert.

A weakness came upon him during the day as though some illness arrived with the sunlight. It was an inconsistent condition because his nocturnal strength surged briefly at sun up, and again when the blazing orb was directly overhead. Then, for a short period, its rays could draw him from his daytime stupor, only to desert him again soon after, to the usual weakness that dragged at his limbs until the sun set.

This was what had caused him to nap for short periods of time during the day whenever the lethargy became overwhelming.

Early on, his mother's protestations had prompted Gazda to explore the effects of daylight further and around his sixth year, he had climbed out of the eternal

twilight of the jungle floor and into the highest branches of a kapok tree that pierced the thick canopy.

He had found it impossible to look directly at the sun in the blue sky—its brightness was blinding; and while he did not feel pain from the touch of its warm rays, he had noticed a “tightness” to his naked skin that grew more uncomfortable the longer he remained in the light.

Gazda had also been alarmed to feel the sun drain his strength to the point that he felt as though he would lose his grip on his high perch, and so he had beat a hasty retreat, only to find his vigor returning as the shadows darkened near the jungle floor.

In time the night ape had found that sleeping once or twice during the day was all he needed. He could still travel and interact as the tribe meandered from place to place, by either guessing the direction they would take so he could catch up after sleeping, or by swinging ahead to find some dark hollow where he could rest until they arrived.

And if he slept until sundown, he could quickly find their sleeping trees by employing his night time powers; that is, unless he awoke to find his mother Eeda somewhere nearby, guarding the entrance to his makeshift lair.

Then he would be delayed overtaking the group for his mother could not move through the forest as quickly as he—especially at night.

Gazda had happily discovered that despite his sun weakness, if he were rested, he could still match the brawn and agility of his peers during the day; however, at night his dexterity, speed and strength were multiplied many times those of the other apes his age.

And, the same thing occurred with his senses. Young Gazda had found the manifold jungle scents confusing, an indecipherable maze of odors and perfumes, until he had learned to control his enhanced olfactory powers. Then he could detect the subtlest smells in the forest, allowing him to track prey near or far, flawlessly discerning the old game trails from the new.

His vision was also amplified many times, and he could see perfectly in the darkest night or shadow, relying on heat, moon and stars to illuminate the gloom—cloaking all shapes in a flickering glow and locking the dusky forest into twilight.

Gazda’s superior hearing worked in tandem with his eyesight, employing sound to complete perfect pictures of the dark surround, as though the noises were turned to light within his head that shone on what he perceived.

The jungle sparkled with noise and color undetectable to the daylight creatures with which he lived, and as he grew to understand his senses, Gazda was better able to direct those powers to his will.

So, where the tribe would hide in their sleeping trees, the adopted night ape would fling himself through the high branches of a world defined by smell, sight and sound from which he felt no separation. He would marvel upon the jungle at that time, and wish his friends Ooso and Kagoon might share his special vision.

For to him a moth that was dull gray by day became a glorious thing at night, scintillating against the surrounding shining leaves on which it fed, as its wings and legs came together rhythmically to form a song for others of its kind.

He could see its curious light a hundred yards distant, though its dappled motes would flicker against his hands when he held them up, and to the night ape the melodious actions of the insect's limbs created a subtle breeze that crossed the great space to caress his cheeks.

The moth became but one set of uncountable facets that Gazda could perceive as a whole, or with his powerful senses parse into a thousand fragments more. To the night ape, there were countless cues to speak of difference, or a million dazzling elements woven into a tapestry to which he was an integral part.

The jungle pulsed with life; its abundant elements throbbing to the beat of his heart and the restless sigh of a million leaves.

It took him years, but the night ape learned to master his magnificent senses and navigate this bedazzling space with the efficiency of a creature made for it.

In time, Gazda used these special abilities in concert with a growing knowledge of wood lore and hunting to track almost anything day or night, in any weather condition often following trails many days old by deducing information from the slightest of spoor.

This ability was doubted and mocked by the other apes at first until he stunned his naysayers into silence by leading them time and again to the very creatures he had described.

The anthropoids came to admire his prowess, and enjoyed the meat and fruits his skills provided them, while those who scoffed began to fear and distrust Gazda's strength.

Being confident in his own powers, King Goro saw no threat, and instead considered the night ape's abilities a welcome boon for the tribe. The silverback was pleased that the foundling could earn his keep, and he had long been impressed by Gazda's spirit when faced with so many obstacles.

Others hated him for it. Omag refused to be convinced of the night ape's hunting abilities, even when proof was presented to him. The crippled ape nurtured his envious thoughts and shared them with any other jealous or small-minded member of the tribe who would listen.

Chapter 10

Omag's Mischief.

Gazda did not listen to any whispers since he was focused upon the competitive world of the adolescent blackbacks, a group to whom he now belonged despite his outlandish ways, diminutive size and unhealthy appearance.

He was dwarfed by his companions, but he could easily fight any of them to a draw during the day—even going so far as to defeat one outright at sunset.

That fact had caused an uproar and scandal among the rest of the tribe that briefly led to anarchy as several angry blackbacks crying foul chased the night ape into the trees where Gazda used the high branch to which he clung as a podium for touting his fighting prowess.

Both Goro and old Baho had been required to bring peace back to the group, with the king declaring an end to contests in the long shadows because they were dangerous, and too difficult to judge winner from loser.

The truth was that neither he nor Baho could understand the outcome of that fight, and did not wish the night ape's unnatural strength to encourage more animosity toward him within the tribe.

But Gazda had made no secret of his victory, and had enjoyed teasing the defeated young blackback and even challenged his friends. For years, the night ape had suffered as the butt of the joke among his peers, and still suffered jibes about his "snakeskin" and "birdlegs," so he could not resist goading the vanquished.

The silverback watched this, approving of the night ape's pride. Goro admired strength in any of his apes, and had always rankled to find bullies within the group like those that had teased Gazda since his adoption; but the king's ruling was in the best interest of the tribe.

The challenges continued, and that scandal faded into the past as the young apes honed their strength. The ongoing competition between the adolescent blackbacks was brought about by their incredible strength and ambition, and was advanced by their boredom with the daily grind as the tribe spent the hours searching for food, eating, sleeping and starting the search again.

So like the other young apes Gazda was driven to distraction and the pursuit of action.

With little to occupy his active mind, Gazda was free to nurse his grudge against Magnuh, whose attack still remained fresh in his memory. So, whenever the giant's wandering brought him near, the night ape would seek him out, and from overhead hurl insults, branches and stones down on the bull elephant.

When Magnuh found himself unable to reach his tormentor, he took his frustration out on the surrounding jungle, smashing trees and plant life to pulp.

Gazda was sometimes reminded that his adversary should never be underestimated for on more than one occasion the seething beast had retreated into the jungle as the night ape laughed—until a great rock hurtled up at him and severed the branch upon which he had been perched. In each case he'd easily leapt to safety, but it was a caution against overconfidence all the same.

Yet such incidents had intensified Gazda's desire to torment the beast.

Having learned the type of food that Magnuh most enjoyed and the seasons when they ripened, Gazda once spent an hour collecting up the dung left by the apes, and using big banana leaves had carried the disgusting mass into the high branches of the elephant's favorite fruit trees.

When the great beast came to fill his belly, Gazda had dropped the stinking waste down upon his head and Magnuh's furious screams shook the forest for miles.

At still another time, Gazda had followed his enemy, swinging unseen from branch to branch in the high canopy until he found the monster sidling up to a large herd of female elephants that had followed a trail into the forest to dine on succulent herbs.

Gazda and his friend Ooso had often played a game where they copied bird and animal calls with their own voices and long practice had left the night ape an accomplished mimic.

So in his place of hiding, he tipped his head back and gave the terrifying roar of a male lion.

The female elephants had stampeded in terror, pushing their calves before them, which left the amorous Magnuh with no recourse but to glare his frustration at the surrounding trees.

His cold and maleficent eye sought the source of the roar. While it had sounded like a lion, the scolding chatter that soon came from the trees gave authorship to the end of Magnuh's romantic liaison and focal point for his rage.

It was during those years and long weeks of boredom that old Baho had told the young blackbacks the story of *Sip-sip and the flying infant*. It was the former silverback's hope that the tale would instill better behavior and honorable thinking in the young males and show them how a good king always observed tribal law.

Young males should never provoke or disrespect a higher ranking male whether he deserved such abuse or not. And if they did, then they could not count on the king for protection, since it was his duty and theirs to hold the law above all other things.

The apes had wandered east to gorge on fruit that was coming into season, and Omag had been gone from the tribe for many days—many hoped for good. But during a break from the fighting lessons, Baho told the story, warning the young blackbacks to never call the crippled ape "Sip-sip" for it was unseemly to do so, and dangerous.

The former silverback knew that Goro might not like him repeating that name, but Baho had noticed how Omag reserved most of his fury and outrage for the she-apes and the young ones, and thus the story. Looking around at the formidable wall of muscle the adolescent apes presented, Baho doubted whether the crippled ape would take such offense if one of these blackbacks dared to utter the name.

Also, the former silverback did not trust Omag or the old queens, and he thought it best that the young blackbacks shared his apprehension. Some among them he knew were in league with the crippled ape, but then, who better to hear the truth?

Gazda had always loved the stories Baho told, and so he sat with the others and listened, his mind turning the tale into pictures. He was infuriated to hear of the she-ape mother's pain, and he was disgusted that Omag had killed an infant simply for calling him a name. True, the tribal law said that bull apes deserved respect, but did infants not deserve respect also, and were they not worthy of patience?

Afterwards, as the young blackbacks went to forage, old Baho had recognized the night ape's dismay. Gazda crouched unmoving in the grass, his eyes focused on the ground until the former silverback rumbled close and touched knuckles with him.

"The poor mother," the night ape said, and the old bull ape grunted his understanding. He had watched the curious young fellow his entire life, and been

impressed by his loyalty to Eeda. The pair were strange, but an excellent example of anthropoid honor.

“The mother in the story is your own,” Baho said, gauging his next words. “Eeda...and the infant was your brother.”

The scar that edged the night ape’s hairline suddenly blazed red, and when a similar furious gleam entered Gazda’s eyes, the former silverback wondered if he should have kept silent.

“A blackback does not seek revenge, Gazda,” Baho reminded, as he reached out to affectionately thump the night ape’s head with his massive hand. “And a king only looks for justice.”

The truth had angered Gazda because at first he felt betrayed by his mother, since she had never told him. Did the entire tribe know? Why did she not trust him?

And yet, though his thoughts and blood had boiled within him, his heart relented finally, as he remembered her long unwavering devotion, and he chastised himself for being callous. He knew how much his mother loved him, so for her to lose a son would have hurt her beyond all injuries.

He eventually resolved to never question her about it. It was her past, not Gazda’s.

However, the night ape determined to do something about the ape that had caused her pain when he returned. And he did return.

Omag dropped out of the trees late one day when the tribe had gathered by a mango grove, and the old queens quickly fell to grooming him. The crippled ape’s disease had continued to deform his flesh in his absence, but all could see that his travels had led him to good fare, for a thick layer of fat was slung about his waist and his muscles bulged like ripe fruit.

He smelled of blood and putrefying flesh, and there was a look on his disfigured face also, of cunning, satisfaction and calm that set many of his enemies grinding their teeth.

Gazda was furious, but not so much that he would challenge Omag to a battle of honor—though he childishly dreamed of such a thing. The crippled ape was a bull ape still, and was many hundreds of pounds of muscle and ferocity.

And so while Gazda imagined fighting the failed silverback, he had no illusions about who would win a battle tooth by tooth and muscle to muscle.

However this was not the night ape’s first such grudge.

From that point forward, Gazda employed the same methods he had used so effectively against his nemesis Magnuh. When Goro called a halt to the group’s wandering, when food was found or suitable sleeping trees were near, Gazda would slip quietly into the forest as the other apes began foraging or building nests.

The tribe had grown used to Gazda lurking in the jungle at night, or keeping to the shadows, and there was his contentious habit of seeking daytime sleeping places, and so his disappearances rarely drew much attention anymore.

But now, goaded by this pursuit of vengeance, Gazda would use the cover of the dense foliage to search about for suitable missiles before moving into a guarded position. He had always been an accomplished aim during throwing games with his friends, and he rarely missed.

From these impromptu blinds he would launch his attacks at the crippled ape. Whether it was a stone, rotten fruit or animal dung, Gazda always targeted Omag's bony brow.

The night ape was no fool, and always took a position well away from his victim, since he knew that should he ever be discovered, he would suffer punishment not unlike that Omag had meted out to his dead brother. Moreover, he risked arousing Goro's ire as well for disrespecting his elder.

Gazda always lobbed each missile at a steep angle so that it would complete its flight on a sharp downward path that would maximize the impact while obscuring its trajectory.

After making the throw, he would crouch in the underbrush with a hand clamped over his mouth. A heartbeat and a breath would pass and down would come the missile to *crack* against Omag's mangy skull.

Gazda would grit his teeth to keep from panting or hooting at the joke as the crippled ape reacted to the throw. Omag would let fly a thunderous growl while leaping up, red eyes glaring as he cast about his fellows.

Any ape that lounged or foraged near would regret laughing at the incident, for he would immediately become the object of the offended anthropoid's wrath, and in fact some few incidents occurred where lesser apes were savaged by Omag's teeth and claws.

The tribe quickly learned to keep their enjoyment of the joke on Sip-sip to themselves, and save it to share later with the others.

And so, Omag was left to puzzle out these seemingly random acts for himself. In the thick jungle with covering leaf and creeper at all sides, he could not conceive of any reason for these flying objects.

The falling missiles came unpredictably after the first time. When they came—and they kept coming—the intensity and duration of the attacks were uncertain. Some days when three had hurtled down Omag's furious response would grow to apocalyptic proportions.

He did not understand where the missiles came from, but he could not dispute the fact that they always seemed destined for his head. The crippled ape was worked into a terrible rage at times, in which he charged about in bristling anger, biting and mauling, until the terrified she-apes climbed into the trees with their infants to wait for Goro to come forth and silence Omag with a fearsome display of his own.

The night ape would break from his campaign of bombardment when such severe disturbances resulted, and he might not take up the cause again for weeks or months after.

He did not wish to anger his king.

So Gazda would put away the stones until boredom or Omag's bullying drove him back to it, and he wasn't the only member of the tribe to lament that these strange missiles had only drawn blood once.

Chapter 11

The Lair of Fur-nose.

Eventually, Gazda's boredom led him to Fur-nose's lair. He had heard stories about the strange creature that had lived within the tree-nest. The night ape knew the place and had seen its vine-covered exterior many times on seasonal trips the tribe took to the coast. The apes craved the berries that grew in great profusion around the clearing where the lair sat up in a group of old trees.

The odd creature had been killed, but the few apes that had seen inside Fur-nose's lair did not remember enough to say how. Still others had attempted but failed to describe the strange sights they'd glimpsed when entry was possible.

In fact, most apes in the tribe had little memory of those times or seemed eager to put the events behind them. However, one thing they all recalled was how Fur-nose had wounded apes merely by pointing at them with his "thunder-hand."

None had ever dared to question Goro about what had occurred when he entered the nest or what he had seen, and since the entrance to the lair had disappeared after thunder-hand roared a final time; the tribe had quickly lost interest in the structure. The jungle had grown outward afterward to claim it in layers of leaf and creeper.

Of course, old Baho answered what questions he could, though in this matter he had seemed strangely reticent when in Gazda's company.

He did say that Fur-nose walked upright and had a naked white skin just like the night ape's, but he had covered his with the fur and skins of other animals.

The former silverback had said that Fur-nose got his name from the long hairs that grew around his nose and dangled down over his mouth and onto his belly. Baho even pantomimed how the odd creature had looked using a ragged sheet of moss held over his face.

Gazda had seen the tree-nest many times and each time they'd pass, the tribe had instinctively moved with caution, watching and snuffing at the air for scent. Of course most failed to remember why they moved so carefully, and might have grown complacent if some bright-minded one among them had not snorted out Fur-nose's name or mimicked the action of thunder-hand. It seemed to happen every time.

Then terror would grip the tribe as old memories resurfaced, and soon all the apes were watching warily, ready to bolt for the trees, and wondering if perhaps another of Fur-nose's kind had come in search for him.

On this visit to the clearing, after an initial panic some blackbacks had grown brave and wished to cross the clearing to investigate the structure, but Goro intervened, telling them that Fur-nose's lair was no place for apes to go.

Omag eyed the king cautiously then, but submitted to his will with a deep bow, though few who knew the crippled ape could see true obedience in the action. It was a jealous look he cast toward the lair before he moved with the rest of the apes toward the beach.

Gazda had grown more curious with each year, but would never directly disobey the silverback, so he moved with the others close to the strip of sand that ran between the great blue water and the low hills that were home to fruit trees.

The night ape stayed in the shadowed shelter of the forest and kept away from the open beach as the rest of the tribe luxuriated in the sun, either stuffing

themselves on fruit, or going with the young ones to play in the small pools of salty water that had been pushed up by the waves and trapped in sandy depressions.

But ever as the day progressed were Gazda's eyes drawn toward the strange lair that he knew lay beyond the line of trees—and as his eyes were drawn, so were his actions, and before long, he had traveled back east toward the clearing while Goro's tribe continued to forage southward, the night ape's mother also caught up as she indulged her sweet-tooth on the ripe fruits and oversized nuts that grew so plentifully in the trees by the water.

Soon, Gazda found that his curiosity had drawn him even farther east until he was swinging through the very trees that ringed Fur-nose's clearing and his lair. Leaping down from the branches, the night ape gazed across the broad expanse of grasses, poorly lit now as the sun had slipped closer to the trees at Gazda's back.

The low angle and orangey hue of its rays diminished their effect upon the night ape, and the lengthening shadows filled him with anticipation for the night to come.

A great crescent of darkness shadowed the land closest to him, but still a bright amber glaze lay over the tree-nest and the forest beyond it.

He half-turned toward the distant tribe of apes, but he could not take his eyes away from the odd tree-nest. Wincing, Gazda cast a look at the dark purple sky and then started to jog across the open space with the grasses slapping at his legs.

But he stopped when a strange scent brought him around to face the south. There a peculiar stand of dark trees edged the clearing and grew up the slope away from the long grass.

He moved toward these trees, drawn by the scent; it grew in potency with each step, at once repulsive and intoxicating.

Closer now, he saw that these trees were densely packed, and it was from around their purple trunks that the scent had wafted—an ill smell but a perfume, too, now that he stood before it: decay and flowery sweetness that he could not deny.

Caught between impulses, Gazda crept anxiously toward the thicket, barking and snapping his teeth worriedly as he pondered the trees.

They looked strangely familiar. He had seen others like them with their broad leaves and long seed pods. They were favorite snacks for his tribe. He had never done more than savor the succulent leaves and enjoy their shade while his fellows happily filled themselves to bursting, eating until a green slurry dripped from the corners of their pink mouths.

Yet this grove was different. The trees were similar in shape, but the leaves and seed pods were a darker green with a sickly brown underside. Black branches protruded at odd angles from the distorted trunks that were a purple gray with dusky threads tracing over swollen contours.

Their leaves were large and thick, and allowed little light between the tumorous trunks and none at all near the tangled roots.

Gazda instinctively grunted a warning when he saw that among these black trees were the hulking trunks of other forest giants, but these were of a different kind—all dead or dying with branches free of leaves and bark sloughing off like dead flesh from rotten corpses.

These trees had been overrun by the black ones; their roots starved of water, and leaves robbed of sun by the taller, darker invaders.

Gazda gave a coughing bark, and stood upright to take a tentative swaggering step forward and then another, frightened, but dreadfully tempted to investigate the shadows that hung around the unusual wood—yet something held him back.

His arms hung stiff at his sides as he swung them, a cautious, almost silent growl was rumbling in his chest. He took another step, and then shrank with knees bent.

He'd had the sudden feeling that something was among the trees—something was in there watching him!

A snake? Leopard? Hyenas, perhaps?

The hair on Gazda's head and neck prickled as he squatted on all fours before the thicket.

The shadowed trunks and twisted roots grew close together, and the big leaves cast a murky darkness that settled like a fog near the ground, obscuring much. It slid among the trees this haze, and crept into the open grass. The darkness was moving outward, slithering toward the night ape in undulating waves crested by a light green mist.

The fog caressed the withered blades of grass that edged the wood as it drifted closer.

Gazda glanced up quickly. Eyes in the trees? Had he seen eyes in there—watching him?

No! He jumped up to his full height, swinging his arms at his side and hooting worriedly. It must have been the sunlight falling from... Where? The leaves were too thick; the wood was dark within.

A flicker of light again, and then nothing.

Baring his fangs, Gazda bolstered his courage by snatching up some sticks and long tufts of grass before standing up to swing his arms and snap his teeth—glaring an angry challenge at the tall black trees.

The night ape barked at the shadows and the memory of things looking out, before he made a desperate charge toward the dark grove where he threw the sticks and grass at the creeping fog.

But he veered away at the last second moving stiff-legged toward Fur-nose's lair, certain that he had had enough of the strange trees.

He barely glanced back as he ran, though his thoughts were fixed upon the wood if his eyes were not. Gazda's heart pounded, and his breath came in gasps as the weird trees loomed large behind him and in his imagination.

The night ape consoled himself thinking that he would return to explore the black grove more closely in the future, for he did not have the time at present.

He still wanted to investigate the mysterious tree-nest before the other apes or his mother realized he was away.

Gazda was never watched very closely anymore—especially when the tribe was engaged in eating its favorites—and now that he was approaching adolescence, he was expected to recognize the jungle dangers on his own.

But his maturation made no difference to his mother. Eeda doted on him, and was prone to worrying if he was very long away from her sight.

The night ape growled at this parental constriction as he sprinted across the grass toward the vine-covered structure in the trees.

The area around it was scallop-shaped, and filled with a great mass of long grasses that was encroached upon by thick ferns growing out from the surrounding jungle wall and intermingling with the clustered bushes laden with the berries favored by the apes.

After his unsettling brush with the dark stand behind him, the large leaf-shrouded structure in the old trees was more curious than threatening; and he barely slowed to climb up the swollen trunks that formed a base for the structure.

Once atop this he cleared away creepers and tangled vines to expose a broad platform made from flat sheets of wood laid edge to edge. Most of the lair was covered so thickly by foliage that the night ape was forced to reach through it and use his fingertips to investigate what lay beneath the greenery.

There he felt a flat piece of flexible material, much reinforced, that rose up perpendicularly from the platform to form a wall. Feeling along this, he found another angling away and past that one, another.

Quickly tearing the clingy covering aside, he set his palms against the wall and found it was made of a strange pliant substance laid over hard angular shapes and cross-braced branches that formed an inner support structure and reminded the night ape of bones beneath flesh.

The green-stained skin was comprised of a fine lattice of interwoven hair-like threads. It was soft, despite its age and dampness, and smelled of mold and decay, but it gave him a pleasurable feeling when he placed his bare hands or feet against it.

Gazda turned from the structure, and looked back toward the line of trees that obscured the beach. From his vantage point, it was plain to see that the entire open space was slowly filling up with plant life as the jungle grew inward to overtake the grasses and fill every hole and shallow—except where the dark grove grew and covered a fan-shaped section of the rising southern slope. There the verdure was falling back as the sick, black trees spread out toward the jungle.

He grumbled and the hair on his neck prickled when he realized that the shadowy fog he'd seen before was still leaking out of the grove and into the long grass.

The night ape hooted worriedly as he turned to the tree-nest where he continued to feel the shapes beneath the overgrown leaves and vines. With broader gestures now, he touched its walls and overhanging roof until he envisioned the large almost circular shape of the lair.

This investigation he had supplemented with his powerful nose, for a scent had been playing at his subconscious that grew stronger as the tree-nest was exposed.

He dropped to all fours upon the platform and snuffled about the structure. An old odor still seeped from beneath the fronds and there was nothing sweet about it. No. Gazda only smelled rot and old decay, but it was distant enough to provoke no sense of impending danger and of a vintage that bespoke no living threat.

It came from deep within the layered nest, and the heap of foliage covering it. This greenery he continued to clear away until he found a smooth piece of wood; a squarish panel hung in a curious arch of wooden supports that were set into the wall, but seeming somehow separate from it.

The night ape imagined this to have been the place where Fur-nose, and then Goro and his blackbacks, had found an opening and entered—an opening that the other apes had later reported as having disappeared.

He sniffed the panel and pressed against it; pulling still more vines away so he could push again. Gazda was amazed to see that the flat shape shifted suddenly against the wooden uprights in which it was set and when it did more of the reek emerged from inside.

Musty, and it stank of very old decay; the smell of green bones on the jungle floor.

He sensed no threat within, though his experience at the dark trees had kept his hair on end. Throughout this investigation, Gazda had been afflicted by fleeting moments of fear—almost panic—and he'd glanced over his shoulder as if someone or something had been looking at him.

It was the way of all jungle creatures to be ever vigilant, but in these alien surrounds, the night ape's instincts were sharply tuned.

However, he had felt no lurking presence connected to Fur-nose's lair. The stories had said he was dead, and Gazda could catch no scent or evidence to contradict that.

The night ape set his legs and pushed harder against the panel with his shoulder, attempting to wedge his fingers in a dark gap that briefly appeared between the flat wood and the upright.

He could not get a grip to pull or push the sheet aside and so after several attempts, he stepped back, and ripped still more vines and covering foliage away from the tree-nest.

The sun had continued to sink further, and the shadows by the dark grove had crept a few more feet across the clearing by the time the night ape stumbled upon a curious twist of leather string that stuck out of the structure where the wall rose up to meet the roof.

He reached out to pull upon this.

There was a sudden and startling *clack* and *thump* as though something had moved inside the tree-nest, and it was only Gazda's frustration that overpowered his fear, and finally goaded him forward.

The panel in the wall had shifted inward; the dark gap between it and the upright had grown wider.

Gazda hooted quietly to himself as he set his right palm against the angled wood and shoved.

The old smell of death rolled out upon a plume of dust as the shadowed opening grew larger from left to right. Over this a clingy curtain of spider web stretched until it broke in twisting filaments and fell aside. The night ape crouched low—his steel-like muscles coiled. At the first sign of danger he would spring upward for the vine-covered roof and leap over that toward the distant trees.

But it was a stale odor of death that drifted from Fur-nose's lair, and other scents with it like rotten wood and dead animal smells, but little else.

The lowering sun at Gazda's back illuminated the inside of the structure, but the night ape's shadow obscured what lay directly across from him.

Hooting cautiously, eyes flashing back and forth as he proceeded, Gazda felt a sudden peculiar fear come upon him as he shoved the flat wood completely aside and moved slowly into the murk.

Aged or not, to his superb senses the smell of death still permeated the enclosed space in a way that was impossible for him to ignore.

Gazda's whistling breath came rapidly and his heart pounded. The brighter light outside the structure and the darkness within dazzled him. His eyes struggled to adjust as he moved deeper into the tree-nest and shadow.

Chapter 12

Treasures.

There was a clicking sound when he set the knuckles of his right hand down on small and brittle shapes that felt like sticks. He snatched his hand away and cast a glance to investigate—before a panicked gasp escaped him!

There in the angled light were the thin white bones and dried out skin of a baby ape!

Gazda coughed a warning, and then shut his mouth, embarrassed—they were only bones...

He grumbled at his own cowardice, and knelt to smell the little skeleton, but in the action, his shadow shrank so the rays of the setting sun fell past him and full upon the body of Fur-nose!

Fur-nose!

Growling and snapping, Gazda jumped back and sidled away from this eerie tableau. His fangs flashed as he moved toward the entrance.

But even in that strange light it was obvious that Fur-nose was dead. The desiccated corpse had only appeared to be alive where it sat across from the door, perched upon a peculiar arrangement of sticks that formed legs and a platform on which the creature's bones were draped.

The night ape rose angrily to his feet snarling, glaring and swinging his arms to raise his courage as he staggered closer with hair bristling.

Fur-nose it was. Gazda could tell by the dry but fuzzy skin that covered the skull, from which long hairs trailed beneath a withered nose and cheeks to fall loosely on either side of the gaping mouth. Teeth, dried lips and some gray stretch of jawbone peered out from behind the dark filaments.

High in the face, empty eye sockets stared at Gazda, and there was a weird, weathered bag of animal skin upended on Fur-nose's head from which lank cords of hair trailed.

Such a strange creature, yet Gazda could not contain an angry growl and low bark as a sudden fear came upon him that Fur-nose might have some wondrous power that would allow his rotten bones to speak for him in violence or in deed.

But the night ape's eyes were drawn back to the platform that supported the dried out corpse and kept it upright. It was made of sticks, and there beside it was

another structure of similar design, though it was taller and upon it rested artifacts of unknown function.

However, this was nothing compared to the mysterious creature that sat so near. Fur-nose was a monster from legend, but there was no life left in him.

Gritting his teeth to steady his nerve, Gazda took a step closer and squatted again to better investigate the bones. These were hidden in part by thin material made from a crosshatch of threads like the skin that covered the lair.

This substance was rotten and torn, but clung in tatters to the skeletal shoulders and followed the bones in the legs until they disappeared in leathery containers that held the feet.

The night ape hooted sadly, for this closer observation made it plain from the skeletal arrangement that it was as Baho had hinted: Fur-nose would have resembled Gazda in size, shape and construction.

He reached up to feel his own ribs, while counting those on the skeleton's chest with his eyes.

The night ape already knew that he was different from Goro's tribe, but what could this mean? Fur-nose had legs as long like Gazda's, and his arms were short like the night ape's, too—their arrangement similar but opposite to the anthropoid ape's—and here they shared that feature.

The skull's face was flat, just as Gazda's face was flat, and the teeth were set in the jaw the same, though the night ape's fangs were longer and sharper.

Gazda briefly contemplated the possibility that Fur-nose had mated with his mother Eeda. He had heard about this happening with the other she-apes, when rogue males might secretly approach the tribe and mate with them. Had Fur-nose done the same?

That would answer many of the questions that had plagued Gazda and made him the target of such derision. He pondered the notion, and wondered if he would ask her. If not Fur-nose then perhaps the night ape's father was one from the strange dead creature's tribe.

Gazda moved closer, sniffing at the air. The body smelled little different from the bodies of dead apes, what could that mean? Was it possible that he like Gazda were just ugly apes? The skeletal differences suggested something else, but the similarities were undeniable.

Unless Fur-nose and Gazda were of a different family than Goro's but still apes, in the way the leopard was different from the lion.

That made some sense to him, though it would never tell him what he was.

The night ape backed toward the door where he could again lower himself over the arrangement of small bones that littered the floor. They were proof that the apes had come into Fur-nose's tree-nest, but none had mentioned an infant in the tale. Goro would never allow such a thing in the company of blackbacks, and on an expedition of this sort, no mother and babe would be allowed.

He growled angrily. Unless Fur-nose had killed the baby ape for his own ends—to eat the meat perhaps? Or like Gazda had the stranger similar tastes and murdered the infant for its blood?

Gazda shifted back on his haunches so he could see the two sets of remains, and as he studied them, he reached distractedly for a lock of black hair that hung

from his temple. He thrust the end this between his sharp teeth and chewed, twisting it around in his mouth as his mind ran over the mystery.

Then his attention shifted to the lair again. To the right of Fur-nose's perch were similar structures. The first was taller and stood against the wall. Gazda lifted himself to peer at the top.

Such strange items there: a curious blob of something that looked like chewed fruit but smelled of lightning strikes; there were sheets of thin, pale, skin-like material that sat in dust-covered piles; and by that was a strange knobby stone that was slightly glossy and filled with black dirt.

At the foot of this taller platform, he saw a scattering of small wooden sticks that smelled of ash and charcoal, and on the floor by them a very strange green stone twice the length of his hand.

He moaned fearfully when he moved closer to the tapered rock, and realized he could see completely through its hard skin at certain angles.

Gazda rose again to move past that taller structure to where it touched up against another thing quite like it, but which was shorter and much, much wider. It had stout legs that held up a broad platform covered with sheets of a flexible material that was soft to the touch.

Hooting quietly, he panted at the pleasing texture, and then grunted his amazement as his eye shifted up to the wall over it, and on from there to the corner.

There he recognized the skulls and horns and furs of jungle animals that Gazda had hunted himself. There the skin of a bushbaby and monkey—further on the horns of a bushbuck and tusks of a pig. He panted happily and tapped lightly upon the wall under them and each time he did, fine debris rained down from the ceiling.

Gazda lifted a hand to catch some of it and he noticed that the cascading particles flared to life and shone as they passed through yellow light that leeches past a vine-covered opening in the wall.

Coughing and nodding in understanding, he rose up to his full height and peered out. Indeed, the opening was covered by vines, and also by thin hardwood sticks that had been placed in an interwoven arrangement over it.

Vines had grown through the mesh, and the night ape picked a piece off and chewed it in place of his hair. Gazda squinted out into the light again, and realized he was looking toward the jungle on the south. On impulse he flattened himself against the wall, and angled his eyes right, so he could see—indeed, he could just make out the dark edge of the black trees, and the orange sky of sunset beyond it.

The black fog seemed to have grown even more.

Grunting worriedly, he turned from the window, and looking across saw that another such opening was set in the opposite wall.

Light from this flew across Fur-nose's dead legs and lit a cloud of dust that was falling upon another platform to Gazda's left.

This was just like the thing that Fur-nose rested upon, but it was larger with a tall thin back and broad upraised arms.

Gazda crept closer to it, grumbling warmly, and then panting at an odd feeling of familiarity. He sniffed the wooden arms, and then half-climbed upon the platform. Its old bindings squeaked but held.

The night ape studied its high, narrow back, tipping his head left and right, trying to understand...and then his eye fell upon the structure there in back of it.

This was a tall, hard-looking thing built against the wall where an opening that smelled of burned wood gaped between two smooth wooden uprights like trees.

Gazda's nose itched as he climbed down from the platform to investigate it. He sniffed at the charcoal and ash within the opening until he leapt back sneezing.

Center to Fur-nose's lair now, he leaned back on his haunches to study the strange cave-like thing that smelled of... flames. It was fire that he smelled there.

The night ape's attention shifted back to the skulls on the wall and the broad flat platform beneath it and from his vantage point, he could see that something was stacked under there.

Moving quickly, Gazda reached under the low platform and pulled out first one, then several animal skins, all piled and dry, and from these also he recognized the animals that had once worn them.

He pulled two other skins from under the low platform, but these were different, for each was suspended by thin pieces of hide, center to a wide loop of wood. A long slim branch had been fed through the strips of skin and this kept the hide taut and flat.

He slid his fingers against the fur and then turned the skin and rack over to sniff at the inside surface that had been scraped of flesh, and while it was dry, it was not brittle.

Indeed, Gazda's fingers worked the corner of one skin and the hide was soft and pliable.

He set the skins and racks aside and looked up at the skulls, horns and furs on the wall and he sighed.

Fur-nose was a hunter.

Gazda was a hunter.

The night ape squatted there in the center of the lair with his arms wrapped around his chest. Hooting fearfully, Gazda thought back to first entering the nest, and remembered the shock, and fright at its strange contents.

But now it felt like all the fear was gone.

Almost everything around him was strange: sight, smell, touch and sound, angular shapes forming unnatural structures; but as his eyes had continued to acclimate to the growing dark he had looked over the scene with less and less fear.

There could be no comfort. But these things felt familiar to him.

Gazda looked back to where Fur-nose's body sat propped up in the fading light that crossed the floor from the entrance, and he approached it again, growling instinctively until he knelt in front of it.

Fur-nose was mostly bones from his shoulders down, but where dried flesh appeared on his chest and abdomen; it was torn, and shredded as though some creature had attacked him.

The night ape noticed something then, and he crept even closer to look where a great length of rotten material was bunched and appeared to have been wrapped many times around Fur-nose's waist. It was deeply stained and displaced by the manner of the creature's death, but something within its folds caught Gazda's eye.

A curious length of wood or stone stuck out of Fur-nose's belt. Its rounded end had glimmered suddenly in the setting sun's rays, and even now the light shone

along its length and led to a stained leather box that lay within the folds of cloth on the dead creature's thighs.

Grasping the strange thing, Gazda gave a simple tug and a shiny, slender fang as long as his forearm slid out of the narrow leather box.

Hooting happily, the night ape held it up, and in his excitement gripped the gleaming fang with his free hand—and screamed, snatching his fingers away with a bark.

Dark blood welled up from a gash on his palm before it pooled and ceased to flow. Gazda had cut himself with the shining fang.

The night ape put a fresh hank of hair between his teeth and chewed as he studied the thing that had held the fang, and he quickly reached out to draw this away from the body.

He held the shining fang carefully; keeping his hand clear of its sharp point and edge as he cautiously slid this into a narrow opening in the broad end of the leather box that had previously contained it.

Gazda smiled as he watched the gleaming edge slide in and out of this holder, and his mind worked feverishly as he studied the weapon.

Fang? Bite. Claw? Scratch. Tooth. Eat. Cutter? Cut... Cutter. *Knife?* The unfamiliar word came floating up out of the recesses of his mind. Knife, he marveled incredulously, smiling as he admired its gleaming length.

It was a long knife!

But the only spoken word Gazda had for the weapon came from his lips as the ape language for 'fang,' which he repeated now as he continued his study of the blade smiling.

He slipped it away and then pulled it out with a flash. Panting and nodding with pleasure, he was thrilled by how quickly he could release the knife from its hiding place, and for a time he imagined it like the claws of a leopard that could be extended and withdrawn at will.

Gazda chuckled grimly, gazing hungrily at the thing in his hand and imagined the jungle enemies of the ape: the leopard, warthog, chimp and gorilla—and their prey, which was often the same thing. He wondered at how much blood he could coax from their flesh with the sharp instrument.

Chapter 13

The Shining Fang.

He sheathed the long knife and shifted it from hand to hand, wondering how he could carry it through the trees as he swung.

Impossible! And yet, he knelt by the corpse of Fur-nose again, and studied the long loops of cloth that girded his waist. Yes, the strange creature had carried the long knife within the folds of that belt, but Gazda could tell with a glance that the apparel was too large and long for him and would wrap many times around his body.

An idea struck him, and he leapt to the low platform and drew a skin out from underneath it. After several attempts he managed to cut a long circular strip of leather with his new blade. This he wound three times around his thin waist and then made fast by twisting its overlapping ends together until it stayed cinched.

A moment later, he had thrust the long knife and scabbard through this belt which tightened it the more. Gazda then drew the weapon with a quick flex of his right arm and stood armed for battle in the center of the lair.

He hooted and panted, then sheathed the weapon before slapping the floor with his palms and leaping up and down. The night ape was quite proud of himself.

The great Gazda! He thought, rising erect again, and drawing the long knife from its sheath. None are as great as he! Woe be to any other ape!

Then he groaned worriedly, sheathing his weapon and crouching low, before creeping over to the far wall by Fur-nose where he had noticed a strange thing lurking in the darkening shadow.

A curious twist of hardened stone lay there. Crouching by it and leaning forward upon his knuckles, he saw that it was of a material similar to the long knife—like smooth, shiny stone. This thing was slightly bigger than Gazda's hand and smelled of lightning when he pressed his nose against it.

A realization struck him.

The night ape jumped back and banged into the door that still hung open on its hinges. Growling fearfully, he leapt into the doorway. The thing on the floor must have been the thunder-hand that old Baho spoke of in his stories, and Gazda kneeled there briefly, paralyzed with fear.

Baho and other apes had seen it flash in the tree-nest before the entrance disappeared. It had been like thunder in mighty Goro's hands!

This thing?

He looked up and around Fur-nose's marvelous lair and felt great anxiety. Could this thunder-hand make the entrance disappear again?

The night ape returned to it, face hovering near as his lips pulled away from his sharp fangs when he smiled.

The thunder-hand was unlikely to make the entrance disappear if it were not inside the lair.

Gazda took a deep breath and then with all the speed in his body, he snatched up the otherworldly weapon and leapt outside. The night ape threw it as far as he could.

Thunder-hand glimmered once in the setting sun before it fell into the long grasses and was gone.

Gazda turned to hear a muted sound coming from the south. Out on the open platform, he could recognize his mother's distant call. She was far down the beach, and had finally missed him. It would take time for her to find his trail and discover where he had turned from the tribe to seek out Fur-nose's lair.

Strength suddenly surged through his body and he realized that he had stayed far too long. The sun was setting out beyond the great blue water and night was coming. He had to return to the tribe before the full jungle darkness closed upon him. He would be safer thus, and he could guard the others also.

He entered the tree-nest again and stood before the corpse of Fur-nose. Gazda sniffed the stuffy air, but the stink of decay had departed with the open door. The

night ape did not think to throw the skeleton away. There was no blood or meat in it, so being nothing more than dry bones, the remains held little interest for him.

Again his mother's call came from the distance. She was still very far away but she was moving north.

Gazda had to go, but his mind was already set on something. The night ape would make use of the tree-nest and call it his own for there was something comforting and secure about it that appealed to him.

With Fur-nose long dead this could be Gazda's lair, and he could come to it when he wished to be alone, for all those years of alienation had taught him to crave solitude.

He would do that, but first he needed to answer his mother...

Then just as he looked away from the body, something else caught his eye. A silvery flicker came up from under the long, rotten hair that laid over Fur-nose's chest. Shifting closer, the night ape saw a silver line looped around the corpse's neck and shoulders.

Gazda hurried over to pry the thing off as Eeda's desperate cries echoed in his powerful ears.

The silver line was made of many small bits of shining stone, round and interlocking, no bigger than bugs, and as he pulled it over Fur-nose's head, a circular piece of hard metallic stone came free of the corpse's mangled chest.

Holding the pendant up to his face, Gazda saw an image set on the disk that took him a moment to recognize: a tapered head and long, coiling neck.

He cried out fearfully and the odd artifact clattered to the floor. Kneeling over it, Gazda could see on the disk a long neck and the cold flat head of a snake. It was like the giant pythons that lived in the jungle and hunted apes.

Gazda studied the hard links for movement, and watched the round disk for a flicking forked tongue, before something within him frowned at his own fear.

It was dead—just shining bones.

Even if it had been a snake tricking him somehow by making its skin like shiny stone, was it still not a very small snake and easy for a hunter like himself to kill?

On impulse he drew the long knife from his belt, and smiling, loomed over the strange thing before he picked it up, marveling as the shining disk spun on the length of interlocking links.

After giving the disk a quick sniff, he glanced at Fur-nose's body and shrugging slid his weapon away.

Gazda held the loop of links in his hands and thrust his head through before sliding the artifact over his neck and shoulders in the same way it had hung over Fur-nose's moldering skull and neck. The flat, circular snake's head rested against Gazda's well-muscled chest, swinging on its silvery links when he moved.

He did not know the reason for the ornament, but he liked the feeling it gave him to have it there, or to simply have it. For once he was pleased to have something magnify his differences from the tribe of Goro. The thing was splendid, and marvelous and *his*.

How many apes in the tribe would dare wear a shiny stone serpent around his neck? Who but Gazda would have taken it from the very bones of Fur-nose?

They were different apes, indeed.

He left Fur-nose's nest, but hesitated before pulling the door closed behind him, making sure he remembered how the curious wooden latch opened by pulling on the length of leather that was threaded through the wall. He tested it a few times and then sprinted to the closest tree where he swung up into the branches.

For the time being, he would keep the provenance of his unusual new possessions to himself, fearing that the blackbacks would grow bold if they knew the night ape had been in the tree-nest, and in his absence molest his new-found lair.

So to hide where he had been that afternoon, Gazda traveled east and left Fur-nose's lair between himself and the great blue water before turning south again and angling west toward his mother's call. Her frantic voice still echoed from south of him, well down the sands where she was likely turning over every rock in search of him.

It warmed his heart to know his mother was so protective, but he also felt guilty for causing her dismay. The least he could do was put himself in the way so she could find him herself, and after the initial celebration scold him roundly for being such a foolish son.

He sped along a trail through the high branches until coming to the great forest of shorter fruit trees that bordered the beach for miles and miles. He had used the path so many times before that he could have navigated it through the growing dark with his eyes closed.

His own scent was everywhere. Some hint of it lingered on every tree he passed.

With the night falling fast, Gazda's powers were returning, and he could soon hear the ocean waves as though they were curling beneath his feet. He could sense also the powerful presence of the great blue water crouching like a monster in the west.

Its waves struck the sand hypnotically, and he soon smelled its salty breath on the warm jungle air.

The night ape was making good time until he came upon a broad swath of trees that had fallen over as if a strong wind had taken them down. This forced him away from the opening and east again to where the forest edged this gap of destruction and led back toward the shore.

Gazda fairly flew around this detour, flinging himself from branch to branch, listening intently for his mother's call. All the while quite pleased with his accomplishments, happy to have explored Fur-nose's lair, and proud of his courage and his actions.

He continued forward, leaping from tree to tree, and flitting like a shadow until a thick log three times the length of his body hurtled end over end toward him from of the jungle below.

The night ape contorted his body to escape the whirling missile's jagged ends, but he was struck across the abdomen.

The impact sent Gazda tumbling through the air into the open space that was littered with broken trees. He glanced off a fallen trunk and cartwheeled over the sandy ground as the flying log exploded into jagged splinters when it struck the ground near him.

As Gazda scrambled to his knees a great cloud of dirt, dust and ruin descended, blinding him; but it did not in any way diminish his other senses, for he immediately felt the earth shake under him as if a great storm approached.

The night ape squinted up into the twilight sky to see Magnuh's massive black bulk hurtling across the open space toward him.

Gazda shrieked, springing toward the closest trees south of him, realizing as he leapt over the fallen trunks that the bull elephant must have set this trap and now intended to take it to its bloody end.

The night ape growled admiringly despite his damaged body's cries of pain, for he respected the sly beast's ingenuity even as Magnuh angled his charge to block Gazda's path into the trees.

Luckily, the sun had slipped completely past the horizon, and left a purple sky under which the night ape's nocturnal strength returned in full.

He leapt onto a fallen tree and jumped toward the nearest branch 20 yards distant.

Gazda caught it... but too late, for Magnuh's long trunk lashed out, curled around the night ape's left ankle and squeezed.

Pain flashed up Gazda's leg as his ankle bones shattered, and agony scorched through his mind even as his thoughts flashed to Fur-nose's shining fang, *the long knife* in his belt.

The night ape held tight to the branch with his left hand, while with the right a single action drew the flickering blade from its sheath before it bit into the thick hide on the elephant's trunk.

Magnuh bellowed mightily at this, and recoiled in pain.

Gazda's leg sprang free of its grip as the beast roared in frustration and fury, lashing out and levering upward against the tree as the night ape heaved himself into the branches.

A moment more, and Gazda had climbed higher before leaping higher still.

There the night ape turned to glare down at Magnuh with his long knife still in hand. He slashed at the tree limb by his feet, scolding the bull elephant with a violent display.

Magnuh raged and blew a spray of scarlet foam from his trunk. He used his tusks to slash the bark away from the night ape's tree before the wounded monster stormed off into the jungle roaring and drooling blood.

Gazda hurled insults after the thwarted beast until the night ape was suddenly taken by a wave of nausea that sent him reeling back against the tree trunk. He realized then that his ankle was broken at right angles to his calf, and the flesh was torn in many places on his chest and belly.

Sinking down upon a branch, he watched in wonder as the wounds began to heal, and a great hunger rose within him, even as the worried cries of his mother grew in his ears.

His legs were deeply bruised and the skin was ripped. He gasped in pain as the ankle cracked and clicked as it suddenly shifted from its unnatural slant, and aligned itself with the rest of his leg.

The pain faded quickly but the hunger did not.

Gazda smiled as he held the long knife up in front of his face where licking carefully, he removed all trace of the elephant's thick blood from its sharp surface.

After that he lapped at the rich fluid where it still clung to his wrist and forearm, relishing the taste.

Neither he nor Magnuh had expected such a turn, and without the blade, Gazda knew he would have been pulverized and killed by the monster.

The night ape gazed lovingly at the weapon and wondered what other uses he might put it to.

1904-1905 — Ten to eleven years of age.

Chapter 14

A Jungle Joke.

Gazda's special abilities continued to improve as he aged. He was as strong or stronger than any of his contemporaries, day or night—faster on the ground and in the trees—and he had become an accomplished and peerless hunter. He boasted a keen intelligence and wisdom far beyond his years—certainly beyond most of the apes in Goro's tribe.

His mother was wise, he knew, as was Goro and old Baho, and there was no doubting the cunning that lay behind Omag's twisted features.

But Gazda was able to outthink most of the apes his age—if little Ooso did present a challenge from time to time. The she-ape had a piercing intellect and delightful imagination which she exercised when she was not busy judging her many blackback suitors or enjoying the gifts they offered her with their proposals to mate.

She had said that the blackbacks were beautiful to look upon with all that muscle, but that she had been spoiled by her long friendship with Gazda.

"You are smart," she had said, when the awkward discussion of mating had come up. "And Ooso is smart enough to know that."

"Then why does Ooso want blackbacks?" Gazda answered. His mother had long thought that the pair should mate when they reached the age, but the night ape could not bring himself to tell her the truth. He was sure that the little she-ape found him too ugly to consider such a union. He was so different.

"They are smart enough to stay with Ooso!" his little friend had replied. "Gazda won't. He wants to mate with the moon."

Like his mother, Ooso complained about his strange absences and nocturnal habits. But she was never really angry and liked to goad him into boisterous bouts of horseplay that always left Gazda laughing and wishing he could stay with Ooso.

But she was right; he was in love with the night.

In time, Gazda's growing acceptance of his differences had increased his emotional distance from the tribe. They were apes and his adoptive family, but he was a night ape, and he longed to know more about his own kind.

He judged that the unique powers: his strength, heightened senses and awareness, must have been a natural thing among the night ape tribe to which he clearly belonged and should well have been a thing of pride. Being of a smaller build than the other anthropoids, he had to be stronger and better at those things that ensured survival in the jungle.

Gazda also linked his growing prowess to his ability to overcome his fears. He had explored Fur-nose's lair all on his own—something that no blackback in Goro's tribe would do. In fact, the old story had said that it was Goro who had first entered the tree-nest. So, Gazda was quite pleased to know he had the courage of a silverback.

Even though in all honesty, even Goro had had Baho at his side, and a force of blackbacks behind him—but Gazda would never doubt his king's courage.

The night ape was not above superstition however, and remembered the odd sense of familiarity he had felt when first investigating the tree-nest, almost like he had been there before, or that it had somehow been preordained that he should enter the lair and become its new master.

His thoughts often drifted back to that day, and were encouraged to do so by the presence of the strange snake symbol he wore around his neck, and the long lethal knife that was thrust through his belt.

The other apes had taken notice of Gazda's acquisitions when he had first brought the strange artifacts back to the tribe, but it took some time for gossip about them to circulate.

Gazda's nocturnal existence and the daytime sleeping that resulted, when coupled with his absences while hunting had already created a rift between him and the other apes. Being creatures of daylight, they had other interests and habits, and by the time he'd been into Fur-nose's lair; he had few close dealings outside the grooming circle.

There, he would notice the curious glances from his tribe mates—any who looked upon the long knife or the snake disk were plainly intrigued—and this had alarmed Gazda at first. He had been protective of *his*, formerly Fur-nose's, lair and did not want to have to explain how he had entered.

So the night ape would answer any curiosity with the distraction of grooming, though he rejected the inquisitive Omag's overtures to groom, repulsed by the beast's mangy hide, and the unsettling way the crippled ape eyed Gazda's shining fang.

The act itself, whether they were at the Grooming Rock or at some other point along the trail, induced an incredibly calm and suggestive state in the recipient—but in this was Gazda different, also.

His mother had long been the individual most in receipt of this attention, but as others worked up the courage for such an exchange with the night ape, word had spread around the tribe that Gazda's nimble fingers, when raked through the fur, created a thrilling sense of calm that surpassed the grooming of all others.

Those who felt his touch remembered a stillness accompanied by mental pictures of events that had happened long ago when they were infants, or other cherished memories were conjured up that had long slipped their minds.

This made some recipients uneasy, since few were able to disregard the night ape's many differences; but it also made them curious. Gazda's knowledge of their

prejudice made him stingy with the talent, and he reserved it for those he considered friends, or for others who were asking questions.

Those went away with bold memories of an inner peace, but no new understanding of where the night ape got the shining fang or the snake rock that hung around his neck.

Gazda's reluctance was understandable also, for being the bearer of little fur; his participation in the ritual was lopsided in favor of the hairy apes he groomed.

He did enjoy the closeness as any ape would, but he grew bored with it in time, and his quick mind was preoccupied with many questions that could not be answered by simple company.

Likewise, he had come to believe that while the grooming encouraged interdependence and cooperation within the group, it also created dependence, and Gazda wondered if this explained why he could do things alone that the other apes feared.

Gazda often ranged away from the others when he'd had his fill of grooming and interaction, retreating to his tree-nest sanctuary whenever he felt the sheer weight of the tribe closing in around him.

In the daylight hours, he would also use his time for sleep, or to seek out Magnuh to pester if the great beast was near. Admiration for the elephant's ambush by the great blue water yet lingered, but Gazda also considered it a debt that needed to be repaid.

The night ape was still amazed that the injuries he had sustained when the elephant attacked had left no scars. In fact, all of the marks had disappeared that night by the time he'd finished hungrily hunting down some bushpigs and savagely drinking his fill of their blood.

His rapid healing seemed to be another difference between him and Goro's tribe, and one that would give him an edge over all the others, so he dared not raise the question. He had not yet seen it in other apes, and Omag's many obvious scars and wounds suggested that the others did not heal as easily as Gazda did.

If his peers had noticed the ability in the night ape, none had cared to mention it. That was either in deference to their superstitious fears or his mother's sharp canines that had long ago taught the other apes to mind her son's privacy.

One day part-way through his tenth year, Gazda came upon a large python high in the trees that was many times his body length and was at its thickest the width of his own waist. The sun was high overhead, and it was at this time that his night strength briefly returned each day, so he fell upon the slippery creature without any hesitation, his long knife held high overhead.

But the wily old serpent managed to catch the night ape's powerful legs before he could strike, throwing the reckless creature off balance and into crushing loops that pressed against the hard ridges of Gazda's muscular chest—smothering him.

With his left arm caught and held tight to his body, the startled Gazda began to reconsider his rashness; until he realized that he still had full use of the sinewy arm and hand that held the long knife.

The snake had not recognized the threat.

It had always seemed that the shining blade tilted every struggle in Gazda's favor, though his natural instincts could be made impetuous by its bitter edge—a

logical but dangerous mistake, that would eventually destroy what young Gazda held dearest.

The night ape struck again and again and the snake's warm blood spurted up Gazda's arm and across his face, and he thrust his long knife into the muscular flesh until the thick fluid seeped into the tight space between the snake's and his own smooth skin.

The python panicked finally, hissing and biting at Gazda's face many times, snapping at his eyes to distract him, but too late did the reptile attempt escape and loosen the coils that were crushing its opponent.

So as the night ape's limbs came free, he kept hold of the python, crouching over the dying serpent to strike and cut until the long thick body almost fell in two where it died draped across the branches.

Gazda quickly pressed his mouth against the creature's open flesh and drank its slow blood as he felt his temporary night strength ebbing with the sun's passage overhead. He lapped at the many red wounds until he was full, and the fluid became like fire in his sluggish veins.

But empowered by victory, he rose to his full height over the corpse as he'd seen Goro and other blackbacks do after battle or with the spoils of a hunt; and the night ape set his foot upon the vanquished enemy and beat his chest as he roared out the call of a great and terrible bull ape.

This was the largest beast that the night ape had ever slain; truly he would be accepted as a blackback now. Might it also cause him to rise in his place within the tribe, or earn him some long absent respect?

Giddy with his own success, Gazda cut the mottled skin away from the creature's flesh, and with skull still attached, he balanced the python's head atop his own while its empty hide hung down his back like a hood and cape.

He roared again like a victorious bull ape and then laughed as an exciting thought struck him.

Gazda started through the trees, chuckling as he went, as his gory prize slid over the branches behind him. He laughed outright when he dropped silently from the overhead branches to land nearly center to his tribe that sat grooming in a great contented circle around their king.

When Gazda hit the ground he crouched low and hissed to hide his laughter, and all of his brethren, even Goro, turned to see a great python in their midst—and they screamed in terror! Rolling and jumping away the apes cringed in the undergrowth, or climbed shrieking into the high branches.

As Gazda got to his knees, and panted joyfully, the silverback recognized the small, bloody figure beneath the tattered snakeskin laughing happily at Goro, his king—his joke! The great silverback roared and bared his fighting fangs, and then pounded the ground with mighty fists.

He charged out of the undergrowth directly at the night ape.

Gazda realized the foolishness of his joke where he cringed in the grass as the bull ape thundered closer, thinking Goro yet mistook him for a snake and was set to kill him.

But at the last minute, the big silverback reached out with a powerful hand as he charged past and plucked the awful snake head and skin from Gazda's gory back.

Wheeling away, the silverback dragged the snakeskin over the grass and dirt, and soon the entire tribe had taken to the trees while Goro screamed his great fury as he tore the dead snake's hide to ribbons.

Gazda had run for the safety of the trees but was met halfway by his mother. He leapt for her open arms, and when well within her grasp, she bit him.

The night ape rolled away, crying out at the pain, as his mother charged after him beating his legs and back until he surrendered completely, crouching low in the grass with an open hand offered to her—but she slapped it away.

Rubbing at his injured shoulder, all thoughts of Gazda's wounded pride were dispelled by his mother's angry look. In the trees around them other apes hung from branches or clung together, all of them agitated and scowling at the night ape, slowing coming to understand what had occurred.

What had Gazda done?

"Gazda be different without shaming Goro or scaring tribe," Eeda scolded, snapping her fangs to silence her son when he tried to speak. "The king treats Gazda like ape. The tribe treats Gazda like ape. So be ape not a snake!"

Gazda slumped in the grass before his mother as Goro continued to drag what remained of the dead and tattered snakeskin through the undergrowth.

Near the king, Omag had crept out of the trees with his blackback allies, intent upon the skin. The crippled ape's astonishment was plain, and his realization was evident. Hooting excitedly he looked back and forth between the tangled snakeskin, and the dense brush that hid Gazda.

The night ape coughed and sat upright as the rest of the tribe continued to climb down from the trees. He was glad of the long grass and the bushes that grew about and hid his embarrassment.

He absently lifted the shiny stone disk that hung around his neck to show it to his mother, to remind her... but she looked away without giving the prize a glance.

Instead, Eeda tore strips of green bark from a nearby bush that she chewed upon while her embarrassed son leaned in beside her.

She ignored the pale and upturned palm he offered.

Gazda studied the shining disk and tried to smile but his mood only darkened further. His snakeskin trick had been funny, but it had come at a price—reminding everyone how different he was.

And with that thought, he remembered how the snake had hissed as it fought him, and how the night ape also hissed when he fought. This made Gazda think of the dead beast's hairless skin, so much like his own in texture.

Gazda was like a snake and an ape!

He wrapped his arms around his knees and brooded for some time before his spirits rose again as he thought of the kill and the blood.

And if Gazda was like a snake? Did that matter if his differences gave him knowledge of the long knife? If it gave him the strength to kill a python that his entire tribe—even Goro—had run screaming from.

But would his trick make them afraid of Gazda too? Many in the tribe had no love for him already. That was the warning in his mother's words.

He cheered up considerably when Eeda finally relented, panting her forgiveness before she started grooming the thick hair atop his head.

Gazda crooned with pleasure as the day sleep came upon him, but his mind still toyed with another notion. Perhaps the night ape would look for a skin that had fur on it, and like Fur-nose wear it to cover his own, so that he would not be so different.

Then Goro and the tribe could not complain.

Chapter 15

The Call of Dreams.

As young Gazda was growing into his 11th year, he had become more and more impatient with the boring day-to-day lives of the tribe. He was tired of grazing, chewing food, breaking nuts and shells and termite-fishing, fruit picking and ape grooming—and he found that his discontent could not even be remedied through interaction with his friends.

While the closest of them little Ooso could be encouraged to think beyond the tribe, an ape she remained, finding comfort in the very things that so chafed against Gazda. She even went so far as to suggest that he'd do better to embrace the life that was unfolding. There was food, and rest, and did he never think of starting a family of his own?

She had explained that she was close to choosing from among her many suitors.

Kagoon, the other of his closest mates, was hopeless for as he had grown larger he had become more of a blackback preferring the company of others like him. His physical size and strength had helped him to overcome the reticence that he had always felt because his brain was renowned for its slowness, but few among the other adolescent males seemed to notice.

It had been years since Kagoon had spent much time with either Gazda or Ooso, though his distance from the she-ape could be attributed to his interest in her as a mate. Ooso had tried to dissuade him after he announced his intentions, but was unable to do so without hurting his feelings.

They all remained friends, but they were growing apart.

So with his closest companions in the full embrace of tribal life, Gazda started taking longer trips away to explore Goro's land, to hone his hunting skills and to visit Fur-nose's—*now Gazda's*—lair where he could hole up to contemplate his fortunes, sleep, or puzzle at the treasures and oddities he found inside.

Gazda felt safe within its walls for he'd noticed that all the animals gave the structure a wide berth when passing through the clearing, as though memory of its former occupant kept them away.

He knew the tree-nest had that effect upon the blackbacks of his tribe. Its history was told in tales by the older apes—especially Baho—who knew of Fur-nose and now the lair's avoidance had been made into law by Goro's insistence that it was not a place for apes to be—and few could forget the thunder-hand.

Especially when they were reminded.

It didn't matter that the odd creature had been dead for years and the thunder-hand gone. Of course, Gazda understood these things better than anyone, but was

happy to leave the stories in place for he did not want the other apes to know he had adopted the tree-nest as his own lair.

Sometimes he wondered if the other jungle creatures avoided the tree-nest because they felt the presence of the dark trees that Gazda had come to shun on his trips into the clearing. Their unsettling smell was always evident if the wind was right, and they were ever there at the corner of his eye.

The first time Gazda slept there had come after a noisy argument among the she-apes had brought him from his morning nap and sent him storming off through the treetops in search of peace and quiet.

He had only just arrived at the lair when the day-weakness came upon him again, so he quickly shut the door. With only a glance at the former occupant's remains; he stretched out on the big flat structure that he had intuitively come to recognize as Fur-nose's bed. Its soft covering against his naked skin had made his repose there irresistible.

After a brief sleepy study of the pelts, skulls and horns that adorned the wall over him, he had closed his eyes and then...

There was darkness, but sound had come to him from within it. A sad call that came again and again, seemingly from all around him as if it were generated by many creatures or had echoed from afar. No lion's roar, or hyena's scream to warn of danger, this was a high-pitched howl like birds or monkeys might make, but deep with feeling; a lament that had strangely soothed him.

Gazda had been drawn toward the bittersweet call in his dream, dear and familiar to him somehow, but mournfully did it linger in his heart, repeating there tragically like the cry of orphaned apes lost in the night. He awakened weeping with his eyes temporarily blinded as though a black veil set over them was slowly drawn away.

From time to time since then he had heard this in his sleep, but always the call haunted his memory—and never could he picture the beasts that gave it voice.

Gazda retreated to the lair whenever he could. He was usually inspired to visit by boredom or curiosity; but it was a place away from the group that had little in common with the other apes, so he felt at home where he was sure that they would not.

It offered some respite to the night ape's busy mind.

On this occasion, the tribe had wandered far to the east of the tree-nest, and Gazda knew it was a full half-day's travel or more to get there and another to return, but since his hunting had already taken him toward the clearing, he had crossed the final distance with little thought of rejoining the tribe before nightfall.

His confidence had grown as he aged, and his abilities assured his own safety. The shadows held few things he feared anymore, so for short periods he was learning to forget his ingrained need to be near the tribe after sunset. He felt safe in the dark by himself with no one close to hear his cry.

Gazda's only concern was for Eeda, whom on several occasions he'd found near sunrise, searching the treetops for him if his hunting had ever taken him far and his mother had awakened in her sleeping tree to find him outside the range of her call.

He always took the punishment she gave him without complaint because he was more worried about her wandering the jungle shadows in search of him

without his or Goro's protection near, and he would have blamed himself if something ever happened to her.

Because of this, the night ape had many times abandoned previous plans to visit the lair if the tribe had wandered too far for him to get there and back in good time. So out of love and loyalty to his mother, the frustrated night ape had been forced to stay with the often noisy and always tedious tribe.

But Gazda had become more open to caprice as he matured, and could convince himself that his mother would understand his impulsive needs. He could not always depend upon her for safety and sustenance, he reasoned, and so she would benefit from his time away.

That thought had kept him swinging through the trees until it left him at the platform outside his lair, clenched in mortal combat with guilt as he imagined his mother alone in the dead of night.

However, like most growing offspring of the anthropoid variety, he got better at overpowering the instinctive urges that would have him race home and see to her safety.

Gazda combated those impulses by embracing the logic that had put him at the tree-nest in the first place. He was there in part to improve his hunting skills. His mother had already benefited greatly by the rich meat he shared with her as a result.

So, in a way, he was doing it for her.

Also, he had a point to make. Goro's reaction and embarrassment over the snakeskin had greatly overshadowed Gazda's accomplishment of killing the python in the first place. So, rather than risk bringing up that unpleasant incident again by hunting another snake, the night ape had decided to go after a beast that was larger than his previous shame.

He wanted to kill a predator like himself—not an ape—for they were group hunters, and no masters of stalking and stealth—no, he knew a greater prize would be to go after something that could hunt and kill a python—or an ape.

In the past Gazda had relied on chance for finding prey, following tracks and scents to the inevitable kill; and while he had found the spoor of predators aplenty, he had guessed quite accurately that they were more adept at avoiding him than the creatures he usually dined upon.

From this he had surmised that hunting such a beast required more skill than chance.

Gazda and the rest of his tribe had long hated the leopards that had fed upon apes like Poomak, but like the others, Gazda had always retreated to the safety of the trees whenever one was near.

However, as time passed, and the night ape's confidence had grown, while the other apes hurled taunts and scolded, Gazda studied the supple killers until they retreated.

Leopards were deliberate with each movement they made—leaving nothing to chance. They studied every patch of earth upon which they were about to set a paw, and they would appraise each blade of grass for scent or mark. This calculating nature made them the efficient and terrifying predators they were.

Gazda had seen the results. Remains of beasts often heavier than the killers, carried into the high branches and wedged in place where they were butchered,

the bodies torn to ribbons and stripped of flesh by long fangs and razor-sharp claws.

Hunting such an animal would be dangerous and the outcome entirely unpredictable. But if he were successful? The thought of the respect that such a deed would earn made Gazda dizzy.

Gazda had grown to about the size of an average leopard, and while great power surged in his own limbs, he seemed awkward and angular in comparison to their compact bodies that were formed of solid muscle and thick bone

But the night ape knew his long knife would make all the difference. It had so easily slain the great python, biting deeply until the creature almost broke in half, and wielded again in the night ape's fist; the blade would surely work in the same way with a leopard.

The only difference would be that when Gazda had drunk its blood and skinned its flesh, he'd have a hide worth celebrating that none within the tribe would dare criticize.

Then would come the long-deserved respect.

Gazda knew that like him, the leopard preferred hunting in the dark, and likely had powers similar to his own that grew stronger after sunset. The night ape was encouraged by this notion, for while he did not greatly fear the beasts; he wanted to be at his strongest when he met one.

Chapter 16

The Pride of Prey.

So, that night as the full moon drifted in and out of ragged clouds, Gazda slipped past the tree-nest door and sprinted the short distance to where long branches reached out of the jungle and into the clearing. With a powerful leap, he was into the trees and swinging away with all his speed. Around him the night creatures made their songs and calls, and all of them combined to form a constant noise that would have confused an animal not born to the jungle.

The night ape moved seemingly deaf to the cacophony, though his subconscious mind studied the raucous cloud for any sign of danger.

His thoughts were otherwise focused upon the hunt.

Gazda knew jungle trails that led to a spring where many forest creatures drank.

And near such paths would leopards lurk.

Gazda's eyes pierced the jungle depths so acutely at night that it still took him great concentration to see only what he wished to see. The jungle was so crowded that every glowing insect, reptile, bird or tree gleamed against surrounding shadow in a way that could dazzle him.

This effect was pronounced on nights where the great moon flew in and out of scudding clouds, alternately bathing the jungle landscape with its bright light, adding random changes as the night ape's eyes struggled to adjust.

In even low light or darkness, the trees were to him illuminated as though by a pale, blue gleam and so he could pass recklessly through the canopied jungle, leaping from one branch to the next or by sprinting along the wider boughs before hurtling into open space to catch at vine or creeper.

At other times, he swung hand to hand, throwing his body through any hole in the dense foliage that opened in the direction in which he flew.

Just now, Gazda had opened his senses to his surrounds, scanning the jungle trail below for evidence of his favorite food, a small antelope or bushbuck. The short-horned beasts had tasty red blood that would appeal to a leopard too, so he had decided to catch one of the creatures for a meal, and then set its flesh out afterwards to serve as bait. He knew that no jungle predator would pass up such an offering of fresh meat.

The moon moved behind the clouds, and in the descending night a familiar glowing shape gleamed brightly against the sudden darkness that opened up below. It was moving quickly along the path, the incandescent spark flickering as it passed beneath the underbrush, so Gazda circled through the branches, before dropping swiftly earthwards while clinging tightly to a vine.

With a single swinging motion, the night ape flew close to the ground while reaching out to snatch the bushbuck from the trail before the vine began its arcing upward climb toward the trees, where he came to rest on a twisted bough.

Gazda wasted no time slashing the bushbuck's jugular with his fangs and hungrily lapping at the blood that flowed from the dying creature, but he pulled away suddenly near the end so that he did not completely drain the beast.

The remaining blood-scent would bring a leopard. Gazda's short meal had invigorated him while leaving room for the carnivore's blood he planned to feast upon later.

The night ape clamped the bushbuck's neck between his teeth and climbed down to the jungle path where he laid the warm carcass on the earth under the low-hanging branches of an ironwood tree.

Gazda positioned himself on a thick limb some 15 feet over the bait where he stretched out on his belly, arms and legs ready to coil and leap at the first sign.

The trap was set.

Thunder rumbled and interrupted the incessant calls of the creatures that filled the trees around the night ape.

Gazda frowned up at the first light patter of raindrops upon the leaves. Then, as the rain picked up, the normal night sounds ceased altogether and were replaced by the rushing roar of the growing downpour.

The night ape took it without complaint since the high canopy broke up the worst of the rain, absorbing and scattering the deluge, and he believed the sound from it could cover any unintentional noises he might make, which would give him and his long knife an edge when a leopard came.

He waited, watching and listening to the rainfall, as droplets ran over his back and legs. He saw several small creatures scurry across the jungle floor, some halting to sniff the dead bushbuck; others simply flitted from one terrifying shadow to the next.

The jungle was dangerous at night.

The rain continued, and Gazda's long hair was soon soaked and hanging down around his face where it dripped onto the path below. He pushed it back over his shoulders, and wedged it behind his pointed ears but the weight of rainwater soon had it falling forward again.

The night ape shifted his position as time crawled by, and soon Gazda was bored, as if he was watching old Baho snore in his nest of elephant plant leaves.

Gazda's thoughts drifted from there toward the general coarseness of his adoptive tribe. Their lives were a constant struggle against the elements, but the rewards they received were so simple and plain.

Grooming, fruit and grubs—family, certainly—but the night ape could never be satisfied with such an end. Family then? He cared for Ooso, but he did not think of her, or any of the other she-apes, in a way suggestive of mating or offspring.

He grunted to himself acknowledging that even the meager prize of tribal contentment that the apes often experienced in the idyllic green jungle could so easily become a chaotic display of madness as Omag or some young blackback lost control of his brutish emotions and terrorized the tribe.

Dramatic, but it led nowhere, and came to nothing.

And yet, the others in the tribe were content, not as restless as he. Was this just another difference between him and the other apes? He found them boring, but did that make him better? Sometimes it felt that way to him, when chaos disrupted the calm, when his fellows became lost in their passions. Then he quietly admired the differences that made him what he was.

At those times, Gazda was pleased to be a night ape.

Thunder startled him from his reverie, and the branch shook beneath him as he caught his balance. Yawning, he raised his head.

Gazda had never imagined that hunting meat eaters would be boring. Like many young animals he craved action, even if it came with the possibility of death. He panted quietly to himself, thinking it a fine joke that dying might be better than listening to Baho's snoring...

He opened his eyes on a jungle that was silent except for the incessant drip of raindrops. The downpour must have ceased while he drowsed. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the sky flickered behind the canopy.

Asleep? Gazda pushed the hair out of his face, and drew his legs and arms under him, coiled to spring. Holding his breath as his pulse flared, he felt the hairs along the back of his neck prickle.

So stupid to doze off—boredom and the bushbuck blood had caused it, made him drowsy and distracted.

He cast about the night with his senses, the action dropping his lank hair into his face again. Hooking the long locks behind his ears, he wondered why the animals were still silent. Did they know the rain would return, or had the other beasts noticed his presence?

A blood-curdling scream came close behind him, and Gazda leapt from the branch; but not quickly enough to escape a wide, black paw that struck at him as he fell; its long claws sunk into the flesh of his face and throat and held him dangling in the air.

A black panther brother to the spotted leopard glared down at him from above; the crafty beast had smelled the bushbuck but decided on a *live* meal, so it had

stealthily moved up into the tree behind the night ape. Had it smelled the blood on Gazda's breath as he slept?

Stupid! Fool!

The full moon suddenly slipped out from behind the rain clouds, its light piercing the canopy to throw the predator into stark relief.

The sudden brilliance blinded Gazda as pain burned across his mind where the panther's big claws dug deeper into his flesh. The beast was forced to keep its other limbs wrapped around the branch to avoid being pulled from its perch with its prize.

The night ape growled up into the black beast's yellow eyes. Unlike the spotted leopard's fur, this panther's hide made it the perfect night hunter.

Snarling, it lifted Gazda, as the night ape's vision cleared and showed him the bright white fangs in its open jaws.

Gazda squirmed, and reached up to grab the big cat's shoulder. With a wrench, he ripped his face and neck away from the claws and fell the 15 feet to hit the ground on his back.

The impact knocked the breath out of him but he had no time to catch it. While above, still etched against the moonlit canopy, the panther hissed, and with a terrifying howl leapt down at him with long fangs flashing and curved claws raking the air.

Gazda ignored the pain in his mangled face and throat as he whipped the long knife from its sheath and brought the shining blade up in time to drive it into the panther's chest when it fell upon him.

The beast's eyes blazed with pain and fury; before yowling, the predator writhed and raked at Gazda with its long claws.

The panther bit into the night ape's face, driving its upper fangs into Gazda's cheekbone while the lower teeth ripped up through his jaw and tongue, jamming the crushed bone against the roof of his mouth.

Gazda ignored the ruin of his flesh and the burning pain to put his full fury into the long knife he twisted between the big cat's ribs. Locked together by teeth and violence, the night ape tasted the panther's blood in his mouth where it mixed with his own.

The beast again slashed his naked chest and thighs with its claws to tear him asunder.

But the night ape could do no more than growl and twist his long knife with all his strength as the panther chewed at his face.

The beast shuddered suddenly, and a cracking noise reverberated as Gazda's blade snapped three of the big cat's ribs. The animal went limp.

Growling angrily, Gazda moved and rolled to get out from under the body, and onto his knees. There he slowed, dragging in a deep breath before he shifted the panther's head this way and that to gingerly open the muscular jaws that were still locked upon him, pulling and pushing to work its fangs out of his face.

There was a wet, sucking sound finally and the panther's jaws fell away from him.

Dark blood pulsed out of the holes in Gazda's mangled face as he climbed unsteadily to his feet to sway over his dead enemy.

The pale skin on the night ape's body hung in flaps and showed the bloody ribs on each side of his chest, and he wondered for a moment why he was not dead.

But then, elation overpowered his pain, and setting one bare foot upon the dead panther, he threw his head back and beat upon his chest while giving the mighty roar of a bull ape that had killed its prey.

The bestial cry shook the jungle around him, and painted the forest floor with a bloody spray of gore from his lungs.

Coughing, Gazda's strength began to pour out of him, but his nostrils caught the potent scent of the panther's blood. He dropped upon the body and tore its throat open to drink. Kneading the dead muscles with his shaking hands, the blood spurted into his mouth, and as it flowed down his throat he felt a shadow of his strength return.

His vision still swam as he drank, but as he squeezed the dead flesh for every drop of rich blood, his power returned in surges.

And as he drank, all of his wounds began itching and throbbing, and his torn muscles quivered terribly. Gazda gripped his lower jaw while agony flared there as the broken bone made cracking noises while positioning itself to knit.

Then dropping to his knees, the night ape clutched at the torn flesh on his chest and thighs, pressing it painfully into place, pushing it against the shape of his ribs and muscles where it formed scarlet lines along the torn edges.

He was healing, but he needed much more blood to restore the lethal injuries he had suffered—and much of the panther's store had spilled upon the ground.

Gazda glared at the dead beast in the dark, licking at the strong red fluid that still seeped from it. The pain, heat and fury of battle was leaving him as his wounds healed, and he finally smiled at the panther's carcass, while running a hand over its sleek black fur.

"Thank you for your blood, it is *me* now," he told the dead creature through mangled lips. "You are a great hunter and honor me with this gift. I will be like you and our flesh will be one. I will move silently and strike quickly." He went quiet as a hunger pang wrenched his guts. His wounds continued to itch. "I will catch the hunter while he hunts."

Gazda climbed off of the body, and using his knife, commenced to remove the black hide. The night ape's flesh continued to knit along fading purple seams as he worked, but he only paused from time to time to shudder as sundered nerves re-grew and blazed anew with pain. There was a final cracking sound from his face as the jawbone twisted back into shape, but the itching remained.

There was still much to repair, and he couldn't return to the tribe until he was healed or they would learn his secret, if secret it was, and be amazed, frightened or threatened.

He was swooning and exhausted, and his breath was coming raggedly. He needed more blood, but he wanted this panther's skin. It would show the others what he had learned.

Gazda would not be caught unaware again, and he would hone his hunting skills until all the jungle trembled when he roared.

Chapter 17

A Great Killer.

Gazda made good on his word, and ever after, he was hunting.

From that first great kill, he had the panther's skin as trophy; but being dead flesh, the hide would soon draw flies and decay like any lifeless thing in the jungle. Unless...

...he remembered the pile of hides in the tree-nest. These had been dried and prepared in a way that he did not understand, but the notion fed the desire to preserve his prize.

So back at the tree-nest he copied the dried skins of Fur-nose by scraping the flesh and blood from inside the hide and laying it flat on the boards outside the door to dry.

The night ape examined the two skins that Fur-nose had kept flat within the looped sticks, but after a couple of attempts to repeat the procedure, Gazda had given up with plans to try another time. His panther skin was beginning to smell in the jungle heat so would not tolerate much delay.

While he waited for the hide to dry, Gazda studied the coverings on Fur-nose's corpse. It was evident to him that the strange creature had hidden his naked skin. He wore a bag made of fur on his head, and he had disguised his limbs behind the strange woven material.

The thought of wearing the prized panther skin in a similar fashion thrilled the night ape.

So Gazda searched the lair and found other coverings of similar shape and construction to the rotten things draped upon the skeleton, and after much struggle, he discovered how some of the dusty garments were worn.

Standing there clothed in Fur-nose's baggy tunic and pants, Gazda briefly considered wearing them with his panther skin while on the hunt. However, after moving on all fours while wrapped in the confining clothes he rejected the idea. They felt like they were smothering him and he was even briefly panic-stricken when the material clung to his arms and throat, restricting the movements necessary to draw his long knife!

So he tore the coverings off and threw them aside, to stand naked before the corpse of Fur-nose.

The strange garments did not suit Gazda's requirements, but they inspired him to find the means for covering his body—not out of shame—but in celebration. He was a night ape and a great hunter as Fur-nose seemed to have been.

And night apes covered their skins.

Gazda was too impatient to let the panther hide dry completely, so he took it up and carefully cut a narrow piece from it. This he used as a rough covering for his loins by wrapping it through the belt that held his long knife. From the rest of the big pelt, he made a long mantle that closed at his throat by twisting together the fur that had covered the beast's forelegs.

That garment fell back over his shoulders like a cape that would keep the sun off his back if he hunted outside the forest, or when the tribe gathered around the

Grooming Rock. At night it would hide his pale skin from his enemies and his prey.

He did another thing too. Gazda used the skin from the dead beast's tail and twisted it into a fuzzy loop that ran around his head to keep his hair away from his eyes. He had been reckless to let it hang into his face before—so reckless, yet this the black panther had taught him too.

In time the uncured leather would begin to stink and grow hard as it rotted, but Gazda had no regrets for the rank odor hid his true scent, and might strike fear into the hearts of other carnivores.

And he could always find another beast to skin.

The panther had taught Gazda more than the dangers of sleeping while on the hunt. The creature's black fur stood out in stark contrast to his own pale coloration, a handicap that made stealth almost impossible for the night ape in the dark jungle shadows.

Which reminded him of something. One day while skirting a stream, he had been shocked to see a knobby log on the bank open its eyes and slide into the water. A crocodile had been lying there made indistinguishable from its surroundings by the dark brown mud that covered it.

A lethal piece of wood.

Remembering this, Gazda saw the sense in the crocodile's choice, and he decided to cover his own body with mud, at least those parts that protruded from beneath the panther skin.

He was pleased to find that unlike the rotting hide at his waist and upon his back, the mud hid the night ape's flesh, and disguised his scent with a neutral smell.

He came to think of the slippery addition as his "mud-skin."

The apes in Goro's tribe did not know what to think of these developments.

When Gazda returned with black panther fur at his waist and its skin draped over his back, some found it hard to believe that he had slain the beast by himself. No group of hunting blackbacks had ever dared such formidable prey, so how could one skinny freak accomplish the feat.

Other than the hide, there was no proof that there had ever been a panther, and since there were no scars on his body save the mysterious one across his brow—well, this made them doubt the more, for how could any ape kill a black panther and come away without scars?

Of the mud covering his own skin? The apes generally regarded this as proof that Gazda had finally gone crazy.

Or he was teasing them, though, his darker coloration was more agreeable to the anthropoid sensibilities, and they only ever questioned the disguise when Gazda added decorative flourishes to it.

Sometimes he drew fish "scales" or etched the jagged hash marks of "fur" on his muddy limbs. Those symbols invited appreciative glances and much interest, for the apes enjoyed good riddles—unlike the complaints that were caused when he upset the blackbacks by outlining the bones on his arms, legs and chest after applying a fresh layer of mud.

The male apes saw such artistic endeavors as a threat to tribal peace and security, and eventually there was such an uproar that Goro would have banned

the practice had Gazda not started leaving for days at a time to test his camouflage in the wild.

Time continued to pass for creatures that were unaware of its passage, except perhaps for dimly noting the waxing and waning of the moon. Instead, the conditions of life dictated the terms and so the young were born and the lucky ones grew to adulthood only to have young of their own should fortune smile.

These adults matured and evolved to suit their natures, ever seeking some pinnacle within the group, and to preserve its elevation. Females rose in stature through the broader hierarchy, and in the tighter embrace of motherhood brought many new members to the fold; as their male counterparts swelled in size and prowess to protect the tribe while gaining skills and courage to one day challenge their massive leader.

Within this milieu Gazda matured, and learned the ways of hunting, yes from the actions of the bull apes, but he also learned by watching and mimicking the behaviors of other successful animal hunters.

Like an ape he moved at speed through the high canopy as stealthy as a black panther on a scent, and closer still he came to resemble the snake, patiently slithering inch by inch until he was in striking range—while at other times he came as an eagle knifing down with irresistible force.

Then also did he employ their methods and with his own fangs or claws tore at the throats of his prey, or with his long knife punctured skulls or chests of those he would consume—the unsuspecting. Still at other times like the apes and like the snake did Gazda grapple with creatures of the jungle and with his strength alone crush out their life, or hold them as he drank it down.

All as time progressed unmarked except when action played in the hot red space between life and death, until another year and more came and passed. And there, at the end of this did Gazda, taller now and much, much stronger, stand with a foot upon the broken chest of another unlucky creature and beating his own breast until the medallion upon it jumped at each fierce strike; he gave his mighty bull-ape cry.

This while in his racing heart were the words: “I am Gazda of the Apes. A great hunter and killer!”

1904-1905 — Ten to eleven years of age.

Chapter 18

Seeds of Ambition.

And while the night ape hunted, life in the tribe continued along its unremarkable course. Goro was king, and none would challenge him. Old Baho

grew older and the hair atop his head was thinner, but he showed his loyalty, and shared sentry duties with the blackbacks.

Baho also shared his wisdom with the young, and told them that strength in one meant strength in all. The tribe was carried on the backs of all its members, blackback, she-ape, and infant, and all had to honor the king, for it was upon the silverback's shoulders that the tribe was borne.

These apes of Goro's tribe were slow to reproduce with the females birthing offspring no more than every five to six years. The many seasons since Gazda's adoption had produced a comparative "stasis" in terms of numbers, with the total apes now 61. The young had replaced the old, and the cautious filled the space left by the reckless. But this tribe of apes did not breed quickly, and that fact was responsible for their dwindling numbers at that time, and was what led to their eventual extinction.

Calamitous loss of numbers had taken its toll upon the species in the past, as it had on other offshoots of other species. Drought, earthquake and fire presented changes too rapid for the intelligent apes to breed or evolve their way past, and so often as was the case, the most successful tribes maintained at best the status quo. They clung to existence along the coast of a dark continent that would one day forget them, as it had a myriad other kinds.

In times long past, lands like Goro's had bordered other territories ruled by apes of his kind, but slowly those anthropoids had been replaced by the ruthless and rugged chimpanzee bands, and by loose collections of gorilla groups.

And that was nothing compared to the damage caused by the approach of human beings. As their numbers grew, so did their rapacious need for territory and resources like those found within the borders of Goro's land. In time, that tide would become too powerful for any group of beasts to turn.

It could be argued that the only chance for Goro's apes once lay in the cunning of Omag and the aging queens, for in their talk was the development of foresight, and the treasured knowledge of cause and effect and of desires fulfilled—facets of sentience that were powerful tools inherent to the tribe, but that needed exercising to develop as true survival skills.

Skills that admittedly did not guarantee survival, for at one time the whole world had eavesdropped upon many such cunning anthropoid species, and must have buzzed with the whispers of ambitious apes that are now forever gone.

So here Omag, Oluza and Akaki flattered young Ulok who was fast growing in size and strength. Years older than Gazda, he had been a blackback for some seasons now, and had quickly fought his way up through the tribal hierarchy.

The cynical apes within the tribe said that Ulok's climb had been accomplished with *his* brawn and *Sip-sip's* brain; though there were no challengers prepared to utter such a contentious thing to this growing forest giant.

Omag and his cohorts would crowd around and spoil the younger ape, grooming his thick fur and his ego, if his crippled mentor did find himself distracted and flinching from time to time, as sudden sounds caused him to recollect his bad luck with falling stones.

On occasion, Omag sat center to his little cadre with the aging queens acting as his handmaidens, cautiously grooming him. *Gingerly* grooming him, for his diseased flesh was too sensitive for such interaction, but there were times when

the build-up of flaking skin, dried pus and the proliferation of scabs became too itchy and frustrating for him to ignore. Only then, could he bare the social exchange, and submit to a careful going-over by the old she-apes.

Secretly, the crippled ape also enjoyed the respite from random missile fire that attended such rare events for they never seemed to find him when he was surrounded by other apes. This cessation had not been his intention, but a bonus, since Omag had accepted the center position in part, with the hope that his attendants might absorb some of the falling objects that came his way.

The old queen Oluza was especially good at grooming Omag, and could discern which scabs were most ready to part from the damaged skin, though she was encouraged in her expertise by an affection for the tasty morsels.

As was tradition, Ulok also joined in to groom his mentor, though his participation was often prompted by his desire for Oluza, who despite his mother Akaki's objections had several times initiated mating rituals with the amorous young male.

Omag's sensitive skin and prickly nature kept him from overindulging in grooming, so he switched off with Ulok if he detected the young blackback's attention beginning to wander.

The crippled ape was most impressed with the young blackback's progress and he often imagined the day that Ulok would challenge Goro's power. This excitement was only ever overcast by anxiety and doubts produced by Eeda's night ape son, who was forever doing strange and unpredictable things.

Like the shining fang that Gazda had brought back from the jungle. That silver barb had made the skinny foundling into a formidable hunter—*of panthers* so he had claimed—though he had only ever shown a large black animal skin to prove it.

While Omag had a hard time believing such a thing was possible, he knew that the night ape had been an able hunter of meat *before* the addition of the fang, and so, some of the more gullible apes were willing to accept that Gazda "might" have killed the panther.

It didn't help that the night ape also boasted about that victory at every opportunity.

While that lethal tool, and Gazda's strange behavior—which continued to include his wearing the black animal skin and covering his pale flesh with mud—might be signs that he was crazy by ape standards, it signified something more to Omag.

His behavior meant Gazda could become a powerful challenger to any silverback if he ever grew larger and stronger, and had he the interest.

Ulok had been a wise choice, of that Omag was certain, for there were no blackbacks close to him in size and might, but even he might succumb to the shining tooth should Gazda ever make the challenge.

So, Omag hoped that the night ape's boastful nature and reckless behavior would lead to his undoing, for it was clear that Eeda's freak believed the new shining fang held more answers than wit and might.

Omag knew something of the silver tooth, for he had seen similar weapons in the hands of the bone-faced apes whose females he preyed upon. They also carried long, shining fangs, and from his place of hiding there had he once schooled himself in their power.

One sunset, while awaiting females by the river, Omag had seen a group of bone-faces come to their lair behind the sticks bearing a dead lion. The creature had been hanging by its legs from a thick pole carried by bone-faced males.

The crippled ape had decided to abandon his hunt after a great crowd of bone-faces came out of the lair and made a menacing display around the lion; but what most prompted Omag's retreat had been the bone-faced ape that stepped back with a long stick upon which was fixed a shining fang, and with it he repeatedly stabbed the dead lion through and through.

Omag would never forget that lesson, and was much more cautious when he took the next bone-faced female for his meal.

But always thereafter did he watch for such fangs in the bone-faces' hands, as he had now come to watch the one in the night ape's.

He would never discount Gazda's weapon, for in fact, he coveted it, wondering how he might get it for himself, or where he might acquire such a thing of his own.

A clever gleam appeared in the crippled ape's eye whenever he thought of the power he would wield with a shining fang of his own. Not even Goro could stand before him so armed.

In this time, Eeda had continued to refuse the attentions of the males, and rebuked any that attempted to mate with her. The blackbacks even complained to Goro but he told them to pursue females that were willing to have them.

He believed that Eeda would mate again once her focus on her adopted son was ended, and already the silverback could see that the night ape required little of her time.

Gazda was now much stronger and more muscular and was growing up to be a hunter unparalleled within the tribe. His skills had provided meat to the blackbacks, she-apes and their infants, and this rich diet was reflected in the thick and glossy coats of all who had received it.

The night ape had never lived on the same cycle as the tribe, being a thing like the moon, and as he had aged, his hunting often kept him away. His mother still complained about this habit, though she rarely went looking for him after nightfall anymore.

Sadly, though Gazda had cunning and skill, Goro still judged him to be crazy since he continued to cover his pale skin with mud and traipse about the jungle with a panther skin over his back. A skin from a panther similar to the others that he claimed to have killed on his own, a tale that Goro doubted, despite the shining fang that the night ape always carried at his waist.

One was unlikely... But Gazda claimed to kill a new panther whenever the old disguise had rotted or worn out.

Such a thing was unbelievable.

Goro had seen the shining fang in action on the odd group hunt in which Gazda eagerly participated; and the silverback respected its gleaming edge after seeing it snatch the life out of prey, even though he doubted its power against his might. To the bull ape it was but a little fang, and there were few places on the silverback's body where it could penetrate to a depth that would kill.

His warrior nature would make him wary of it, as he was wary of many dangers; but Goro was more concerned about Omag's whispering, and the close attention that the failed silverback and the aging queens paid to his son Ulok.

Like any silverback, the king cared for his offspring, but had no love for them as they grew into maturity, and became ambitious blackbacks. Such love could blind him when a blackback son's challenge came, and no king could be so sentimental.

He respected Ulok's strength, and could see his own power there in the flex and heft of the growing ape's muscular form.

Goro did respect it, though he did not respect the ape. Ulok had become a bully and had no honor. It was normal for the blackbacks to fight amongst themselves—and such behavior was even encouraged—but they were to protect the tribe. Many times had Goro seen Ulok bully the females and infants when his needs were not met, or when disappointment loomed.

Since Omag was also bully, it seemed to Goro that the association between the two was the source of his son's dishonor. While this bothered the bull ape as a father, it soothed him as a silverback, for being a bully would make Ulok's challenge weaker when it came.

Goro was not as convoluted a thinker as his enemies were, and that might have been his undoing in the end. He did not obsess over the unhealthy relationship between his son, Omag and the aging queens. It was his thought that the more likely outcome would be that Ulok would reach an age to challenge and in a rage slay the crippled Omag as was sometimes the way with young males—even if the older ape was not the king.

The silverback was glad then to think of old Baho's loyalty. Baho had also fathered blackbacks in the tribe, and those were loyal to him and to the king.

Still, Goro knew a challenge would one day come, and he would be ready for it. At 450 pounds of solid muscle, few things in the jungle could threaten him.

And only a foolish blackback would dare make the challenge before he was at the height of his power. Goro doubted such an attempt would ever come from the night ape, for besides being crazy, Gazda did not seem to be so ambitious—and he was too small.

The night ape's inclusion in such thinking usually came when Goro had puzzled over Gazda's claims about killing panthers. It was inconceivable to the silverback that the comparatively scrawny night ape could accomplish such a thing, shining fang or not.

This usually led the king to wondering if even he could accomplish a victory over a big cat without such a weapon.

Chapter 19

The Two Trees.

Gazda was well into his 13th year and growing quickly into full adolescence. Whenever he returned from a hunt there would be clashes with the other young male apes because his diet of fresh blood and his active lifestyle had left his flexible body layered in banded muscle, and his head full of pride.

His hubris and his immaturity often provoked him into competitions of strength, speed and dexterity, all of it in a lead up to the day that he and other

young males would be fully welcomed into the throng of blackbacks that jockeyed for position under Goro and his lieutenants, with most of them eyeing the throne.

This could lead to brutal exchanges between Gazda and his contemporaries that usually began in the good-natured spirit of competition, but that more often than not degenerated into payback for lifelong personal disputes, answering old debts, insults and jealousies.

Gazda enjoyed the tests of strength and courage to a degree that depended upon the time of day. At night or when the sun was directly overhead, the night ape could surprise the tribe by easily overpowering his peers, and while this built him a firm reputation as a fighter; it also meant he was the target of repeated attacks, since he had become a benchmark for all other challengers.

However, battles in the long shadows had been outlawed by the king, and their outcomes thrown into suspicion, which left the night ape timing his challenges for those parts of the day when he was strongest.

This restriction left a lot of defeated young blackbacks chattering and jockeying to fight the night ape again when it most favored them. Many quickly learned the trick of issuing their challenges mid-morning or afternoon when the night ape most craved his sleep. He could still win then, but the outcome was much closer and left him exhausted in victory and defeat.

At night when he could revel in his power, Gazda was more than a match for them, and at such times he entertained childish thoughts of calling adult males out to fight. His contemporaries were weak and slow-witted by comparison; and the night ape craved greater competition.

He had tried to challenge the mighty Ulok, but Omag had lunged between them, and with much flying spittle refused the fight on the young blackback's behalf. Gazda was not a real ape, Sip-sip had claimed most hurtfully, and Gazda could find nothing to say in response.

In the night ape's heart, he had yearned to call Omag out to a battle, but never in his most youthful boast would he dare utter such a thing to an ape that had fought Goro himself, for it would be like challenging the king.

And Goro's indomitable power had been so ingrained on Gazda's soul, and pounded in by his feats of prowess, that the silverback represented the epitome of strength in the night ape's mind.

There had not been a serious challenge to Goro for many years because the silverback was truly the most powerful bull ape to come along in generations.

Many of the young blackbacks still performed mock displays, circling the king, but never doing more than earning a ferocious reprimand if they stepped too far. Those adolescent blackbacks who in their youth and folly came to blows with Goro were punished accordingly, but rarely did they suffer excessively for the king was not a despot.

Goro usually took the youthful exuberance in stride, and responded eagerly when the mock challenges came.

All male apes grew silver hair on their shoulders and along their spines when coming into adulthood, but it was only after challenging their king for leadership that this vest grew thick enough to earn the characteristic name of silverback.

So all kings were silverbacks and their challengers, too.

An adult blackback male would never perform a false display, for all such challenges were accepted, with an outcome that led to death or exile—or worse, a beating and mercy shown by a king that many considered “weak” for straying from tribal law.

Of course, tradition demanded that any genuine challenge for the throne should be made at the meeting place of the Two Trees where generations of ape successions had been decided.

That place was a great, grassy, stone-strewn clearing a day’s walk northeast of the Grooming Rock that was edged around with prickly thorn trees and fruit bearing bushes. The tribe visited at least twice a year when the fruits and nuts came into season, and it was there that the tribe knew any “official” challenges to leadership would come.

Two Trees was also the place where other challenges of less import were addressed, with the king holding court center to the “V” formed by the dead trunks of the titular “Two.”

Here he would listen to complaints within the tribe: of violent behavior between mates, of dangerous actions among blackbacks, of the true lineage of offspring, before he reminded all of the responsibilities for the guilty parties, of the dangers of infidelity and of the need to satisfy the victims.

Within a rough ring of stones by the buttressed roots of the Two Trees Goro would give his pronouncements and settle all disputes. The proceedings were essential to the tribe’s well-being as they had been for generations, since small disagreements grew into large ones if unaddressed, and the jungle life was too fraught with peril to have one’s tribe divided against itself.

Here apes were judged, and proof of this was the old thorn-nest where legend said usurpers of the crown had ended up in ages past for attempting to circumvent the law and unseat a silverback through guile or mischief. There would such offending apes be detained until the challenged silverback dealt out swift punishment.

And it would have been harsh, for a tribe of apes cannot survive without a king, and a squabbling coalition of weaker, ambitious apes would not assure the survival of a tribe as one mighty silverback king could, since usurpers without loyalty would unseat each other before long. Their personal dreams would be more important than all else, and so the tribe would fail.

Not so with a silverback for he was the tribe, and so the tribe’s needs were his own.

But there at the Two Trees would official challenges be made, and so Goro and his tribe often entered the clearing with a mixture of excitement and trepidation upon their sturdy brows.

It was true that succession could occur away from this place if a silverback were fairly challenged—had he shown weakness or fear—and at other times when a silverback died far from the Two Trees temporary succession occurred that lasted until the apes returned to that place again.

Apes were creatures with short memories and few traditions, so with the “challenge at the Two Trees” chief among them, they clung to it with all their might.

The night ape, however, remembered everything, and was not so poorly endowed, seeming as eager to add to his treasure trove of remembrances as he was to increase the height of his growing pile of skins. Always, he was thirsty for experience.

Gazda fondly remembered a time when Goro had come to his rescue and cemented a bond between them that would forever keep the night ape from considering anything other than his complete loyalty to the king.

It happened in his fifth year. Gazda was trapped against a tangle of strangler figs by some young adolescents led by the big Ulok and dead Tobog's son Dogo. They had teased him about his "snakeskin" and "bird legs" and mocked him with crude imitations of how he moved.

But it was when they insulted his mother that he finally flew into a rage.

"Eeda mates with monkeys," Ulok had yapped as the other blackbacks panted in agreement.

Gazda was a third the size of the smallest bully there at that time, but he did not give this a thought when he launched an attack directly at Ulok who shied away from its ferocity.

Unfortunately, the adolescents were daylight creatures and had started teasing Gazda in the afternoon when much dim light still fought its way to the jungle floor to weaken him, so he was soon overpowered.

Four in the group, they gripped his arms and legs and beat upon his chest and bit at his shoulders and thighs with their long canines.

Gazda hissed and spat, but he could not break free.

But then Goro had exploded onto the scene. His massive body made the adolescents look like infants as he cuffed the closest about the head and back, before biting Ulok and lifting him over his shoulders.

The silverback threw the screaming adolescent into the trees where he struck and fell to the ground. Gazda was pleased to hear Ulok making fearful baby noises.

Goro chased the others, driving them forward, flailing their backs with a stout branch as they ran screaming into the closest trees.

The king abandoned the chase to glare after them, before rising up on his stout hind legs and beating his enormous chest from which sounded the challenging roar of the victorious bull ape.

His bellow filled the forest and left it silent.

As Gazda struggled to rise, Goro's large hand wrapped around his arm, hoisting him to his feet.

The night ape squatted before the giant silverback with his eyes focused at the ground.

"Gazda sorry for trouble, Goro," the battered night ape panted, with palm held out before him.

Goro brushed his hand with massive knuckles and lowered himself to his elbows to look the little one over—only cuts and scrapes on his thin white skin, perhaps some bruises.

The silverback grunted then, puzzled, looking for injuries he had seen on Gazda when first entering the fray.

The night ape knew the worst marks had disappeared already but was reluctant to discuss his rapid healing with the silverback, if he even needed to. How could he presume that the king did not have the same ability?

"You are too small to fight those apes," Goro rumbled, studying him a moment longer. "And they are too old to fight one so young.." He scowled after the adolescents. They had been frightened, but they did not seem ashamed. "They have no honor!"

"They were teasing my mother," Gazda said, shivering where he crouched. "Ulok said she is no ape!"

"Do not listen to their teasing. You are different and they fear of you," Goro assured, then ripping up a handful of grass, and munching he said, "But none can tease you for lack of courage."

Gazda gave a little pant of pleasure as he slapped the ground in his excitement, and his thin white chest swelled with pride.

"Nor tease you for having too much brains," Goro barked, and then gave a pant and hoot, before snatching Gazda up by the arm and dangling him before his face.

"You are brave, little Gazda," the silverback rumbled. "But a smart ape only fights when he must."

Gazda's mouth hung open in a grin, and Goro swung the cheeky night ape back and forth, before throwing him into the thorny underbrush where he tumbled end over end.

"You have honored your mother," Goro had growled, strutting back toward the main group. "That is good. Mothers make the tribe."

Often after that had Gazda followed Goro through the jungle when he could and always would he mimic the silverback's behavior, stance and actions for he wished to be like his king and master.

This hero worship drew the attention of the tribe, but it was not unusual for young males to copy the king, and word of Goro's intervention on the night ape's behalf soon caused a marked decrease in gossip about Gazda's parentage.

Old Baho had always been curious about Gazda, but never teased for he had connected the "night ape," as many had, to the Fur-nose creature. While that made him unnatural by association, it also gave him an excuse for being crazy.

Baho was just glad that Eeda's foundling had shown no sign of sprouting fur on his nose, or growing a thunder-hand on his arm.

The rest of the tribe had continued to hold Gazda in various degrees of acceptance, from a deep friendship as with his little friend Ooso and the dim-witted Kagoon to outright but now silent, hostility.

For this reason, when Gazda was not with his friends or his mother, he was usually by himself.

Eeda had always told Gazda that the adult blackbacks had to be respected and feared for it was the law of the tribe, but that like any growing male, he should not let anyone dominate him or suffer injustice unnecessarily. She had long felt the uncanny strength flowing in his wiry limbs, and had seen his speed and ferocity—and felt his first bites.

She knew Gazda could take care of himself, and now that he had grown to almost half the size of his contemporaries, she feared that the adult males might

try to manipulate him into taking dangerous chances or making challenges he would not survive if they grew fearful of his differences.

Generally, the adult blackbacks kept to themselves, and were not concerned with females or smaller apes because they were focused on the leadership and gauging the time that they might some day take it away from Goro in battle.

So much of this was just talk that it was easy to be lulled into a complacency that no silverback could afford, for in a moment the growing pressure would boil up and a challenge would be issued; then the jungle calm would explode in a primordial battle to the death.

Of this Gazda was aware since he'd been witness when bigger blackbacks had come close to challenging the king for the crown. But so massive was Goro, so impressive his musculature and frame that all rivals had abandoned their displays halfway through before the ignominious conclusion of being chased by the silverback as he bit their flanks and chewed their bloody necks.

The dispirited contenders consoled themselves by saying that a successful challenger would one day come, but Goro was at the peak of his power, and only his son Ulok had any chance of growing so large.

The whole tribe knew that Ulok had been taken under the wing of Omag and the aging queens and had watched as they groomed him and fed him choice grubs, meats and fruits, until his frame swelled large with muscle.

"There," the tribe would whisper, "is the ape who will challenge Goro." But he was still young, and had not yet grown into his full power. When that happened, then the tribe would tread softly whenever visiting the Two Trees.

Omag's illness had continued to worsen, twisting the bones in his right arm, and consuming the flesh on his left cheek from the top of his muscled crest and down the jaw to the shoulder, and breast. The exposed flesh and veins had scabbed over in places, but would open up when the crippled ape moved about. Then they would ooze pus and dark fluids that collected by his ruined mouth and dripped from the hole in his face.

The lips on that side no longer stayed closed and remained barely under his control. He still managed to communicate articulately enough to be understood, though he was helped enormously by the ape-language's reliance upon gestures.

The sip-sip sounds that accompanied his distorted mouth's many failings had grown more pronounced, as had his indignation and violence toward anyone drawing attention to it.

His disease helped drive his ambition now, the crippled ape aware that as his handicaps grew worse, so would his ability to provide for himself. He needed power and influence to survive.

Sip-sip, as many still called him in whispers, continued to leave the tribe from time to time and while the other apes wondered about this, they did not care. As a "failed" silverback, it was normal for such surviving males to leave the tribe to start groups of their own.

However, Omag could be such a repulsive character that even his loyal blackbacks resisted the notion of starting a separate tribe with him, and many believed his disease would kill him before that could happen.

Luckily, their loyalty had yet to be tested, because Omag always returned to Goro's tribe.

When Gazda wasn't testing his muscles against the other young males, he was prowling about the jungle hunting animals, ever in search of a greater prize. He was a powerful fighter and enjoyed stalking the black panthers and spotted leopards, and as a result, he had begun keeping trophies at the tree-nest: skulls, and skins from which he cut replacements for his loincloths and capes as those he wore decayed.

In later years after he'd taken to using the mud-skin, he mainly used the capes under a full moon because carrying the garment between uses was cumbersome, and so he began hiding replacements high in the trees along the common ape trails.

Gazda had developed an appetite for the succulent bushpigs that charged along the game trails winding through the jungle, and he usually satisfied that craving on his own to avoid the mad rush that accompanied the larger cooperative ape hunts. Those affairs often degenerated into violent exchanges when the kill was made, blood spilled and the tribe tried to dine en masse while observing primitive rules of hierarchy.

Going solo meant the night ape could enjoy the hunt and drink his fill of blood without the drama, and yet he still participated with the others because like all apes he valued his membership in the tribe—and it was during those competitions for food that each member's place within it was diminished, reinforced or advanced.

If Gazda's hunt and kill produced a very large bushpig, he would shoulder its corpse and bring it back through the trees to the tribe. The other apes would scream in anticipation for this fleshy windfall, but could only feed after Goro and his lieutenants had stuffed their guts.

In those cases, Gazda tore off hunks of meat before the rest, and made his way through the riot of struggling anthropoids to find a quiet place where he could dine in his own fashion.

Just as the younger apes had hounded him for chewed mouthfuls of berries, nuts and maggots, one of his friends had remembered this peculiarity and capitalized upon it by snatching up and devouring the hunks of meat that he spat out.

Being a female of small stature, Ooso was often muscled out of the feast that followed tribal hunts, so in times past would wait while Gazda forced his way through the feeding apes to come away with meat.

It was Ooso's good fortune that her friend enjoyed sharing his prize. Now that she had an infant on the way, the rich food was of great importance. She still had not chosen a mate for herself, or identified the baby's father from among her suitors.

"Ooso is greedy," Gazda teased. "Wants many mates."

"Gazda is foolish," Ooso said, dining on a chunk of pre-chewed pig he'd thrown away. "Wants to be small as Ooso without any meat!"

Gazda hunted every night to feed his thirst, while the tribe only staged their hunting rituals during the fertile season when there was plenty of fruit, nuts and grasses available to fuel their bodies for the exhausting work involved in catching monkeys and other small game. In the dry season when their usual foods were not in abundance, they could not afford the energetic chase.

But Gazda hunted for blood whenever he required it.

His skills improved at every outing, and his vigorous nocturnal activities left him growing in strength and speed, if it did leave him exhausted during the day.

While traveling with the tribe Gazda knew his naps still drew disdain, and now that he had so many personal scores to settle among the blackbacks; he was concerned with what would happen should they search him out while he slept alone and exposed, or on the rare occasion with only his mother in place for protection.

With those thoughts in mind, he began to search for more remote places to sleep, where neither the blackbacks nor his mother might ferret him out.

So after returning from a night's hunt with the jungle growing light around him, he would slip away to dig a hole under twisted tree roots while the tribe still slept, or find a high hole in a tree or a dark crevice in the rocks where he could wedge himself.

His mother was not so easy to trick, however, so the night ape was often pleasantly bemused to climb out of his hiding place and find her chewing nuts or lazing near, a curious mix of love and reprimand upon her heavy features.

Chapter 20

Magnuh.

With each kill Gazda's taste for blood grew in concert with his pride. His continued successes with panther, pig and python caused him to hunt the large antelopes that sometimes followed Magnuh's kind into the jungle where groups of them foraged along the elephant trails.

He risked impalement from their lethal horns, but those daylight victories only encouraged him. When gangs of cunning baboons entered the forest for figs, Gazda tracked and killed many despite their monstrous fangs.

The night ape usually hunted such prey from above, sliding and slinking from shade to shadow from trunk to branch, his strong finger and toenails driving into the tree bark like claws, and then with a powerful hissing roar he would leap upon some hapless creature and kill it.

Often he would use his long knife, but not always, preferring as he did the feel of frightened flesh beneath his fingers, sometimes forgetting the weapon's role in his growing courage.

He enjoyed these challenges, relishing his power over the defeated prey, drinking their fear before sinking his teeth into their flesh. Then a potent resonance would surge through his muscles, as their living strength spurted into him—as his heartbeat raced and theirs diminished.

At other times, he would master his prey to study, gripping the hapless creatures in his powerful arms, forcing them to struggle for their lives as he held them still—before slowly leaning in to bite.

In time, the night ape grew careless.

One afternoon, Eeda became worried about Gazda. She had had only fleeting contact with him for days beyond her counting, and she was suddenly gripped by a mother's anxiety.

This worry had come upon her as the tribe retreated to the trees after detecting some subtle alteration in the animal calls and birdsong that usually dominated the day—there had been a minor change in the pitch or rhythm as happened before storms, or when a predator was near.

The she-ape did not know where her son was, but suspected he would be deep in his daytime sleep and vulnerable, so she ignored the warnings of the other apes, and began a frantic search of the forest floor for places he might have retired.

She whimpered as she went, stooping beneath a silent sense of doom. As always she feared that he would not be hidden well enough from the predators that stalked the jungle paths, or that a direct assault upon his safety had caused the fear that suddenly colored the day.

Unfortunately for Eeda there were other beasts than animals in the jungle.

Hunters from the curious Bakwaniri tribe had entered Goro's lands from the east. These men lived on the far side of the river that bordered the silverback's range. The jungle thinned past their village as the land swept up to the grassy plateau that led on into the mountains.

These men hid their faces behind hardwood masks carved into the shape of human skulls. Symbols of death were prevalent in everything about them: skeleton warriors were tattooed on their muscular shoulders and chests; skulls and bones were impressed upon their hand-woven and leather apparel; while naked skulls grinned at intervals upon the carven shields they carried, and marked the arrows, bows and spears they used to kill their prey.

The three hunters had set out days before, emboldened when a spell cast by the village sir-jon, a wizard, affirmed their new leader's order to explore the forbidden lands west of the river for sign of the monster that had haunted its banks.

The sir-jon said they would succeed, and so encouraged these frightened hunters who had grown up in the shadow of the beast. Few had seen it and lived, but all knew the story of a hairy giant that devoured Bakwaniri women.

These men had been sent out with other small groups of hunters to track the beast and kill it or bring news of its lair and kind. Then would the Bakwaniri leader send an army to destroy all trace of it and end the reign of River Demon.

Nearby, as Eeda sought out Gazda's sleeping place; she sprinted from shadow to shallow through the thick undergrowth and finally burst onto the game trail where the three Bakwaniri hunters were inspecting strange tracks in the dirt.

All of these men knew of gorillas and chimpanzees and enjoyed their flesh, and to them Eeda looked a delicious prize. The hunters were startled by her sudden appearance, but not so much that three arrows could not be fired, and one strike the she-ape in the arm.

Eeda cried out in pain when she felt the missile hit, and a moment passed before she turned to see the bone-faced apes upon the path.

She screamed again.

As the startled warriors struggled with shaking hands to set arrow to bow, the she-ape bared her fangs and charged as their second volley flew wide. Eeda

snapped her teeth like she was about to attack, but veered suddenly to the side and clambered up a tree trunk to where the lowest branches hung.

Gazda had just come awake, disoriented, with his mother's scream in his mind. He had killed a large antelope at midday and gorged on its blood—and while replaying the struggle in his mind, he had found a quiet place and slept...

...until he heard his mother's cry—and then she cried again!

He leapt out of his shadowy resting place and turned in the direction of her call.

The night ape threw his head back, and beat upon his savage breast until from him came the powerful challenging cry of the bull ape, a call he voiced to strike fear into the heart of any creature that dared threaten the mighty Gazda's mother.

The night ape had made his lair some distance to the west of the tribe, so he flung himself into the trees and raced toward his mother's pain, dodging branch and leaf, flitting past twig and vine, casting about for the true location of her call, and with his powers yet diminished by the sun, Gazda missed what lurked in the dappled shadows of the overgrown trees just ahead.

Magnuh had followed the herd along the jungle trail with mating in mind, when a collection of tasty trees distracted him from the beautiful females. The trees bore fruit that appealed to the jungle giant for they hung from low branches in a dense collection of broad-leafed trees where he could enjoy the cool air while he feasted.

Then had come a familiar cry, and his nemesis was suddenly swinging toward him overhead.

With his full attention focused in the distance, Gazda leapt over the looming shadows with a single thought blazing in his mind: *Who dares to harm my mother...*

The bull elephant's serpentine trunk reached up and deftly plucked the night ape from his vine before it lashed like a whip, dashing the night ape against the earth with all the strength in Magnuh's gargantuan frame.

Gazda's wits exploded in pain and shock, and he had barely turned over before one of the elephant's massive feet stamped upon his chest.

Eeda clambered higher into the branches panting with fear and pain as the bone-faces lifted their bows and scanned the leafy heights for her. With the immediate terror passing, the she-ape felt the throbbing in her left arm and shoulder, so whimpering softly; she found a guarded spot near the trunk where she squatted on a branch and licked the bloody flesh where the arrow had pierced her arm.

Below her, the jungle shook as a silverback roared his challenge. The bone-faces turned and sprinted north along the trail away from the sound.

Seconds later, Goro charged out of the trees in answer to Eeda's call where he tore around the jungle floor ripping up the crowded saplings and throwing their pieces skyward. Again and again he stamped around a wooden bone-face and shield that had been dropped or lost by a frightened hunter.

The Bakwaniri men had had only minutes to escape and were even now sprinting swiftly over the uneven ground seeking out an eastern turn in the path that might eventually take them home. Each of them was hoping to survive, for surely, they could bring news of the River Demon!

With a final bloodcurdling bellow, Goro ceased his display and stood across the trail. The great slabs of muscle on his shoulders and chest heaved as he searched the high branches and hooted his concern for Eeda.

Her resolve now hardened by the king's presence, the she-ape gritted her teeth and pulled the arrow from her arm without a whimper. She flung the bloody missile aside and licked the wound.

Goro snorted approval as Baho and four blackbacks roared out of the quivering foliage. Their silverback turned with them and ran along the path in pursuit of the bone-faces...

...as Eeda remembered Gazda's challenging cry and she wondered why he had not yet arrived—but it was then that she heard a monstrous crashing in the trees. The ground trembled and her perch shook as some forest giant trumpeted its victory.

It was Magnuh—was the jungle titan fighting another bull elephant?

An urgency gripped Eeda's mind and with it, a feeling and thought—perhaps a voice whispering: *Mother!*

And a horrible realization filled her.

Gazda was in pain, and he was calling out.

Her little son was dying.

Eeda raced through the forest toward the shattering conflict, and almost fell from the branches as trees in her path snapped in half when a great gray body spun and tore through the thick jungle confines. Climbing higher, she screamed angrily at the elephant as it lifted something bloody and limp in its trunk and flung it against exposed rocks.

Bellowing, the beast charged with his bull head down and the gargantuan tusks nailed the fleshy lump against the ground, drove remnants of it deep into the earth.

Then the elephant twisted and ground the points of his tusks, raking a pair of jagged grooves into the hard soil as he scraped the dead thing against the rocks and dirt.

The dead thing that was...

The panicked she-ape swung branch to branch, leaping ever closer, until she hung directly over the bull elephant's head where she hurled insults down at the giant until his eyes blazed up at her.

Eeda's heart shuddered for...impossibly, draped across the bloody tusks—was the limp and mangled body of...

"Gazda!" Eeda screamed, and overcome by a fierce maternal instinct she dropped onto the elephant's tusks and savaged his trunk with her fangs, as the startled beast roared at her impudence and swung his mighty head.

But Eeda's strong hands snatched up Gazda's gory remains from the twisted ivory, before sliding along the tusks as the force of the elephant's spin sent her tumbling.

Magnuh growled and then trumpeted his wrath, but Eeda was up and bolting toward the trees with Gazda's tattered corpse slung over her shoulder.

The great bull elephant trumpeted his frustration as he lunged, and his powerful trunk lashed out!

Eeda felt its terrible two-fingered tip slide across her back, and catch a tuft of fur that it painfully ripped away as she heaved herself into the lowest branches of the thickest tree.

The elephant roared, and the she-ape scrambled up through a shower of splintered bark and shivered wood as Magnuh rammed the trunk below her.

Eeda whimpered, knowing that Gazda was dead, his crushed bones and pulverized flesh were plain to her as were the holes that gaped in his tattered skin; so she was startled when a sudden crackling noise came from the red ruin, and some strange movement quivered beneath her leathery fingers.

Her son gasped through mangled lips and broken jaw.

The tree rattled again as Magnuh vented his anger a final time before turning to snuffle at the broad smears of blood that marked his enemy's demise.

Above him, Eeda knew that Gazda was too badly injured to travel far, and she could see that he would die soon, so she carried him higher, swinging toward older trees where higher still she found a hollowed-out trunk into which she clambered—dragging her dying son after.

There in the darkness she licked his many lethal wounds and kept him warm as his body quivered and grew colder by the second.

The night ape drifted in and out of consciousness, drawing comfort from his mother's scent and warmth from her flesh so near to him, but he was slipping...

Time traveled quickly in the dark, and Eeda knew her son needed sustenance, but with him so close to death she could not leave him alone while she gathered food.

She could not leave him to die that way.

When he called out her name, tears burst from the she-ape's eyes, and she did the only thing a mother could. She offered him a breast, though her milk had dried up long ago and he was many years too old.

But Eeda had nothing left to give, so cradling her son; she brushed his torn lips with her breast, and was cheered to feel him latch upon it. Not to suckle, but to calm him then, for the end that was to come.

And she felt a peaceful tremor go through him before a similar tingling rose up her own neck to ease her mind.

Her night ape son lay upon her suckling, and Eeda felt great warmth and love passing out of her and into her strange offspring.

So strong was he. So proud was she.

Chapter 21

The Bakwaniri.

While hearing of Omag's depredations could elicit sympathy for those Bakwaniri women with whom he fed his perverse appetites, it would not be fair to paint those victims and their families as innocents in the jungle vastness.

The Bakwaniri lived behind a rustic palisade of poles built on the far side of the river that ran just past the eastern border of Goro's land. There the green jungle

cleared as the geography rose to embrace a vast grassy plateau that led under blue skies into the distant purple mountains.

The village rested in what would have been considered an idyllic setting to a romantic. Steeped in natural beauty this place should have inspired visions of Eden, the polar opposite to the symbols of death and mortality that so heavily adorned the inhabitants' bodies, clothing and tools.

However, like all things in nature, there were environmental factors like hunger and competition that had shaped these curious people, and their cryptic culture.

And like all cultures, death played a part in its creation, and daily life, and would of course be there at the end.

How a people viewed death was directly related to how they viewed life, and with the Bakwaniri, these disparate states were justifiably tilted toward extinction, and so, the people in the skull-masks held a gloomy view of the world where life came from death, and so even their festivals were celebrated with the shedding of blood.

Within that skewed framework good and evil could also be seen shifting places, but in the name of survival, the definition of sin was often obscured.

Indeed, these people were guilty of crimes not much different from Omag's that they had for generations committed upon neighboring tribes, many of which had gone extinct under the onslaught of the Bakwaniri culinary and cultural forms that demanded unwilling participants.

It would be unfair to say that these raids into other territories along the river were undertaken with cannibalism solely in mind since slavery and gold had also motivated the land-bound reavers.

Avarice and greed played in their time of poverty and need, and while forgiveness might exist for such sinners and the culture that formed under this duress, it gave them no right to exercise their demons upon the otherwise peaceful folk that inhabited the jungle that they had invaded.

The troubled origins and history of the Bakwaniri people had begun many, many miles to the west, and had chased them through the valley of death to this living desert and made them into the fearful, savage and sickly lot that they were at the time of Goro's reign.

Those physical and mental infirmities with which they were afflicted came about in part as an honest reaction to the hostile lands that crowded their settlement, for on all sides the thick and labyrinthine jungle was populated by wild carnivores, poisonous insects, plants and worse.

But the blame lay farther back, so untangle their roots, and find them the descendants of fugitives that ran from the authorities at a time when the gallows answered most legal questions, and so every breathing soul to join them since that initial escape: each man, woman and child had been damned by the sins of their fathers.

The first fathers of the Bakwaniri people started out as the crew of a pirate ship that had wrecked more than 150 years before the Gypsy Horvat built his yurt. The vessel took its name to the bottom after running onto the same rocks that later dragged the Westerner so spectacularly beneath the waves.

The cutthroats had been chased there after a desperate sail from their Cuban stronghold with the Royal Navy a day or two behind them, and North African sanctuary on the forefront of their minds. When their Barbary corsair cousins

sought to enslave them, these refugee rovers headed south and into oblivion on the savage shore.

Knowing that they faced the hangman's noose should they be rescued, those buccaneers who survived the wreck opted for the semblance of death, and so they left their ship to be discovered half-sunk near the shore and stuffed with the bones of drowned crew while those 30 men who could still walk... *ran inland*.

The fugitives, seamen all, had little or no knowledge of Africa other than some familiarity with emancipating its treasures from the locked holds of honest merchant vessels; and so to a man, they were failures at hunting the frequently murderous fauna while knowing nothing of which flora they could safely consume.

These sailors found themselves in a hazardous setting that offered no civilized refuge. The first few months saw wild beasts, starvation and poisoning cull their numbers until desperation turned them upon each other and then to cannibalism.

At first, this dreaded ritual was only practiced upon the dead, very weak or sick among their own crew, but as those survivors grew stronger on such grisly fare they turned their hungry eyes to the relatively peaceful tribes of native Africans that they discovered eking out tenuous lives in the jungle.

Those groups of natives were often already much depleted in number and morale, having suffered for generations under both the African and foreign slave trades. These faded cultures were outfought by the buccaneers' European technology and so the Africans to survive the exchange were forcibly brought into the ranks.

Any that were not eaten outright were kept as wives or slaves, only to be eaten if they became more useful as food.

The original pirate crew had been a mixed bag of mongrels to begin with, being of European, Asian, Arabic and East Indian descent. Most had been career seamen without families and still others had been pressed aboard.

As their process of survival by absorption continued for many decades, a motley collection of humans was the result as the surviving pirates and their offspring interbred with their slaves to form a hybrid group of caramel-skinned, mixed-race buccaneer and indigenous peoples who were better prepared for surviving in the jungle, but who were by that time ingrained physically and culturally with a grisly craving for human flesh.

The invaders became notorious—rumored and whispered about—and always feared. But so terrible was their reputation that few who had not seen their gruesome work believed it possible—and so in the early days their bloody raids shocked the indigenous tribes they overran. The few survivors could never relay the true horror they had witnessed.

So most tribes in that tangled corner of jungle were decimated and enslaved before heroes could be chosen; and any chieftain who attempted appeasement or collusion was the first upon the fire.

Bawkee, Bokanu, and Bakweena! They were called by those who are no more.

Those peoples they dominated met them with screams of terror, and word of their invasion passed between tribes and languages, and so finally their initial appellation of "buccaneers" was shaped by manifold dialects into the referent "Bakwaniri" as the news spread from mouth to ear.

With successive generations the Bakwaniri became more African and their language more of a polyglot, yet vestiges of their roving lives remained at the core of their culture.

The “crew” called their chief the “capan” who was supported by a secondary chief the “fust” and “sir-jon,” the Bakwaniri wizard, witch doctor and priest.

Singly each crewman could be referred to as a “Johnnie,” and the women “Hearties,” though the names like the genders were interchangeable in time of need or grog.

Such quaint anachronisms were most evident in regard to the extraordinary village in which the Bakwaniri crew lived.

“The ship,” as they called it, was not any simple thatched and walled jungle homestead, but was originally intended as a monument to the brave and foolhardy men who as first fathers had crossed the seas and then the jungle; in fact, it was the early framers of this outpost who had tried to capture their own spirits in the very lines and layout of the town.

It was also safe to say that all involved with its building were better acquainted with the construction and layout of sailing vessels than they were the living habits and abodes of landlubbers.

And so seen from a distance, the village resembled a three-masted sailing ship afloat in a jade ocean of jungle. Its “hull” was a palisade of stout, sharpened posts set upright tight together and sweeping upward in height fore and aft to make a fortified structure that framed the space within.

The long, narrow oval formed by these poles was marked in three places by tall rounded timbers called “fore,” “aft” and “main” masts that had been raised in a line where the keel would lie in an actual vessel.

From each of these hung a spider web of rope rigging used by the crew to access the heights, and for applying patchwork leather coverings to deflect the rains. The greatest of these devices was stowed to the port side of the “bow” and could be swung into place in foul weather.

The smaller masts fore and aft were used by the crew as a center brace or fulcrum for building projects or any chore, like skinning game animals, that required the elevation of a weight; while the center mainmast had to hold the “crow’s nest” high over the jungle green, just shy of the canopy that variably by season could close the forest in over the ship.

The ship’s location had been chosen for its access to the fresh water that ran close to the starboard side, but also for its proximity to ancient stone basements or foundations built and left there long ago by Roman explorers far from home.

These subterranean block structures ran the length of the ship, forming small stone rooms that came off to the left or right of a center hall and were used by the Bakwaniri for food storage and to house what treasures they had. In times of necessity they were also used as prison cells or as defensible retreats.

The first fathers had used these as refuge from the unseen jungle terrors that pressed them on all sides, shelters in which they lived while they planned and built their ship on land and from where they launched their many raids upon neighboring tribes.

In time a double row of small thatched-roofed wooden huts was built atop these stone rooms and ran in a line from fore to aft. Parts of the ancient Roman arches

and walls protruded from the ground and were used to shore up the huts that butted up against them pacing north and south before stopping aft to leave room for the capan's stout hut that stood on stilts overlooking the ship.

These huts also left room by the forward part of the palisade that formed an open, lancet-shaped area in which the Bakwaniri held their communal festivals and where the sir-jon performed his dark arts. There was a great fire pit ringed with stones there by three tall blood-stained posts thrust into the discolored ground.

So the village was ship-shaped—though none of the Bakwaniri was seagoing at that time. They lived far inland now, and their old legends spoke of the ocean and the west as a place from which doom would always follow, so they were pleased to live far away from it.

Generations of breeding with and bastardizing the local inhabitants they could master left them more comfortable on land, though their harrowing years in the wild had made homebodies of them all.

And so, the oddly crafted palisade might have been intended to memorialize their dimly remembered nautical origins, but it still kept out the more savage jungle denizens and even presented a challenge to the mighty Magnuh and his kind.

The Bakwaniri knew of the giants for herds of them still crossed the river to the south and ranged the forests on the western side of their home. In earlier times when their store of gunpowder still held, the first fathers had hunted the elephants for the ivory that still decorated the encampment's sometimes squalid trimmings, with the skull of one great tusker proudly adorning the ship's prow. Few beasts that still lived could have wielded those arching ivory weapons, and it was a testament to a bygone age to see them so displayed.

The Bakwaniri territory was surrounded by natural impediments, and guarded by savage beasts, and so they enjoyed the protection of a lethal wilderland that the first fathers had barely survived crossing when they ran from the sea.

Neither civilized man nor savage would dare to travel those forbidden lands, and any fool who did would not be seen again.

So the Bakwaniri hunted along the edge of Goro's territory, or turned east to the rolling lands that led to the upland plateau. There the groups of hunters tried to time their visits to avoid the lions, dogs and hyenas with which they'd have to compete for gazelle, impala, antelope and many other game animals.

This sort of hunting was adopted from the native cultures they had consumed, but was not widely embraced for it required greater skill and physical prowess than the Bakwaniri had, so rather than replacing their gruesome main course they used the local game and flora to supplement it as seasons or chance permitted.

It was more efficient to eat the flesh of their slaves than it was to chase after herds.

Again, this Bakwaniri behavior was reinforced most honestly, for it seemed that many of the first fathers had been plagued with illnesses of various origins and climes, and so their first contact with the local people spread sicknesses to which pirates were prone: venereal diseases, Black Death and deadly flu. Some among them also brought the curse of leprosy and of course the African scourge of *Noma* was waiting there for them beneath the canopy.

From this interchange of bloodlines came new diseases and conditions that have since been lost to time and death and never categorized or studied as a result. There were diseases that plagued the minds of many Bakwaniri, and even gnawed at the present capan's clan, but there was one physical ailment that settled in most and displayed in various horrific ways.

In fact, the Bakwaniri wore their decorated masks to terrify their enemies, but they were also much depended upon as time progressed to hide their true appearance.

Chapter 22

Demons, Curses and Crimes.

The crew carried within its ranks a debilitating and disfiguring disease they misnamed "scurv" that impacted the bones and soft tissues, and ate away at the flesh. Its progress was slow however, and varied man to man, but because it did not kill quickly, it became endemic to the people and any with which they bred.

There was no cure, but for generations the Bakwaniri sir-jons had prescribed the ingesting of "clean" human flesh as an effective ward against the scurv that ravaged them all, with powers to mitigate and lessen the impact of its infections and outbreaks.

This scurv disease then, also kept the Bakwaniri closer to home as they grew older, for its progression produced physical disabilities to undermine a hunter's heart and lungs, or twist his spine, or left him with legs too bowed and bent for walking the distances required while on the hunt.

And so scurv was another reason that the mysteries of Goro's lands had been left largely unexplored.

"History" to the Bakwaniri consisted of oral tradition and myth, a mix of pirate tales, European folk stories and African legend that was maintained by the sir-jon and his apprentices to be passed down from one generation to the next.

So, the story of the first fathers' arrival in the jungle was colored by misinterpretation, distortion and fantasy for few of the founders had been well-versed in letters, and none of the peoples that were forced into the tribe had brought a written language. The result was the Bakwaniri were a superstitious folk who were slow to learn from their errors.

But, among the sir-jon's tales were truths of a sort, and it was told that the first fathers of this bastard people had struggled out of the sea and traveled inland, only to spend many months surviving the wilds in full retreat from persecution.

And it was in that time that they came against the Forest Demons. Starving and lost, the first fathers were attacked by these hellish things that were men in shape, but monstrous in guise, bearing the weight and muscle many times a man, and being covered in coarse hair or quills.

And these wily black beasts came upon them in large numbers, each as cunning as a man, but more daunting in power. To their aggressions did many first fathers fall, and by them finally were the survivors chased across the river.

Powerful Forest Demons though they were, said the tales, they came no farther. And so it was that from the start the Bakwaniri had ample reasons to stay east of that running water.

When the River Demon had started coming 25 years past, there was great terror and accusation in the ship, for the sir-jon had said that the beast must have come as punishment for some slight against the gods, or in response to an unknown Bakwaniri incursion into the forbidden lands; while still others thought it was a curse from one of those they had recently enslaved, and that this spell had opened a door to the demon.

So many slaves were put to the fire as sacrifice and their flesh consumed, and throughout the Bakwaniri ship did neighbor accuse neighbor, while still others were driven mad and killed themselves from fear.

Worse might have come to the Bakwaniri people had not their sir-jon gone to counsel with the capan, and between them the two divined a truth.

Since there seemed to be but one hungry demon to collect the debt against a transgression that only it perceived; then, the sir-jon felt that such a thing might be readily appeased.

To calm the ship, Capan Sparsall pardoned all tribesmen for crimes against his brothers, launched no reprisals across the river and accepted the lost women as an unfortunate sacrifice.

Gathering his people by the great fire, the capan had given his judgment. The crew knew the old tales and had no wish to relive them, so they accepted the River Demon's bargain, fearing to bring a greater curse upon their heads.

As the years passed after the deal was struck, the Bakwaniri counted the loss of three or six daughters a year to be a fair investment for their peace of mind. They lived in the jungle, and all were used to the loss of life.

Most hated it, but none dared to haggle a better price.

So decades after the first payment, the daughter of a young hunter called Seetree fell to the demon, and the poor man himself found her bloody corpse upon the riverbank.

This outrage pushed Seetree past his point of tolerable patience, and he confronted the capan, fust and sir-jon about the terrible loss, volunteering himself to lead the hunters into the forbidden lands to slay the demon and bring back its head.

Yet still old Sparsall counseled acceptance, and both fust and sir-jon agreed.

But, the vengeful Seetree had no acceptance in him and would abide no more delay.

As a boy he had glimpsed the River Demon, as had other men who grew up to know the forest hunting craft, and each among them had in their travels north and south come upon hairy gorillas and chimpanzees and returned with its man-like flesh to eat.

And they knew that despite the River Demon's monstrous appearance and size, it did in shape and movement resemble those other creatures, and from this Seetree reasoned that even bull elephants could be killed if enough hunters tried to kill it.

So despite the fact that Seetree and his mates had labored their whole lives under the River Demon's curse, and nightly dreamt of its foaming jaws; they were

emboldened by the loss of their loved ones to fight back—even if it threatened to revive the greater curse.

To this Capan Sparsall, sir-jon and the fust as keepers of the Bakwaniri knowledge had warned their people and ordered them against the action, but the River Demon had dined too freely of late for the crew to accept.

So the bereaved father spoke his mind by the great fire where all gathered around his daughter's bones to bemoan the fate of others lost to the demon. And in accordance with ancient Bakwaniri law, a majority among them chose Seetree to be capan.

Old Sparsall was hung for cowardice and his flesh cast uneaten on the fire and for obvious reasons, neither fust nor sir-jon disputed the election results.

Thus stirred by loss and the eager crew, Seetree had sent hunting parties to explore the forbidden lands west of the river with orders to bring back sign of the demon and its kind or kill them if they could.

Far to the west lay the first victims of Seetree's vengeance. A parent and child had been forever riven to pay for the new capan's lost daughter. Had the ship's sir-jon true powers of divination and glimpsed the forces that had been unwittingly set in motion by one masked hunter's arrow, he might have counseled leaving the Bakwaniri lands altogether and like the first fathers run into the east.

But the sir-jon was no more a seer than the capan was the only creature with a taste for revenge. One of his victims dreamed of it.

With closed eyes Gazda saw night apes in a hollow stone mountain where from that height, they threw fire down in burning torrents upon others of their kind that were wrapped in shining stone and thrusting long-knives up into the burning deluge.

He heard screams as they burst into flames...when he suddenly felt himself drifting.

And Gazda saw a dead forest on a muddy black hill. Night apes like him were there in the trees, but these were poor climbers or had fallen because they were transfixed on the many sharp branches or skewered by splintered trunks. The clumsy creatures were up there moaning, bleeding and wriggling with the wood stuck through them.

Blood trickled down over their toes as they kicked their feet.

The night ape's heart raced to see so many red torrents, and his throat grew hot with thirst.

He chased the blood until his eyes opened. It was dark when he woke.

Gazda was lying on a bed of moss and dried leaves; his vision flickered through quivering lashes as he tugged himself free of sleep, of death—of flame and blood.

The cries of night apes still rang in his ears.

Night apes killing night apes. But these creatures were not of Goro's jungle, and they had used flame to kill.

Gazda knew little of fire for all the apes of Goro's tribe retreated from the orange creature whenever it appeared. Sometimes flames would spring up after lightning roared, or sprouted from the dust without reason to chase through the dry grass and trees, and eat up the jungle with its hot, yellow teeth.

The night ape had seen the smoking ruins, and burned his fingers upon the glowing black rocks that the fire left behind. His mother knew little more, only that fire would hurt him if he touched it.

Eeda, like the rest of the tribe, was superstitious about the forces of nature. While the anthropoids had not yet built a pantheon of gods to describe them; they did treat the elemental actions as living beings whether seen at close quarters or from afar.

It was easy to see water as a snake or lizard as it moved, and the wind like an invisible ape or monkey by the way it shook the leafy branches or tried to knock the tribe from their high perches.

The wind was a mischievous infant to the towering storms that lurked behind the canopy above them, where at any moment it would thrash the jungle as a giant blackback would. Such storm apes raged and howled, and threw lightning bolts, branches and rain as it challenged the jungle creatures to a fight.

Gazda had come to understand that the apes also viewed their thoughts, life and death and dreams with the same apprehension and illusion that they did the uncontrollable forces of nature.

Much was unexplainable but good things were to be enjoyed, and the bad were best forgotten.

So, the basic ape philosophy gave Gazda few tools to dissect and understand the strange images that had crowded his night ape dreams.

Flames, darkness and blood, the images flitted from one gory moment to the next as slaughter reigned supreme. Claws and fangs flashed, throats were cut, heads were torn away, and still other night apes were set aflame.

The memories had started his thirsty stomach churning, for with the crimson thoughts had come feelings of loneliness and betrayal, fear of capture and of death—of violation and loss!

Gazda stretched out on his crumbled bedding, and looked into the darkness over him. There in the black high above, a gap came into sharper focus, dim light glowed on a ring of green leaves—the opening through which he'd crawled into the hollow tree—or must have... if he could but remember.

Remember...

Magnuh! Memory of the elephant's wrath and the injuries he'd inflicted swept over his mind like an avalanche, and he winced to relive the goring tusks, ripping trunk and crushing feet!

Hooting fearfully, the night ape ran his hands over his chest, but felt no rents or tears in the swelling muscle, no split or break in his bones.

Then how? A dream! He remembered then, another dream. His mother Eeda in a shadowed grove of strange black trees. About her hung a heavy mist that wrapped his cold, bare limbs—he had curled up beside her for warmth, and she'd drawn him near—to feed him? No! He chuckled, at the mental image.

Gazda was too old to suckle!

And she would not let...

A shudder ran through him for he had recognized his mother's scent in the air. She was near—somewhere in the dark she...

He rolled over, and saw that indeed Eeda sat on the mossy floor of the hollow an arm's length away. She leaned there unmoving with her back against the dark wood.

"Ah..." Gazda started, feeling his spirits rise, but he faltered as her glassy eyes gave no hint of recognition.

The night ape leapt up onto all fours and moved cautiously toward her—where he smelled the death. No. No. NO!

His mother was dead.

It had to be a dream! Or how had he survived Magnuh's revenge?

Impossible... He pressed at his eyes with his fingertips, caused them to spark, and forced them to adjust further. He growled quietly as he rubbed at his face thinking, "*Wake up! Wake up!*" before opening his eyes again.

Gazda moaned. The low light from above reflected on his pale skin and a soft glow settled over his mother.

Eeda's dead mouth hung open, and her head had fallen forward, the lower jaw resting on her deep chest, and below that...

...her breasts had been torn, the skin hung in tatters as if the flesh had been ripped by fangs—by many bites.

...too old to suckle.

The night ape craved no milk... but the bite, he... *Gazda's* fangs!

He remembered Magnuh. In the dream his mother had rescued him, and taken him somewhere dark... He looked around. Safe... here inside an old tree.

Comfort... she had carried him to safety, and offered him a breast... and he had... he had...

Lost control of his hunger? No, Gazda had fed upon her with relish!

Delirious, dying... starving! He had drunk her rich blood, sucked it out of the now-cooling heart she had given him so freely.

Growling with rage he thought of Magnuh. The night ape leapt up to the opening in the bark and pulled himself out onto a nearby bough where he roared his fury as a challenge to all the jungle.

Gazda would avenge his mother's death by making war upon all of those who brought her to this end... and upon Magnuh! The night ape would kill the elephant! And he would kill...

He would kill anything that dared to hurt... to kill her...

But the night ape had killed her!

Gazda's face flushed and his heart shuddered beneath this realization. His legs trembled, and as he collapsed upon his lofty perch, a word passed his lips in a language he did not understand: "*Ma—mater!*"

Chapter 23

The Guilty Parties.

Gazda peered into the hollow tree and his shadow fell across his mother's corpse. He could not bear to part with her and he could not stay. His heart forced

him to look away, but his mind chased the nightmare—followed his memory to where his mother had come to his aid.

Magnuh had attacked and Eeda brought her son to safety to... to...

His pain would wrench him around to see his mother's dead eyes...her shredded breasts. Gazda had done this—her son had... The night ape!

But he loved her so. An accident—terrible but not his fault... he wouldn't... he couldn't...

He'd been out of his mind with sickness—dying...

...and yet, the justifications did not matter. He would never escape the pain so close at hand, but to leave her would feel like he was denying his crime.

Such a betrayal *should* follow him forever. It had to. The responsibility for this lay with others, but it fell to Gazda too. So he would carry it with him always, and as monument to her sacrifice he would hoist her memory high in death.

Poised outside his mother's crypt, he swore that he would never set her precious body near the jungle floor. Flies would come and other crawling things... come to reduce all life to dirt and dust—his mother and her love to fading memory!

He would catch her dignity and spirit in this high place she chose, and keep it safe for all time within.

So the night ape climbed down from her resting place, and sobbing spent the day dragging mud in green leaf bundles high up into the tree where he layered it on the bark around the hole to close it up—to protect the place where a mother had taken a son for safety, and where he had...

Still as he wept, he spread mud and sticks and leaves over the opening—covering the place where she lay still. Constantly, he cursed himself as the shameful son, praying sadly as he peered through the closing gap that some final rays of light might fall across her gentle face...

But she was gone into shadow... his mother—gone.

When he finished, Gazda disguised the layered mud with sheets of bark that he pressed into place, and soon, none could know that behind it. Behind it...

He collapsed on the tree limb and wept his heart out—in grief he tore hair from his head. His heart staggered from guilt to sorrow to rage at the monster Magnuh, at the night ape Gazda—and he swore revenge upon the beasts that were responsible.

And as he wept, the tears brought that time more vividly to his mind, and he remembered first waking to Eeda's cry of pain and terror—waking and then flying into the bull elephant's trap.

What had happened to bring that call from her loving breast?

He could only think of Magnuh then—*oh Magnuh!* Gazda would use his hunting skills to learn the truth, and bloody revenge would fall upon the guilty.

The *guilty*? At the thought he wept anew, ashamed at his own weakness—his inability to accept—undeserving to be near his mother's tomb.

From deep beneath his swelling guilt, he looked down again upon his crouching naked body. Where were the scars that Magnuh must have left? He knew of his flesh's ability to heal, but nothing could survive a bull elephant's wrath unblemished!

Is it a dream? Oh please! And he rose upon his haunches glaring at the bark that covered... Had his mother truly died? Could this not also be a dream?

But he remembered her eyes... flat and glassy, and the scent of her dead flesh. This was no dream.

At sunset, the night ape gathered in a sobbing breath and climbed into high branches where he began hurtling recklessly hand over hand until he caught a hanging vine from which he swept swiftly through the night.

And as he swung, he cast about for his tribe, and upon a wayward breeze he recognized their scent. He thought of Goro then, and of his mother, and Gazda paled at his own shame.

Then came Magnuh's stink from the forest floor. The beast's scent was stronger still.

Gazda continued through the canopy until the fruit trees grew shorter and then a large group of them abruptly fell away altogether to form an open space of ruin.

The night ape landed lightly on the torn and gouged earth where the elephant had attacked him.

There, on all fours, he searched the broken brush with his night-enhanced senses attuned to subtle light, shapes and scents, and soon in a tangle of shattered branches and splintered trees he found his shining snake disk. He slipped its chain over his head as he combed through the wreckage and found his belt twisted many times around the sheath and long knife where Magnuh's mighty foot had crushed them into the black earth.

The powerful weapon was undamaged, but it had been useless in the fight. Magnuh had given him no chance to draw the blade, and because of that...

There was no sign of his loincloth; the untreated leather would have been consumed by a million crawling bugs forever in search of food. The night ape would replace it from the skins at his lair.

But first, he jumped into the trees and flew from branch to branch, the sense of loss still pulling at his savage breast. Loss and pain grew together inside, and swelled until his breath came short and choking and his heart struggled feebly—the constriction causing his fury to boil.

He hunted until sunrise, and in his wrath killed many more creatures than were needed to feed his angry hunger. He killed many mercilessly, fueling his bloodlust until the sun began to rise and the night ape raced through the jungle to drop onto the grass by the sleeping trees, just as Goro and the tribe was climbing down.

The scent of so many apes brought his mother's kind face to Gazda's thoughts, but no tears came; his shame had been washed, and his anger cooled by the blood he'd shed in the night.

He told the others that Eeda had bravely saved him from Magnuh, and nursed him back to health in a place she knew he would be safe.

Baho shuffled wearily forward and told him how Goro had saved his mother from the apes with bone faces; how Baho had joined the king to unsuccessfully chase the interlopers down.

Goro had rumbled then from a rise of dirt on which he stood watching the remaining apes climb down to the earth. He asked Gazda where his mother was, for she had been injured when last he saw her. Days and days had passed since she was seen.

But, Gazda could tell by the silverback's expression that Goro knew she was dead, had sensed or smelled it upon him.

“She died in the jungle before I awoke. I do not know how,” Gazda lied, and then a part of him shifted in shame, so grasping he added, “I buried her.”

Goro grew grave as did old Baho and other apes that gathered, but the jungle allowed little time for mourning—there was food to find, and young to protect. There was much to do, but Eeda would be missed.

Omag, Ulok and the old queens were not so inclined. The crippled ape and his supporters felt the she-ape’s death was evidence of savage justice. Had she not brought most of her troubles upon herself?

Besides there were the bone-faced apes to think about. The king and the blackbacks did not understand their ways, or comprehend the dangerous pointed sticks they threw.

Baho had found one with Eeda’s blood upon it.

“The stick must have killed her,” the former silverback intoned quietly.

Baho told Gazda where the bone-faced apes had attacked his mother, and Gazda quickly followed the scent, speeding to the place despite his growing daytime weakness, eager to wash his guilt away with more blood.

But when he arrived he found he was too late for tracks or trails. The many days of weather had cleared away all marks made by the invaders.

Except for the large wooden bone-face that peered up at the night ape from the ferns that Baho had described to him. The oddity had been thrown aside by Eeda’s attackers. It had been discovered with a larger flat piece of wood that held little meaning for Goro or Baho.

But this was not a real bone-face.

Gazda claimed the mask, and later took it to his lair to keep. The bone-face was flat and like an ape’s or the way Fur-nose’s was beneath the dried old flesh and skin. Its smooth forehead was wringed with long hair, and a leather strap ran from side to side behind the holes where the eyes would be.

Upon closer inspection, Gazda saw a pair of crossed long-bones sculpted tight under the chin.

On an impulse, the night ape held this face over his own so he could peer through the eye holes. The strange thing smelled of blood and flesh, and had an oily, pungent aroma that came off on his fingers.

Gazda slung the ugly thing over his shoulder, and carried the other strange artifact under his arm as he made his way back to the tribe, his heart sinking as he went. In time, he staggered to the center of the wooded area where the other apes ate leaves and nuts and there he found a depression covered by thick bushes and ferns where he fell into a deep, daytime sleep.

1907-1909 — Thirteen to fifteen years of age.

Chapter 24

Life Flies Forward.

Gazda's mother picked through the long strands of hair that grew atop his head, scraping his scalp with her broad fingernails and kissing away flakes of dead skin with her flexible lips.

The young night ape lay calmly against her warm belly, his spindly, white legs draped over her sinewy knees.

"Who is my father?" he asked, yearning to play with the other young apes in the grass.

"No worry," Eeda grumbled. "You have a mother."

Gazda snuggled into her lap. "But *she* has fur..."

"You have fur," his mother said good-naturedly, pulling out a few strands of his hair to make her point.

"But I am different from you!" Gazda rubbed his tender scalp. "And Goro." Deep down, he had hoped his father was Goro, but he doubted the silverback could sire a night ape.

At that time, Gazda had wondered whether his real father might have been Furnose as some had said to bully him—and he had yet to take pride in his many differences from the tribe of apes.

"Go hunt for bushpigs!" his mother scolded with good humor, pretending to push him off her lap. "I cannot eat these questions."

Gazda had been having trouble with the young blackbacks again. Such teasing always started him questioning his origins.

"Do not worry about the bullies," Eeda said. "You are different, and they are stupid."

"No worry!" Gazda turned his head to grin at her. "I have a mother that will always help."

"I cannot be everywhere," Eeda chided warmly, her expression turning grim. "You must help yourself."

She panted happily then and tickled her son's thin ribs until he couldn't catch his breath.

The night ape awoke gasping through his tears. Overhead, the dark leaves told him he had slept through much of the day. Gazda whimpered, sniffing at his hands, arms and shoulders, hoping he could catch his mother's scent, but what he smelled was in his mind still from the dream... and there was something else...

He rolled over to see that old Baho lay nearby chewing a handful of wild celery.

The former silverback was watching over him as Eeda had before she—she was dead.

Gazda had... he had... More tears came suddenly. Embarrassed, he pretended to claw sleep from his eyes as he climbed from his sleeping place and onto his knees before Baho.

The night ape tried to speak but only moaned like an infant.

Old Baho stirred, rising to his knuckles to look down at him.

"Be strong," he grunted.

"I am not strong, Baho. My mother is gone," Gazda whimpered, before looking away ashamedly—unable to accept his guilt beneath the honorable Baho's gaze. "I am alone. She was..."

The old bull ape did not notice any guilty tremor in Gazda's voice, for he said: "Feelings are like a river and if you follow them they will lead you to the source. And that place is where your strength comes from."

"I am weak," Gazda snapped, his heart shuddering, remembering how his weakness had played out. "I cannot..."

Baho grunted, and scratched the stiff white whiskers on his scarred old jaw. "An ape that fears the source of his feelings fears his own heart and will wander lost upon the bank of that river of which I speak. As he does, the infant he hears wailing comes from his own mouth."

"Does Goro wander this riverbank?" Gazda wondered, having heard the whispers of the silverback's essential softness of spirit.

"Goro is strong," the old bull ape growled curtly, thumping a heavy fist against the ground. "He has been to the source of this river to find the infant ape that once he was. There, Goro gathered up that babe in his great arms and carried him here to our tribe—and now within him is the strength of every ape he has ever been in his life, for he knows the lessons of his days. Only a fool would doubt that strength."

"Where is this river you speak of, Baho?" Gazda asked, his curiosity aroused.

The old silverback stripped juicy leaves off a celery stalk and chewing said, "It is inside you, Gazda. I hear its waters rising in your throat." Baho reached out and gently dabbed Gazda's tears with his heavy knuckles. "It is leaking out, look!"

Baho panted with humor over his damp fingers, and with a sharp hoot, he pushed Gazda back into the leaves where the night ape rolled end over end.

"Gazda will find his answers if he looks," Baho said, watching the young night ape rise into a crouch, but his old eyes shifted to where Omag brooded on a mound of stone beside the aging queens. The trio sat grooming the growing giant Ulok while the rest of the tribe built their sleeping nests in the branches overhead.

Baho involuntarily bared his fangs at the crippled ape before looking back to Gazda. "Remember your mother's heart. She gave it to you and to this tribe that is her family—so it is your family. You will never be alone for she is here with us, and she is on the river of which I speak."

A sudden chill went through Gazda and his pale face flushed as he looked away.

The night ape remembered Baho's words, and in the days and weeks that followed, Gazda searched inside himself for the river the former silverback had described. As he tracked this thing, his mind shifted away from anger and revenge, and within, he remembered the days of his mother's love, and the many warm places she still existed in his heart, and within the tribe.

In fact, he was pleased to find that signs of her were everywhere.

But great pain and shame always accompanied her spoor, and while his search for her heart kept him from the path of vengeance; it did not quiet his knowledge of those who had shared in his sin.

While upon her trail he came to accept his part in her death as accidental and he knew that his mother would agree.

But he could never forgive himself as she surely would have.

Still, the hunt helped him heal in the seasons that followed, though the strength that returned was destined for violence.

Halfway through Gazda's 14th year, a pair of starving female lions entered the jungle to hunt in Goro's land. It had been a dry spring in the highland plateau and many of the larger prides had broken up as they were forced to compete among themselves for scarcer game. The herds of zebra, wildebeest and gazelle had gone far to look for water and had not yet returned.

Those lions that had not followed the game were starving.

The jungle canopy held great reserves of water and from its stores grew food for the animals it nourished. The dense forest could pass the dry months with little change, and only a long drought would drastically impact the life there.

So the lionesses came looking for prey under the trees, and stalked the water trails where passing game would not expect the big predators.

Omag and the aging queens approached Goro to demand that the king do something about this, for there had been an incident involving one of the she-apes.

The crippled ape leaned heavily upon a strange thing he now used as a crutch to help him walk. His disease had twisted the bones in his right arm, shortening the limb, so this tool helped him move upon the ground, though in the trees he still swung with the swiftness of any ape.

The failed silverback had only recently returned from one of his absences and had brought the curious thing home with him.

On one end of a stout wooden stick, a broad, leaf-shaped shining stone was held by strips of hide, while on the other end this stick tapered to a sharp point. The crippled ape used the shining stone as a handle around which he'd wrap his long fingers, and lean upon the 20-inch wooden shaft with its splintered point driven into the ground to brace it.

For Omag it was a welcome aid to his shambling gait, while to its previous owner it was the iron blade, and splintered haft of an axe he had used to defend himself.

The crippled ape had finally satisfied his jealous yearning for Gazda's shining fang by ambushing a bone-faced hunter by the river, killing him and stealing the axe he carried.

Omag had quickly understood the "walking stick" had other uses that only he could perceive.

Gazda and the other apes recognized the handle on Omag's crutch as being made of a similar material to the night ape's long knife, and many wondered at its origin.

The apes shrank back in huddled groups as *Sip-sip* swaggered and bristled before the king with the aging queens bowing low behind him. Omag reported that hunting lions had almost caught Amak, mother of Ooso, as she made her way to a nearby drinking pond. The she-ape had only survived by a lucky jump and catch at vines draped near the trail.

"A king will do something to protect his people," Omag said, wiping at the drool that dripped from his chin. "He would chase the lions away."

The crippled ape made this assertion in part to undermine his "weak" king, but there was also some tentative hope that Goro would act for Omag had been unnerved since hearing that bone-faces entered Goro's land on the day the she-ape Eeda had disappeared.

While they had not been seen in the territory since, he did feel a certain constriction in his throat to imagine them crossing the border to hunt for *him*.

He had grown much jumpier after learning of this, though it had emboldened him to kill the bone-face for his fine weapon. Not long before that he had stuffed himself on female...and at the thought of the flesh, Omag's nerves thrilled and a deep desire heated his guts.

"Sip-sip!" he lisped, subconsciously lapping at the saliva that the craving had cause to flow from his damaged mouth. The crippled ape slapped a big hand over his mangled lips and scowled at a young ape that had turned toward the sound.

Lions? Omag had begun to wonder if Goro could chase the bone-faces from his land.

Gazda smirked from where he watched the scene astride a tree limb whetting the blade of his long knife on a rough stone. He had learned to sharpen the weapon by copying the actions of night apes in his dreams. It had pleased him to understand one of the things they did.

"The lions will leave," Goro said, quietly munching nuts, shifting his weight as two females groomed his silver back. "This is ape land."

"The lions will leave when they are full of *ape* flesh!" Omag cried, and his supporters screamed their agreement.

The tribe struggled with the terrifying discussion. Even Ooso had carried her daughter Yulu over to where the other nervous mothers crowded closer to the trees.

"No! We watch for lions," Goro said, shrugging his massive shoulders. "Goro and the blackbacks will warn the tribe, and apes will be safe in the trees. Lions do not climb."

"The king would let the trees protect us?" Omag countered, saliva slithering out of his ruined face in amber strings. His long tongue, now dotted with blistered lesions, popped out of the ragged hole in his cheek to lap at it.

"*Sip-sip*" came the sound again.

At this point, Gazda slid his knife away and climbed down to the ground where he stood with the loyal blackbacks who had formed a solid semi-circle behind the king.

"The lions will leave," Goro growled, rising onto all fours. "We must be calm. Goro watches."

"So Goro fights the lions?" Omag said sharply, swinging his arm to indicate the aging queens behind him, and the other blackbacks that had moved in back of them with Ulok. "And the apes can rest."

"Goro will fight any lions that come," the silverback rumbled, seemingly growing larger as he spoke. The hair on his back and swelling shoulders quivered. "Goro is king, and he has spoken."

Omag stared at the silverback with his bloodshot eyes, but the tribe had noticed that he, too, had shrunk down as Goro postured. The crippled ape's breath came hard and fast from his ragged face and made a greasy farting sound.

But no one dared pant or hoot at the embarrassing noise.

"Then Omag will not question the king or his word," Omag said slyly, as he and his supporters knelt in the grass before the silverback. "Goro will fight the lions."

Chapter 25

Strange Apes.

Weeks later, Gazda was swinging through the jungle canopy, flitting from branch to branch so quickly that when an alarming odor startled his senses he misjudged his leap and fell far short of the next intended limb in his path.

The night ape plunged 50 feet toward the forest floor before his outstretched hand snagged the flexible tip of a long branch that bent mightily but held his weight after much jostling and bouncing.

With the limb clenched in his fist, the night ape sniffed the warm air, casting for another whiff of...and there it was, he recognized the pungent smell. His free hand came up and he rubbed the fingertips beneath his nose, remembering the curious scent he'd noticed when pressing the wooden bone-face over his own.

The strange thing was left behind by creatures that Baho had claimed attacked Gazda's mother and struck her with a sharp stick. Her scream had baited Magnuh's trap.

Before Eeda's son had...

Nosing the air, the night ape bared his fangs. He heaved himself high up the tree before springing free of it, hurtling by vine and branch toward the scent.

Moving at this, his fastest, speed through the high branches, Gazda became a blur, almost flying bough to branch. The dappled afternoon sunlight did not slow him, so dense was the shadow that gripped the trees—so concentrated was the fury that propelled him.

Few of the arboreal creatures even witnessed his passing, though some birds drowsing in the trees squawked suddenly and lifted off—unaware that the night ape was long gone by the time they knew he had been there.

The scent was growing stronger as Gazda raced through the canopy when his eye caught movement on the trail far below. He checked his forward motion by hooking his fingers on a stout branch and swinging completely around it once, twice and a third time, before he let go and dropped through the crowd of limbs, slowing his descent by grabbing at the most flexible branches, angling his fall, until he could grip the tree trunk to use the rough bark as a brake until he stopped.

Then moving silently, he crept out on a limb some 20 feet above the strange creature. The hair on his neck bristled, and his body went rigid as his claws raked deep grooves in the branch beneath him.

A bone-face! Like the creatures that had attacked his mother...that later caused her death.

Could it be the very one? It was moving cautiously along the trail, stalking beneath the trees, the oversized eyes looking this way and that as the long sharp stick in its hands mirrored the action.

Gazda's mouth fell open, and his immediate rage bled away, as shock sent tremors through his mind. For the moment, his curiosity overpowered his fury.

The creature wore a long decorated cloth that hung over its loins and a vest of woven sticks and bones protecting its chest. But more importantly wherever the flesh was exposed the skin was pale brown—and hairless!

True, the skin was mottled, varying by degrees of yellow-brown, and the muscular limbs were marked in places with blotches—bruises and wounds of dark red and purple, but it was still enough like his own flesh to make him wonder if he was looking at a night ape thus disguised.

Beneath the bone-face would the creature have a fur-nose?

As quietly as a panther, Gazda slipped back to the tree trunk, and then crept down until he clung in place where he'd be just above the bone-face as it passed beneath him on the trail.

He struck with the speed of a snake, his fist snapping down on top of the creature's head. The impact knocked the bone-face senseless, but Gazda's strong fingers caught in its hair before it could fall.

The night ape turned and dragged his prey high up onto a broad bough where he leaned his captive against the tree trunk.

Then Gazda ran his nose over the creature's chest and neck, and his lips curled up with disgust. It was the same stink he'd found on the wooden mask—pungent, but there had been something else, too. This one smelled like an ape, but there was the scent of sickness and decay.

Gazda lifted the creature and held him upright by the throat so he could remove the face covering with his free hand, before stripping off its garments and the metal ornaments that clung to its arms and ankles.

There was hair on the bone-face's head, and some under its nose—there was no doubt—and upon its skin were dark lines depicting other bone-faces like skulls and bones that danced.

Curious things...

When the creature started gasping itself back to consciousness Gazda let it sink onto its haunches, as he stepped back to study it further.

It resembled a night ape—like Gazda, and like Fur-nose.

However, the bone-faced ape was diseased, for mottled skin and boils showed purple-red around the joints of the creature's arms and legs—and a gray-yellow ooze slid out of cracked skin that stank of rot.

Part of its face had been eaten away, too. The upper jaw and along the right side of the nose had opened up to show raw, scarlet muscle beneath, and sight of this put Gazda in mind of Omag. The sores and slight "bowed" shape of its legs reminded him of *Sip-sip*.

Gazda was puzzled. So, as the bone-face struggled to breathe, the night ape investigated the creature's coverings and tools that he'd set out on the broad tree branch between them.

There was a loincloth like his own and belt of shiny leather with a knife hanging from it. There was a stick bent around a taut string, and a long, leather pouch full of sharp sticks. These had been slung over its shoulder, and Gazda drew one stick out to study.

Its point was as sharp as a fang, and on the other end split feathers had been somehow attached. Gazda imagined the thing moving through the air... and a dark shadow entered his mind as he imagined it striking his mother as Baho had said.

A red gleam flared up in the night ape's eyes as he let the stick fall from his grasp.

Squatting before the bone-face, Gazda hissed as it shook its head and opened its eyes to look at him.

Terror filled the disfigured face as the creature saw the night ape's wrath.

Immediately, it pressed itself tighter to the tree, and gibbered in a terrified and irritating way.

But at that moment as the bone-faced ape showed its fear—the predator in Gazda surfaced, as did the enraged son, and in the creature's eyes he saw his mother's terror reflected.

This creature and its brothers were the cause... had forced Gazda to...

He struck the bone-face too swiftly for it to react, and gripping the thin neck, Gazda easily lifted him overhead. The creature squealed, kicked and tried to cry out.

The night ape smiled, and bared his fangs as he lowered the creature toward his mouth.

The bone-face's eyes went wide.

It made a gurgling noise as Gazda tore into its jugular and drank the foaming blood that gushed out. Then, as if the potent meal added passion to his rage, Gazda chewed, gnashed his fangs and tore at the strange ape's throat until the head rolled to the side and dangled by a grisly string of flesh and skin.

But Gazda's immediate anger had subsided as he drank the creature's life away, and afterward he sank to his knees to calmly study the bone-face's clothing and equipment again, thinking he might take them for his own use. The questions they raised were too exciting to ignore, and something of their design resonated in the night ape's breast.

He licked at the blood that still colored his lips and chin, thinking that the blood and flesh tasted much like that of a chimpanzee...and the smell of it was ape. And with that, he decided with some finality that the bone-face was a night ape similar to his own kind—and Fur-nose's.

Then he wondered if perhaps Omag could be induced to explain the similarities between his diseased flesh and that of the bone-face's for at close range they looked to be the same.

But Gazda shrugged, uncertain if he was prepared to mention Sip-sip's disabilities for the crippled ape was sensitive and vengeful when any attention was drawn to them.

He decided that the dangers of asking Omag would be warranted if it might help explain how the night ape came to be Eeda's child...

...and how the events had unfolded that led to her end.

Growling angrily at the thought, Gazda lifted the bone-faced ape overhead and flung the body to the ground far below where it hit with bone-crushing force near where it had dropped its long, sharp stick.

The night ape had just started wrapping the bone-face's possessions in its woven vest when movement below drew his eye to the jungle floor.

Expecting to see a hyena going for the dead flesh, he was startled when another hairless ape moved carefully out of the thick green brush.

But this was no bone-face, this one was black in color and without hair from head to toe, and its shape and scent soon confirmed that it was female.

She carried a long knife similar to Gazda's and unsheathing it, she moved cautiously toward the dead bone-face, her eyes alert for movement. In her other hand was a long sharp stick with a knife-like blade affixed to one end.

Gazda barked a warning and dropped rapidly branch to branch, before sliding down the tree trunk and leaping between this stranger and the body.

The hairless female's dark face and limbs became like stone, but her eyes shone white rings of surprise as she stopped. And yet she did not flee but held her place—and Gazda wondered if she intended to eat the bone-face meat.

Her knife was out, and its tip was pointed at Gazda.

The female's eyes narrowed as she glared at him with neither fear nor anger; and perplexed, the night ape did the only thing he could think of.

He barked again, and beat upon his chest until the dried mud-skin and hunting marks he'd daubed there came off in clouds of dust.

One corner of the female's mouth came up in a half-smile as Gazda stamped his feet and growled at her exposed teeth.

Confused by her reaction, since it was clear she had not shown all of her fighting fangs, Gazda moved some feet back from the bone-face where he squatted in the dirt to watch, and sniff at the air between them. Already the female's scent was growing stronger to him, and was a heady vapor that made a jumble of his thoughts.

His nostrils flared as he captured more of her perfume on the warm breeze.

The female was dressed in a leathery vest and short cape, with a knee-length loincloth that sprouted from a wide belt. Her forearms and calves were covered in the same leathery material that protected her chest and neck, and while it appeared stiff and hard it did not hamper her movements.

Gazda studied the strange designs that swirled in raised lines over her garments and he felt an urge to take them away from her. She could be no match for his strength, and it would allow him to see the body beneath.

The black female kept her long sharp stick in one hand, tipped back and balanced on her shoulder as she knelt over Gazda's kill. The night ape growled quietly, but she did not flinch, using her knife to cut a patch of long hair from the bone-face's scalp.

Gazda watched her puzzled, tilting his head to left and right, as she then tied this bloody trophy to a collection of similar hairy tufts that were knotted into a long, twisted cord that hung from the belt at her slim waist.

Pointing at the dead thing on the ground, she said something then in a commanding tone, "Bakwaniri!"

Gazda looked at the corpse and up at the female, and he grunted the name for "meat" in his ape language.

The female's eyes went wide at the animal sound, but she repeated slowly: "*Ba-kwa-niri.*"

She followed this with complicated chattering that reminded Gazda of the irritating sounds made by the bone-face that lay dead between them.

But the black female continued this, pointing at the body, chattering and gesturing to the trophies on her belt, and while the night ape did not understand her “sounds,” he somehow understood her meaning.

The thing on the ground was not just “meat” it was a “Bakwaniri.” The bone-face was called that just as he was called Gazda...

He marveled at his sudden intuitive leap, and he hooted happily, slapping the ground in his enthusiasm as he repeated the word in garbled fashion.

The female showed all her fangs in a smile and the night ape growled menacingly, but quickly calmed down when she nodded agreeably before chattering again.

Gazda lost the words, but he was amazed to understand her meaning: “I am Harkon the huntress. *I mean no harm to the ape-man.*”

“Ape” he understood, but “man?” He studied her slyly, puzzling at the mental picture as it faded. *Did the strange word mean “hunter” to this female? Such a meaning would make sense, since he was an ape and a hunter.*

This Harkon was like Gazda, a great hunter also, but her strength was directed solely at the bone-faces. *She hated the Bakwaniri.*

Gazda raised nose, snuffling at the air and picking up traces of her female scent. Had he smelled her trail before? Was she familiar in these lands?

No! She was not. The night ape grunted negatively. He would have remembered her scent. Gazda gave a coughing bark as he waved at the thing on the ground, trying to make her understand that she could eat the bone-face meat if she wished.

He nodded and repeated his assent as Harkon the huntress started backing away, nodding also. The night ape hoped that she would kill many more Bakwaniri, for they had helped cause Eeda’s death.

His mother...

The bone-faces and Magnuh had played their parts, and while Gazda had plans for the Bakwaniri, of the bull elephant, there had been no sign. The night ape had yet to decide whether such a confrontation was worth tracking down when the outcome would likely mean his own death, and there was still blame enough at home.

Gazda struggled with the fact that he—the son—had fed upon and killed the only thing in his life that had ever cared for him, had raised and defended him despite his many differences.

Tears suddenly came into his eyes, and he growled to negate them, shaking his head violently so that the long black hair fell forward to cover his face.

Harkon paused at the trail’s edge to watch him, tipping her face from right to left, curious about Gazda’s meaning.

Then she set her weapons aside and put her hands out in front of her, fingers spread and palms down, and the night ape did the same.

It was a simple gesture, but both understood its meaning. Like her garments it was uncomplicated, and elegant, nothing like the brutish and harsh language and laws of Goro’s apes.

Harkon and Gazda understood each other. They were both night apes! Had he found his tribe at last?

She retrieved her weapons and backed away, leaving Gazda by the corpse as she melted into the thick undergrowth that choked the jungle floor there.

Gazda's mind clung to her scent, her actions, and to her clothing, and he glanced down at his own rough black loincloth, glad that he wore it—saddened that he had not brought his cape.

They were not as refined as Harkon's gear, but Gazda was not just some hairless ape—or what she had suggested an *ape-man*? No. He was different from the other strange apes in the jungle.

Gazda looked up into the tree thinking of the dead Bakwaniri's bundled gear and he scowled at the thought of using it. The clothes were more refined than his own, but they smelled worse, reeking of disease and stained with foulness. The creature's weapons and tools had only filled the night ape with anger and guilt.

He could never use them without thinking of his mother's death.

But his memory played back to Harkon's garments, and a thrill of excitement made him hoot and pant with pleasure. Those coverings had seemed practical, and their lines and dark coloration suited his hunting techniques, and would disguise much of his pale skin.

With a final glance along the way that Harkon had taken, Gazda quickly climbed back up into the tree where he investigated his bundle of booty.

The clothing he threw aside, and after it the sharp sticks were cast away. He dropped the bent stick and string that he could not understand, and paused a moment as he considered retrieving the bone-face's long sharp stick from the forest floor.

Harkon used a similar weapon but Gazda decided against it when he imagined moving through the trees with the awkward thing. Besides, he had no idea how he could employ its sharp end when in close quarters battle with his prey.

The Bakwaniri knife was of inferior quality, but he still wedged it firmly between some branches, memorizing its location in case he ever lost his own blade.

Gazda kept the decorative arm- and ankle-bands. They were made of a substance similar to his long knife, but it was the motif set into them that drew his eye: two were marked by grinning skulls, another of entire skeletons with linked hands and feet and a fourth of long bones crossed in a patterned series. He copied their placement from where he'd found them upon their former owner, dividing them up to slide over his ankles and upper biceps.

Finally, he studied the Bakwaniri's bone-face covering, in his mind comparing it to the one he had in his lair. Between them he could distinguish differences that made him favor the mask he already possessed, so after catching a whiff of decay, he flung the one in his hands away.

With a final admiring look at his interesting new adornments, Gazda laughed and then leapt into motion, swinging through the trees to where he had left the tribe combing the crumbled ruin of a fallen ironwood for grubs and insect eggs.

Chapter 26

The Lions.

As Gazda swept from tree to tree, he again mused upon Harkon's fine body coverings, and on Fur-nose, whose garments were made of flimsy stuff that pulled apart into threads like spider webbing.

Those marvelous strands had come to mind when he saw Harkon's leather apparel for it was edged with colored string or webbing. Gazda had seen a connection, and felt it was more proof that night apes were an advanced group of creatures capable of wonders like long-knives, body coverings, the incredible tree-nest and the fantastic things inside it.

Gazda released his hold upon a swinging vine so that he flew some 30 feet in an arc, to where he dug his strong fingers into the ridged bark of an enormous tree.

He climbed upward to rest on a branch where he yawned and studied the Bakwaniri ornaments again; turning the band on his left arm to make the carven skulls move around his bicep.

The night ape snatched a lock of his long black hair and chewed on its end as he studied the way he had come through the trees.

The thick, leafy wall of jungle looked impenetrable, but he knew that Harkon would be in there hunting Bakwaniri for their hair, and a surge of excitement almost caused him to dash after her and join in the killing.

But he would hunt for her track later.

At the moment, he had to tell Goro what he had learned of these Bakwaniri because the silverback's lands were not open to strangers.

Gazda's sun-weakness had come upon him when he returned to the tribe late that afternoon, and the apes were preparing to bed down by the time he came awake to hunt for his supper, so it was not until the following morning that he could tell Goro about the bone-faces.

The apes were searching for their breakfasts on the cluttered and uneven ground in an open gash in the jungle where fallen trees had given way to new saplings and much undergrowth. Massive trees formed a dense wall of interwoven branches where the forest edged the narrow clearing.

The night ape was crouched before the silverback and about to speak when Aluga, mate of Baho, tore screaming out of the thick foliage and pushed her way between them. The fur on her shoulders, breasts and belly was soaked with red, and cruelly marked by claws.

As the tribe quickly gathered, Aluga chattered that she had just escaped death. Two lionesses had ambushed her close to the nearby stream when she had bent to drink. It seemed their starving state had made the beasts impatient, and so their attack had failed when the she-ape wriggled free.

Aluga shrieked and screamed like no other, and soon even old Baho's concern was drawn by her dramatic tale. He sat by Goro with his large hands over his ears as a pair of she-apes tended his noisy mate's wounds.

The king ordered his lieutenant and the blackbacks to get the females and infants into the trees while he performed a rearguard action by pacing the trail back toward the stream. The males would then protect the tribe and under Baho's leadership await Goro's return.

Few of the frightened apes missed the king's many angry looks at Omag, who hoisted himself into the trees with an impudent expression of amusement upon his distorted features.

As the tribe was climbing into the branches, Goro started retracing the she-ape's path, but came to a sudden halt when a gaunt lioness appeared out of the thick undergrowth near the clearing's edge.

She had followed Aluga's trail and tracked her right back to the tribe.

Terror seized the heart of every ape, and screaming with unbridled panic, they clambered higher into the trees, seeking protected perches where they could safely scold and taunt the unwelcome predator.

Gazda did this also, caught up in the king's order and the tribe's fear, and he was soon 50 feet above the clearing where he turned upon a bough to see that Goro had not moved.

The king stood his ground before the lioness. A deep rumbling sound came from the silverback, as his massive body seemed to swell and dwarf the very open space around him.

Shouting encouragement, Gazda watched as Goro's bull-ape roar caused the lioness to flinch and the great carnivore cowered before the king of the apes—shaking. Thus emboldened, Goro pounded his mighty chest and with fangs bared he charged the beast, tearing up stones, plants and rotten logs as he hurtled toward the cringing lioness.

Gazda recognized the trap too late, so he could only scream an unheard warning as Goro pounded closer to the cowering beast. For that lion was the bait to draw the king in and when he was close enough...

...another lioness launched out of her hiding place in the underbrush as Goro passed, and landed full upon the great ape's back.

Gazda and the other apes screamed and shook the trees at this duplicity and cowardice.

Goro howled in fury as this second lioness raked his shoulders and lower back with long, sharp claws. She hacked at the thick muscle about his neck with her fangs, seeking his jugular.

When the king reached back with his powerful hands to pull the lioness off, the first beast made her attack, jumping at Goro's chest and face.

The rest of the apes shrieked and scolded from the trees, threw sticks and stamped on swaying branches to no avail as their king battled the lions alone.

Several blackbacks looked to old Baho who was reluctantly holding his position. It was clear on his face and in the cries of his fellows that they wished to test their strength against these lions; but the former silverback was torn by his duties to his friend and to the leadership bestowed upon him, for indeed he had also inched his way lower where he shook the branches with fighting fangs displayed.

Baho was torn, for it was the way of the apes to do their duty. He had been ordered by the king to guard the tribe not Goro. The king was doing his duty, so must Baho, and the blackbacks had been charged with the tribe's protection also.

Watching and howling and shaking the trees only helped infuriate these beasts who were many and the lions but two.

Some of the most eager had slipped down their respective tree-trunks and hesitated by the gnarled roots, eager to join the fight.

But Omag bellowed close to old Baho. He hung hand and foot from overhead scolding any blackback who had moved to the ground, or dared work up a fighting frenzy. The huge Ulok loomed there also, backing up his crippled mentor by roaring for order. Between them and the aging queens every blackback was reminded of the king's pronouncement that "he" would fight the lions.

While not 80 feet from them, Goro wrapped his massive arms around the first beast, hissing as the lioness behind him sank her fangs again and again into his mountainous shoulders—his "silver" back hung in shredded strings of crimson gore.

The king drove his own long fighting canines into the first lioness' shoulder as he crushed her against his chest in a smothering embrace. The snarling carnivore slashed at his forehead.

Gazda was struggling with the memory of his mother. Had she still lived, she would have crept up onto the branch beside him having read from his bearing that his fear was gone, and that his impulsive nature would soon make him act against the tribal laws.

She would have recognized this, and slipped her strong arms around her son where he would alternately try to break her grip while raging at the lions that battled Goro.

Though she no longer lived to protect him, her memory was there to hold Gazda in place, and so the night ape wrestled with the lessons Eeda had taught him.

As indecision grew heavy in the pit of his stomach, he cast about the trees at his fellows—feeling some relief to see little Ooso and tiny Yulu high up in an ironwood, while in the branches below them Kagoon's massive black form lurked protectively.

They were out of danger, but Goro...

Already, the king's fur was slick with scarlet and the flesh on his shoulders was torn in ragged strips. Even at such a distance Gazda's nostrils grew full with the smell of battle and his heart raced for blood.

Goro was either weakening, or the first lioness had set her teeth in his throat for the great silverback fell forward suddenly, and as he did, the beast upon his back shifted positions to sink her fangs into the flesh at the base of his neck.

His spine would soon be severed, and the tribe knew then it would be over.

Goro was weakening, but he was not finished. He roared his frustration, great muscles shivering, for he could not reach back to remove the second lion without opening his throat to attack from the first.

That lioness beneath him had sunk her teeth deep into his chest muscles, but would shift and strike like a snake if he lifted his chin. The silverback knew it was only a matter of moments. His primitive fury surged through him and he squeezed the lioness under him with all his strength—and there was a cracking sound.

Distantly he heard an uproar as the tribe's warning and scolding cries turned to something else. Something was happening! More danger? The silverback could not help them.

The tribe still scolded the lions, but some it seemed, the blackbacks were cheering.

And the lioness on Goro's back suddenly screamed, spun and jumped off of him. The silverback ignored the wet coolness that flooded over his shoulders, and

growling he pressed his great forearm against the lioness' throat beneath him. His titanic muscles swelled as he crushed her against the earth.

There was another cracking sound.

Behind him the apes had been cheering Gazda. The night ape had finally broken away from his mother's memory, and defying Goro's order had swung through the trees until he hurtled to the ground behind the rending pile of feline muscle perched atop his king's back.

Even Baho could not contain himself and cheered with the others, while Omag, Ulok and the aging queens scowled as they scolded them all.

Gazda had leapt forward quickly, reaching out for the lioness' tail which he brought up to his gaping mouth and with his razor sharp teeth sheared off the tufted tip. Thick red blood jetted from the severed tail into the night ape's mouth.

The lioness had yowled and turned about with long claws lashing out for Gazda, who sprinted away from the battle with her hurtling close behind.

Goro crushed down on the lion's throat until he felt muscle and bone shift and fracture one against the other beneath his forearm. And at last the beast's fangs slid from his chest. The big silverback closed his fighting canines over her head and with one great bite, split her skull open. Hot blood flowed into Goro's mouth as the beast beneath him shuddered and went still.

But there was no time to rest. The silverback heaved himself upright and staggering, turned to see the other lioness moving away across the clearing in pursuit of Gazda.

The night ape could move as quickly as the other apes did on all fours, but he could also employ an unsettling but speedy sprint by raising himself onto his hind legs and charging along like he was about to fall onto his face.

The other apes could also walk on their feet alone, but could never match the night ape's agility or speed. Gazda kept ahead of the lioness by dodging back and forth, but she was quickly learning his movements and soon her claws would catch.

Goro thundered after them, screaming as he pounded toward the beast. His challenge brought the lioness at last around to where she growled at him in kind, and started back toward the bleeding silverback, his many injuries making him the easier kill.

The king bellowed, and snapped his bloody fangs in anticipation for the lioness' neck. The bull ape was badly mauled, torn and bleeding everywhere, but his mind was alive with fury that the beasts had dared hunt in his lands, and though he doubted he would survive this fight; he panted joyfully for a final battle, pelting toward the lioness with the last of his strength.

The apes in the trees went silent as the lion ran at Goro and leapt.

The silverback screamed and met the charge with all his might. The big carnivore struck him in the chest and the impact threw both great beasts in a heap where they rolled and struggled on the ground.

Yet just as quickly, Goro felt the lioness in his arms go limp. Puzzled, yet growling mightily, the silverback pulled himself up to see that the beast was dead.

But Goro had not killed it. Instead, Gazda lay there wrapped around the lion's body, just as an infant ape clings to his mother's back. Only, he was not suckling. The night ape had his shining fang out and was sinking it again and again into the

great cat's side. Its coat was torn to ribbons; the internal flesh was exposed and stained dark crimson.

Gazda had used Goro's charge as a distraction and had come after the lioness when she had turned, leaping onto her back as she raced toward the king.

Goro wiped at his bloody brow with a shaking hand, and then sat down quite heavily.

Gazda's face was lined with worry as he pulled his limbs from under the lion's corpse.

The silverback's vision was swimming and tinted red where his torn scalp leaked blood into his eyes. He felt great thirst and weakness, but he climbed back to his feet as Gazda approached.

Farther on, the bull ape could see the rest of the tribe climbing down from the trees to cross the clearing. The smell of carnivores and blood made them move cautiously.

"King Goro fights the lions," Gazda said, licking blood from the shining fang in his hands.

Goro grunted, pride suddenly burning in his veins, renewing his strength. He took a deep breath as the other apes drew closer.

Rising upright the silverback set one great foot upon the dead lioness, and throwing back his head, he beat his powerful chest with bloody fists, loosing the victory cry of a bull ape.

And then he fell onto his knees as the night ape moved to steady him.

"Goro fights lions with Gazda," the big silverback gasped, and then he panted lightheartedly, swatting the night ape with a massive hand and knocking him for a tumble.

Soon, the females and infants stopped a safe distance on as the blackbacks approached the dead lions. There the males screamed and leapt, running back and forth between the lifeless beasts venting their rage upon them with fangs, fists and rocks.

Gazda and Goro walked together toward the tribe where Baho panted and hooted in joy, and the females hurried forward with concern upon their frightened faces. The night ape joined with them to tend and lick clean the mighty Goro's wounds.

As the blackbacks continued to display their outrage upon the dead lions, Goro looked at Gazda and grunted appreciatively as he accepted the handful of grasses that was offered.

Chewing the green blades for their moisture, the silverback felt a shadow of his strength return. His reign as king might continue yet.

Across from them Omag, the aging queens, Ulok and a group of resentful blackbacks had remained in the trees.

Cold was the glare in the crippled ape's eye.

1910 — Sixteen years of age.

Chapter 27

Harkon the Huntress.

It was almost three years ago that Capan Seetree of the Bakwaniri had ordered his hunters into the forbidden lands. A fire had been set in his soul and the flames would burn at each feast or festival until the River Demon and its kin were dead and their meat was hissing on the fire.

The range of this beast had been sounded, and hunters were sharpening their blades and making ready to set out as they had every season.

Each Johnnie boasted he would be the one to take the monster's head—despite the fact that all had failed, and many died or were never seen again, lost as they were in the twisted jungle that the River Demon called home—a jungle as vast as the ocean the first fathers had said, and just as quick and lethal for any crewmen sunk within it.

But their quarry had proved to be a slippery fish, as was its folk that seemed to move quietly beneath the green murk, leaving little sign of their passing. The returning hunters would speak of finding the spoor but never the beasts, and it was impossible to know what the missing lads had found.

In the years since his dear daughter's death, Seetree's efforts had slain many other creatures and men, with no River Demon skull, flesh or skin to show for it.

In fact, since hunters had first found its trail and followed it across the forbidden lands toward the coast, the beast had doubled back many times to slay their women; the poor hearties gone forever down that raw, red gullet.

Because efforts to slay the beast were meeting with little success, and women continued to die, Seetree had tried to shift the focus from immediate results to their greater accomplishments, and he would often hold festivals by the great fire where he broke out the grog and roasted the best slaves for a feast to celebrate the ship's history.

He'd have the best music played amidst wanton dancing and the night would spin under the stars as the wizard's apprentices flayed their captives alive.

Then capan, fust and sir-jon turned out in their best gear to remind the crew that the first fathers came from a great place more powerful than the jungle that rose in leafy waves about the ship, or any flesh-eating demon that dared lurk in its wake.

The "best" gear had been altered by years with most of the original metal weapons and tools of the fathers' falling victim to time, lost or worn away by rust and use or ground down to nothing by endless sharpening.

Of blacksmithing to repair the things only the rudiments remained to them and that was reserved for making crude weapons, rough nails to build, implements to cook and chains to hold their slaves.

Families in the crew might brag ownership of heirlooms or the like: ratty scabbards, bent swords, and blunt knives that upon inspection would be exposed as broken nubs better used for skinning bananas than repelling enemies.

This decay did not in any way deplete the importance of what artifacts remained, and so the positions of capan, fust and sir-jon being of some repute were all identified by certain badges of office.

Like the other Bakwaniri males, they wore masks of wood though their "skull" faces ended at the cheekbones to allow for the long braided beards that each official cultivated.

The capan wore a hat of woven feathers that unknown to its wearer was crafted in the shape and design of head coverings that once denoted the British admiralty, while at his hip hung a cutlass much dwindled by long sharpening until it was half its original length and width when it was drawn.

Of clothing there was nothing genuine left, though flairs of their sea going history still rode in the cut of their beaded coattails, hyena fur epaulets and tight snakeskin leggings and boots.

The fust wore similar attire, though his hat had four points instead of three, and was furry. From his waist was suspended a saber that remained sheathed at all times to hide the fact that there remained only a rusted spike projecting from its tarnished hilts.

Being a wizard, the sir-jon wore a long waistcoat and breeches of lizard skin, and with him he carried two sacred objects for which he had only passing knowledge of their original use. A rusted quadrant swung from his neck by a length of rawhide, and under one arm he carried a much-weathered spyglass.

Neither did he employ to determine his position upon the earth, but rather as optical devices for gauging the nature of things in the wild, and the content of men's souls.

But so caparisoned, these men appeared supreme against the savage backdrop, and the echo of history would affirm the crew's belief in itself, and its leaders.

These festivals were laid out when the season or situation demanded, for the capan had been forced by the grumbling crew to alter his plans for revenge. He was asked to keep half of his hunters close, for many said there was little point of searching in the west for a creature that visited their homes.

Yet none spoke of elections for there was booty to show for their years of hunting the demon. The Bakwaniri slave ranks had grown to bursting as bellies swelled with the flesh they'd taken from small black tribes discovered hiding in the deep verge and pillaged for meat, slaves and gold as the hunters combed the dense jungle to the north, south and west.

Young female slaves were always needed to give healthy babies to Bakwaniri hunters and to grow the population of the ship; while slaves of any gender were worked until they were needed in the kitchen.

But such plunder would never be enough for Capan Seetree, robbed as he'd been and bereaved, for he knew his daughter's spirit could only rest when the River Demon's head was hung from the mainmast.

They simply had to find the beast.

Generations spent roasting slaves and stalking the hoofed animals of the upper terrace had not prepared the Bakwaniri for hunting jungle creatures. The dangers were numerous, and it seemed they were not unopposed.

The recurring disappearances of Bakwaniri Johnnies on the hunt, and the mutilation of their corpses suggested that there might be something other than the River Demon to whom a debt was owed.

Seetree's plans might have changed, but the fire of conquest within him still burned brightly, fuelled by his need for vengeance and the disease that ate at his brain.

However, it seemed that he was not the only keeper of a flame.

For hundreds of years raiders and slavers, foreign and native-born, had pillaged the lands of the West African coast destroying and making extinct civilizations and peoples too numerous to count, while leaving too few to conceive of their loss.

A holocaust blazed where one group of people after another were made slaves or killed, their treasures and land taken, before all trace of them was destroyed.

There were many such peoples, and their survivors clung to life in the shadows of the dense jungle that had birthed them and concealed their existence.

For generations, one tribe of warriors had been whittled down to nothing. Their numbers were reduced until they had not enough people to grow or revisit days of glory—nor to carry the traditions of their past.

The dwindling few who remained had spent the days surviving, avoiding raiders and slavers and putting off the inevitable end. An end that came quite recently for this small group that had lived in a pocket of dense jungle in the northeast of Goro's land. These warriors with their children had moved there no more than two years past.

A small group of Bakwaniri hunters tasked with finding the River Demon had stumbled upon their hiding place, and returned in force to raze it. The men and children were made slaves or killed in the process, and the women of breeding years were taken as wives.

Save one.

She was called Harkon, a great hunter of animals that in the intervening years had come to be the hunter of men, and seeker of revenge.

Whether her captured people had met the butcher block, or were now slaves of Bakwaniri masters, none could say; but Harkon had devoted her life to finding out and rescuing any she could, while bringing death to those who'd pushed her people from the very earth.

The Bakwaniri had to die for crimes they'd committed against her. Recent years had shown the diseased and masked warriors moving out past their former range, reaving and slaving as they went, and in the end they had attacked a place where her people had lay hidden.

Harkon's race was all that was left of one of many lost African tribes and kingdoms. Wars, famine, slave raiders and the Bakwaniri hunters had all but annihilated a people who had once boasted golden halls with ivory thrones.

A joyous people had been made to weep, and all that remained of hers was a small group of some few hunters, old men and women and a handful of children. There had been little left when the Bakwaniri had come and there would be no future unless Harkon acted.

And if there was no future, then she would see to it that the criminals similarly disappeared, or that she would die pushing them to the brink.

Harkon's tribe had been forced in its defense to take up a nomadic existence, leaving little trace as they passed, creating temporary huts within a palisade of sticks and bushes whenever required. The tribe moved constantly and at a moment's notice.

At any indication of an enemy, the old men and women would lead the children to prearranged hiding places, while the warriors remained behind to fight a rearguard action.

However, the last attack by the Bakwaniri had come by stealth after they had stumbled upon the little tribe. When their reinforcements had arrived, the masked men had fallen on Harkon's people without warning, slaying and capturing what warriors remained, and taking the old men and women, and children before they had a chance to hide.

Harkon had been out of the camp at that time. As the greatest hunter it was her task to procure meat for her people. There were so few left, they could not spare any more than one of their protectors at a time for obtaining meat.

When Harkon returned home she found herself alone. Even the dead had been collected and carried away. Man, woman and child, even Harkon's husband was nowhere to be seen, though his favorite string of beads she found in a sticky pool of blood.

Favorite, for it had been made for him by their son, *Anim*—a boy of four years who was missing with the other children.

Young he was but quick to learn the chores around his mother's camp. She found herself hoping *Anim* would be useful to his captors—if he yet lived.

Harkon knew that the Bakwaniri made slaves of those captives they did not eat, and she vowed to find and free her boy and any others who still breathed.

Hers had been a race of happy people who were lovers of children and good company. As she studied the trampled earth for sign and track, the last remnants of that joyful breed was squeezed from her heart as it hardened for the grim task ahead.

Rather her son and husband were dead than food for fat Bakwaniri oafs. Despair came upon her briefly then, but rather than weep, Harkon growled, and as she rose to her feet, her eyes blazed with hatred and desire for Bakwaniri blood.

She had stalked out of the ruin of her people, eyes searching for a trail.

She followed the track for many days until she came upon the strange Bakwaniri village but immediately understood that there was no frontal attack a sole warrior could make upon its high walls. The best Harkon could manage was to climb into the trees that grew around the clearing and peer over the palisade there to watch the distant figures move within.

Slaves and Bakwaniri she saw aplenty but she could not identify her child.

For a time she despaired because her quest looked hopeless. How could she help *Anim* from outside the walls?

And so, she did the only thing she could do and vented her impotent fury on any Bakwaniri she found hunting gazelle in the high plateau, setting snares for monkeys in the jungle near the village or collecting fruits that grew along the river.

Also, she targeted the small groups of masked men that crossed the river to hunt in the west. There from each dead Bakwaniri she killed by spear or knife, Harkon would cut a lock of hair and scalp to make a belt of vengeance that would

remind her of the things that she had lost—that she was unlikely to ever find again.

Yet there was some hope, for Harkon knew that behind the palisade Bakwaniri life continued—and the diseased reavers kept their captives as slaves until it was time to eat them.

There was a chance her boy lived still, and so she continued hunting Bakwaniri, and searching for some means to know if Anim could be rescued.

And if it did turn out that her son was dead? The thought was colored crimson, and what mother could think it and not contemplate bloody murder.

If the question even entered her head, a Bakwaniri would lose his hair.

Harkon hunted the masked men, and came to know their habits so well that she read some of their history in their spoor. These reavers were alien to her world there was not doubt, and in their looks, behavior, clothing and tools she recognized the shadow of white slavers blended with the blood of long lost native tribes.

This added passion to her quest, and such a thing was useful for her prey was difficult to catch. They rarely left the area of their village alone, and even in groups seldom slept outside its walls, a condition perhaps of their inherited weaknesses. A disease inflicted each of them that slowly ate their flesh and twisted their limbs, and must have made prolonged excursions outside their walls exhausting for any but the youngest.

They feared something else also, for it was plain in the way they guarded their people as they bathed, or drew water or performed any chore outside the wall.

But what they feared, she did not know.

Harkon was yet to be woven into their nightmares, because her victims were usually found after jungle scavengers had left few remains, and so, the losses were credited to the greater jungle of which they were already terrified.

It was in the jungle where Harkon did her best work. Its dense surrounds allowed her to pick at the hunters from concealment, and with her spear or knife come to terrify her prey. If any man wandered from his fellows or lagged behind, she would close with him and he would die.

She was pleased to hunt them in this way, for her kills were many and such losses within the jungle preyed upon the Bakwaniri minds.

As they trembled, Harkon puzzled over ways that she might save her son, and bring about the release of other captives.

Yet never did a rescue seem possible when there was but one person to make the attack, and so she wracked her brain for a plan involving something more than vengeance.

As the dilemma grew frustrating she released her anger in her hunt upon the clumsy Bakwaniri, terrorizing them as they moved along the game trails for they were unused to the jungle west of the river, and she had been born to it.

As had another whose presence Harkon would soon come to see as a boon.

For there was a white man who lived with the apes and he liked to kill Bakwaniri, too.

Chapter 28

Lurking Vengeance.

Harkon had seen him first and then watched from afar, often while hidden high in the trees. She would marvel at this strange sight of a man interacting with a large tribe of apes like he was one of them.

Other than his loincloth and possession of a knife and sheath, he behaved like an ape in every other sense. He did not appear to speak but made monkey-like chattering that allowed him to communicate with those beasts.

Harkon had seen him move about on all fours, scampering quickly in a gait similar to the knuckle-walk that was natural to the apes around him. While still at other times, he'd stand upright, and walk or run with back arched, and shoulders and arms wide.

He did seem to believe he was an ape, and Harkon had thought he was an imbecile left behind by slavers that had somehow been adopted by the intelligent beasts.

Or so she had believed until she met him face to face, and then she'd seen intelligence in his gaze, and curiosity and a grasp of language that far exceeded his hairy family's greatest expectations.

She'd been hunting a Bakwaniri at the time on a western course through the jungle, and found him dead beneath a tree.

The ape-man had been his killer.

Despite some initial reservations, in that exchange he'd given her a look steeped in yearning and shaded by loss. There was a sadness in the ape-man that underlay his excitement and desire to know more about her.

His expressions conveyed a great loneliness within him. While Harkon did not trust the creature for there was also a coolness behind his heated gaze; she had hoped he would kill many more Bakwaniri—as attested by the anger she'd seen flaring in his eyes.

Afterwards each night that Harkon lay awaiting sleep in her place of hiding, she dreamed that a partnership might be formed with the ape-man and with his help, she could attack the Bakwaniri village and rescue her little Anim. With many of the healthiest hunters away there were few left who were not too old or infirm to adequately defend its walls.

The thought brought an ironic grin to Harkon's strong features, because she knew it was this same weakness that the Bakwaniri had exploited to destroy her life.

Ever since Harkon had first seen the ape-man, he had appeared occasionally on the trail before her with a wry grin on his handsome features, or she'd hear a sound behind her and she'd whirl around to see him standing there, smiling again, obviously pleased that he had stalked her so closely without her knowing.

He did not seem to mean her any harm, and was somehow gaining great pleasure from the joke.

Proof of this benevolence came when she began finding fresh food upon her trail: a bushpig or small antelope laid upon a plate of broad green leaves. The meat

had always been partially prepared, bled out through the throat, but Harkon had always met the gifts with gratitude for often her obsession to kill Bakwaniri drowned out her stomach's cry for food.

She wondered if the ape-man understood this somehow, and she accepted the possibility that he might at any time be lurking near. He had the strength and skill to hunt her, so if he had wanted to kill her, she would be dead before she knew it. So, she accepted his gifts and curiosity without attributing some darker purpose to this attachment.

He was lonely, and lethal, that was all.

Occasionally, he would leave a dead Bakwaniri hunter out for her to find along the path, or hung upright in branches, as if the man was still alive, and she would be startled, and cast her spear, only to realize it was a corpse that she was killing. Then she would wonder if the ape-man was off somewhere in concealment watching her and laughing at his jungle joke.

Regardless of the position in which he left the dead bodies, their throats were always cut or torn out and judging by the pale skin all the blood had been drained away.

It was clear that the ape-man's hatred of the Bakwaniri was as ferocious and unabated as her own, and Harkon hoped that he would continue to focus his hunting and killing powers to achieve their destruction.

He was unlike anyone or anything Harkon had seen before.

After their one attempt to communicate, the ape-man had never again offered her that kind of close proximity for long. He had clearly understood her attempt to speak previously, and even made a crude, but intelligible response.

So since it seemed that he would only communicate with Harkon through action and gesture, she suspected that he might be mute.

When she saw him during the day, he appeared much like other men, though he was very white of skin beneath a film of mud that he layered upon himself as camouflage, at times even drawing decorative lines in it resembling fish scales, sun shapes, or jagged waves like fur.

He looked to be 20 years of age, and was well-muscled and like any young man despite his behaviors. The eyes were dark beneath pointed eyebrows, and a long scar marked his forehead at the hairline.

The ape-man had long, sharp canines hidden behind full red lips that were framed by dark sideburns growing down and along the underside of his lower jaw. A band of rawhide kept his long black hair from his face and channeled it back over his swelling shoulders.

He had no obvious unnatural qualities other than the company he kept, the sometimes eerie intentness of his gaze and the profound feelings he could convey with it.

But Harkon had seen him at night, and the effect had been the opposite.

She always stayed well hidden during the dark hours, but on occasion her hiding place had allowed for a view of the surrounding terrain. Harkon had once seen the ape-man climbing into a tree and hauling with him a full grown antelope that looked too heavy for a normal man to lift—but up he'd moved like it had no weight at all.

And at another time she'd seen him in the trees outside her hiding place. Then he'd been little more than a shadow in the branches, but he had smelled of blood, and his eyes had shone like crimson flames as he watched her.

That had sent her scrambling for her weapons to guard the doorway to the little cave where she had made her bed, but he had shown no aggression toward her and she had seen no more of him that night.

Once just past sundown she had witnessed him scrambling high into the trees overhead with a speed that no ape could have matched and when he reached some 150 feet he leapt to the next tree that stood 60 feet away.

She knew that the jump was impossible, so she had convinced herself that what she had seen was a trick of the eye. The growing dark and shadow must have hidden a swinging vine or some other mode of transport.

Harkon rarely crossed paths with him as his life with the apes took him to the farthest reaches of their range many, many miles along the coast and at least as many inland north and south—but never to the east as far as where the Bakwaniri lived.

And her life concerned the stalking and killing of Bakwaniri wherever she could find them.

So their nomadic lives put many weeks between their meetings, though there was a ubiquitous quality to the ape-man for at a distance day or night, Harkon had heard his terrifying call thunder through the trees. It came like the challenging roar of a bull ape, but with something distinctly cold and reptilian echoing at its base.

Harkon had wondered how the man had come to be with the tribe of apes, and thought that perhaps he was of the Bakwaniri since their skin was also pale compared to hers, but his perfectly formed limbs and flesh refuted that. More likely they had kidnapped him for slavery, and after his escape the man-like apes had adopted him.

That would explain his war on the masked men, and why he derived such pleasure from their deaths.

Harkon knew that life in the jungle was fast-paced and death came quickly. The fact that the ape-man had not attempted to kill her suggested he would not—unless that was to be another one of his grim jokes.

Regardless, Harkon cultivated a positive relationship with him when she could and whatever his history, play to their one connection: an insatiable hatred for the Bakwaniri.

If the worst happened, and he ever fell upon her with eyes gleaming and canines flashing, then she would have to hope his lack of knowledge for weapons beyond his own knife would give Harkon an opening to sink a spear or blade.

Being the child of a massacred people kept her from too much optimism, and on a certain level she was expecting an attack. It was still possible that the ape-man would grow tired of playing, and his hunger for killing would override their mutual respect.

Time would tell.

The night ape watched Harkon as she moved stealthily through the thick undergrowth beneath his hammock of vines.

He had only recently returned from lands near the southeast border of Goro's territory after searching for some sign of Magnuh. In the years since his mother's death, the night ape had resisted the foolish notion of tracking the bull-elephant down and winning vengeance against the giant in battle, for there could have been but one outcome.

Yet in that time, he had not seen the beast, or come across any recent track, so Magnuh had likely met a deserving end.

Gazda shuddered to think of the creature that could have slain his old enemy, and the thought always left him feeling chill, and rather curious, so from time to time he looked for the behemoth's trail.

A satisfied smile twisted Gazda lips as the female stalked below him unaware. He had not communicated with Harkon face to face since their first meeting, preferring to stalk her as any predator might. He had no wish to feed upon her, but he was fascinated by the skills she used to stay alive in the predator-filled jungle.

He was also embarrassed that he was unable to engage her in speech because of the limited ape language he knew.

But whenever he came across her trail, he'd follow quickly, and if possible overtake her. Not to slay her, but to show that he could if he so desired. It was a predator's way to kill, and for one to spare another was a sign of power and mastery. That way he felt she would trust him more, if they ever did come to meet again, and try to exchange more than awkward sounds and looks.

He had also taken to leaving meat upon the trail after he had consumed its blood; certain that the woman hunted more Bakwaniri than food, and also because he knew from his experiences with the young apes that such a gift would make her view him more favorably.

She rewarded him by showing that she had mastery over fire when she summoned some of the hot, yellow creatures from a small pile of wood simply by striking some objects together.

He had been unsettled by this casual display of power, and then appalled by her brutal treatment of the meat that she burned over the flames before chewing up charred strips of it.

She was a powerful fighter, indeed, to have that skill, and Gazda would have to steel his nerve if he ever wished to learn more about inviting the fire.

At other times, if he were lucky enough to smell her trail after he had slain a Bakwaniri, Gazda would retrieve the corpse and hurry to get ahead of Harkon where he'd leave it for her to collect her trophy. When he'd first done it, he hid nearby to watch, and had been pleased to see the woman freeze before warily stalking toward the body like it was alive.

That gave Gazda such delight that he began positioning the corpses in lifelike positions, and each time he had been rewarded by Harkon's cautious reaction.

He found this funny to watch, and it gave him an opportunity to study her reactions and it was from this that he had come to understand how she used the long sharp stick she carried.

It flew from her hand with incredible power and accuracy.

So for jokes and information, Harkon was a never-ending source of pleasure to him.

And he liked to look at her. He had come upon the woman in various states of undress, and while her skin was dark all over and her body shaped differently to his own, there was no doubt that she also hailed from the night ape tribe. He was pleased to see that she had no lesions or wounds on her body like the bone-faces, and that there was no hair growing around her nose.

Gazda would find a hidden place and watch if he was lucky enough to find her as she bathed, squatting there in a stream and lifting parts of her clothing to wash what was beneath—but always with her eyes vigilant and spear in hand.

Still he found her gentle actions alluring, and they caused some unfamiliar passion to rise within him, a yearning similar to his craving for blood grew, but this enflamed other parts of his mind and body.

Thoughts of Harkon also came to him when he was far away with the tribe and at other times when he rested in the day. Gazda would think of her body, and be unable to quash the feelings that rose up in him.

He was glad to have found her in the jungle, and if ever he came upon a dead Bakwaniri with a missing chunk of scalp, a tender feeling would pass up through his chest, and Gazda would quickly find Harkon's track and follow, there to watch in secret as she made her way through the forest landscape.

Sometimes he would ferret out her hiding places in the night, and hunt nearby so that he could watch over her as she slept, much as Eeda had for him.

Though never again would he let Harkon see him at this task.

Word of Gazda's and Harkon's various attacks upon the Bakwaniri hunters had reached Capan Seetree and the crew. Survivors blamed the deaths and disappearances upon the River Demon that was hunting them within its own borders—and that thought kept many a Johnnie from sleeping sound at night, or wanting to go on the hunt at all.

The sir-jon screamed about these grim tidings, and augured a dark future if the River Demon had summoned others of its kind as the old tales of the first fathers and dead Capan Sparsall had warned!

Some returning Bakwaniri said they'd seen a man-sized terror with blazing eyes and long sharp fangs gripping a fellow hunter by the neck before lifting him easily into the trees.

Naught was ever seen again of a man so engaged and it was an oft-repeated tale that any to see that fire-eyed creature only told the story because he hadn't been seen in turn.

But, Seetree had set his mind on revenge and would not accept cowardice in the crew, so he stoked the blaze of their courage at the great fire by feasting with the rest upon Johnnies that refused to hunt.

A feast that brought the other hunters around quickly enough.

Capan Seetree's dreams continued to grow, just as his mental affliction and scurv progressed. He was plagued with hallucinations now, and had seen the vast land west of the river as a golden paradise that he was blessed by the jungle gods to conquer.

Once the River Demon and its fire-eyed servants were repelled, the Bakwaniri would claim the jungle as their own and sail through the heights like angels.

True, it was taking too long to find and kill the River Demon, but those Johnnies that did not disappear were hardened for the fight ahead.

The capan felt that they were getting close, or why else would the River Demon have need to call for help from this red-eyed servant?

No. The time was coming and Seetree did not care what was standing in the way. The courage of his hunters would stand with him.

Then he would be capan of all the lands from the river to the coast.

1912 — Eighteen years of age.

Chapter 29

Heirs to the Crown.

By his 18th year, Gazda had grown tall and long limbed, and his rich diet of blood and vigorous lifestyle had covered him from head to toe with thick layers of corded muscle. The swelling chest, shoulders and flaring back formed a solid pillar of strength that rippled beneath his ivory skin.

Neck, torso and limbs were equally swollen with pliant reams of muscular flesh completing a look that went far beyond the expectations of any normal man. Life among the anthropoids had undoubtedly built this powerful body, but the very line of his form while diminutive in comparison was similar to Goro's, almost as if his body had grown to mimic his adoptive kind.

He was a man in form, there was no doubt, but never in the history of the species had there been one so strongly made, other than in the imagination of Greek and Roman sculptors.

The night ape was shaped like a god.

Gazda's hair grew in the appropriate places, if more abundantly than one might find on the average man. His thick, black mane started center to his face, not two inches over his nose where its startling widow's peak played fulcrum to pointed eyebrows sweeping upward and parallel to his arching hairline.

From there the long locks formed a thick mane of wavy tousles bound away from his brow by a rawhide strap. It cascaded back over his mighty shoulders concealing a sharp line of bristle that sprouted from the nape of his neck and along his spine.

Dark hair grew down from either temple to form a pair of thick sideburns that edged his large cheekbones and continued along the underside of his jaw. This formed a hanging fringe of beard that left his full lips and narrow chin free of encumbrance or decoration.

His powerful chest was shaded by wiry black hair, and a dense spread of this grew down over the flexing of his well-defined abdominal muscles. Similar hair thinly populated his calves and forearms and lay over the backs of his sinewy hands and feet.

The long, strong fingers and toes flexed hard, sharp nails that could puncture bark, or flesh, as many of the tribe's more ambitious blackbacks could attest.

The night ape's god-like form was draped with a glossy black loincloth and cape made from the skins of panthers that he hunted with the keen long knife that hung from his narrow waist.

Added to his adornment were several more Bakwaniri bracelets and bands that decorated his arms and legs as proof of his continuing war with the bone-faces.

The skulls and skeletons carved upon these metal rings peered out from clefts in the swelling mounds of ridged muscle and taut flesh.

As the night ape had matured in body, so he had in mind, with special abilities ripening to match his physical prowess.

To either side of an aquiline nose, Gazda's eyes were dark—almost black—ringed with white and appeared as such in daylight, though they could be seen to flash like crimson flame in the darkest shadow or deepest night—or should some hot passion seize him at any time of day.

The night ape's voice was human at its core, though life among the anthropoids and the daily raucous sounds of the teeming jungle had made him a virtuoso in its use. He could easily utter the primitive ape-language and mimic any member of the tribe.

By amplifying certain characteristics of it he could agitate the entire group, or use its subtleties to calm an angry blackback in full display. Likewise he could employ its various ranges to sooth the wildest prey into stillness.

This he used along with the talent for mimicry taught him by Ooso, who had used her mastery of birdsong to answer her cravings for flesh by luring small birds to their doom. Together in mischief they had learned the vocal range of many animals within the canopy.

Combined with Gazda's hypnotic, sometimes crimson, gaze he could, if he was sufficiently motivated, dominate the simple communications of his tribe, or overwhelm any animal in the jungle that was within earshot.

But he was not often interested in employing this gift upon his fellow apes, for the day-to-day workings of the tribe had long since grown dull to him, and he was rarely moved to participate in its somewhat shambling social life. He was proud to be a member of the group, fiercely so, but he was simply too far ahead of his tribe mates to be drawn into their primitive politics.

Gazda rarely even played his jokes on Sip-sip as a result, and he could barely remember the last time he had thrown a stone at the crippled ape. This was not the case for Omag who could not forget being the target of those random missile attacks and because of that was still prone to nervousness when the tribe stopped to feed or groom, and should the slightest sound come from overhead.

But his tormentor had begun to avoid such things, since Omag always took his frustrations out upon his innocent brethren thus diminishing the night ape's enjoyment of the joke.

Gazda's adolescence had seen the passage of the worst uses for his special abilities, and as a responsible ape growing into adulthood; he would not willfully add trouble to the normal anxieties that afflicted the tribe.

Besides the reactions of even the most intelligent anthropoids were too predictable to provide much amusement to the night ape's active mind. He would

rather spend his time chasing down Harkon, and studying that remarkable creature.

Gazda and Kagoon had grown closer following the night ape's actions during the king's battle with the lions. The big blackback had been impressed by his friend's bravery and the pair of them now hunted together whenever they could or joined in wrestling and mock battles, each honing his strength and skill against the other.

A similar thaw had occurred between Gazda and many blackbacks and now like the simple Kagoon, they sought the night ape out when he returned to the tribe, curious to learn the power of his shining fang, and to understand this surprising character that had so outrageously circumvented ape law.

They were also anxious to test his strength which had always been a surprising thing, but that had now grown in proportion to his bravery.

In fact, most blackbacks now accepted their losses to the night ape graciously as a means of strengthening their friendship with the victor. His reputation as a great hunter and an ape of honor had removed any embarrassment from being beaten at his hands.

Ooso was still very close to Gazda and had grown more so after her tiny daughter Yulu had grown past her toddler stage, and now demanded much of her mother's time and energy. Ooso was pleased to share those responsibilities with her old friend, whom Yulu already sought out for extra attention without any encouragement.

The little she-ape was shaped like her mother through the body, having a round, fat torso and conical head; but with her very long arms and legs, she presented an unusually gangly form for an infant. Gazda had found that carrying Ooso's daughter was like holding a very furry melon with four long and wriggly vines attached.

In her short life Yulu had bonded with him, and looked for the night ape whenever there was time for play, or for grooming anywhere along the trail—especially at the Grooming Rock where she loved to show off her special connection with the tribe's most unique fighter and hunter.

In fact, whenever the night ape visited the tribe and he was not competing in mock display with the other blackbacks, he was carrying tiny Yulu around on his hip while the little she-ape played with the curious pendant he wore around his neck.

Gazda was free with his affections for Ooso's daughter, though he resisted her efforts to make theirs an exclusive arrangement because all of the young apes in the tribe were drawn to him by his unusual appearance, and the many strange tales that had grown up around him.

Tales given life by old Baho's popularity among the young, and his predilection for storytelling—a predilection that often kept Gazda busy correcting the exaggerations that crept into the former silverback's narratives.

Gazda was quick to correct the inaccuracies for they usually put too bright a light upon his prowess, and the night ape did not want to overshadow his king. Goro had fought the lions by himself, and would have gladly died for the tribe if Gazda had not intervened.

The silverback was the true hero of the tale. He was the king.

As his loyal subject, Gazda had always supported Goro, and would until his dying day, so he would not encourage anything but the elevation of the mighty ape's status.

Having reached the age of 38 years, Goro was at the pinnacle of his power. The injuries suffered during his battle with the lions had long ago healed. Most of the scars were hidden beneath his lustrous coat, and they had done nothing to diminish the silverback's strength and bearing.

The great sheets of muscle that clung to his gigantic frame rippled with each movement of his mighty arms, and many apes thought he resembled a moving mountain.

The silverback did bear a deep scar across his forehead and cheek from the lioness' long fangs, but this became a grim reminder of his ferocity for any ape foolish enough to challenge his authority.

How could any blackback upon his approach forget that Goro was king, and he was a lion-killer who had celebrated his victory over the beasts by sharing their flesh among the tribe and afterward taking the young she-apes Ivey, Udam and Oka to be his queens?

Each of those lovely creatures had borne him a son, and the other apes rejoiced for their powerful king and spoke to a future of peace and abundance for the tribe of Goro.

Though some still whispered and plotted, and the lips upon the most active mouth were twisted by spite and disease.

Sip-sip's facial deformities had made him utterly hideous by that time. While apes judged beauty differently from other creatures, the open wound on the left side of his face: empty eye socket, exposed teeth, jaw and tongue left him horrible to behold. The entire side of his head had become a rotting lesion that alternated between scar tissue, and dripping infection.

Omag's "sip-sip" sound had become almost uncontrollable, and was amplified by the copious amounts of pus that drooled sloppily out of the foam-flecked hole in his face.

His physical deformities had worsened also, with the bones in his arms and legs twisting around their centers and distorting the thick ridges of muscle that covered them.

This did little to slow Omag while swinging high in the green canopy at speed, but hampered him appreciably when he moved to the ground. Then the traditional anthropoid "knuckle-walk" was distorted by these malformations into an awkward lurching waddle as his massive muscles compensated for the disabilities with sheer power.

He continued to carry and rely upon the axe-head "cane" he'd adopted long before, and over the time his cradling of and caring for the blade had caught the attention of bolder apes who had nicknamed the tool, still in whispers, "Sip-sip's baby."

The cane was integral to his walking over greater distances, and allowed him to adopt a threatening upright stance while braced against it.

Compared to the mighty Goro, Omag was a pathetic thing, deformed and disabled beyond individual survival, but the tribe was wise to remember that the

strength of the bull apes was such that it could often overcome physical challenges that would handicap or kill lesser creatures.

Failed though he was and ill, Omag was still a bull ape.

It was also wise to remember he was mentor to the mighty Ulok.

Chapter 30

Skin-stones and Doorways.

Gazda was still often haunted by memories of his mother's death and frequently plagued by boredom so when these things dragged at his spirit; he took trips away from the tribe, days that he alternately used for hunting game, killing Bakwaniri when he ran across any of their trails, and playing jokes on Harkon the huntress. At other times he might spend as much as a week holed up in his lair pouring over Fur-nose's mysterious possessions.

The artifacts were many and strange, but some were within his grasp. The night ape had studied the former inhabitant's method of stretching cleaned animal skins until he was able to reproduce the process on his own. The garments Gazda made from the processed hides were suppler and resisted decay far longer than any he had previously possessed, and though they still fell short of Harkon's fine coverings; it no longer offended his sensibilities to wear them.

He had less luck comprehending the small items laid out on the platform beside Fur-nose's bones, and with other wood and metal objects he found in the tree-nest that might have been weapons or tools.

The night ape often contemplated a collection of transparent receptacles that he had thought were made of water until he touched their hard surfaces. His studies had yet to illuminate the true purpose and properties of glass.

But most puzzling and disturbing were the *skin-stones*, curious things that he had only recently come upon.

These were perhaps the most unusual of Fur-nose's possessions, and the most overlooked. He had found them at the bottom of a wooden box that was filled with broken branches. That box and another like it was partially concealed between the bed and the wall.

He had seen the skin-stones many times but only glanced at what he had thought were regularly shaped stones, and their true properties might have gone "undiscovered" had one not fallen from his grasp when he lifted it in his boredom.

Then a frightening mechanical reaction had occurred, and the "stone" had come apart! The hard, flat outer covering had flown open like wings and its solid interior fluttered apart into many, many thin, straight-edged skins that clung together along one side—only to have the skin-stone later return to its original hard shape after he worked up the nerve to lift the thing and allow its rigid covering to swing back into place.

So that it could become solid again!

Whatever their actual purpose, these skin-stones had further darkened the mystery of Fur-nose and Gazda's night ape tribe for when the skins had fluttered open, he found inscribed upon them many lines of small, twitchy shapes.

At first the night ape mistook them for bugs or bits of dirt, but then he realized they would not brush off, and instead stayed in organized groups that followed the straight edges of the skins.

He had yet to comprehend the true nature of these skin-stones, though he could observe some of their facets, for there were stranger things that he had found in them.

While some of the skins had rows and rows of small but puzzling shapes upon them, others had crowds of small black dots and lines, or so they had looked at the first close inspection.

What had surprised the night ape was the strange power in these marks that could only be realized when he moved his face well away from the page. Then the tiny shapes organized themselves to look like black and white plants or trees that looked real, but were flat and bland to the taste and smell.

Phantom plants were formed that disintegrated back into dots and lines when Gazda moved his eyes closer to the marks.

The night ape found similar things in other skin-stones that showed creatures made from the black marks—strange beasts he had never seen in the jungle—shadowy animals that also came apart into dots and lines when he moved his face closer, before disappearing altogether when he closed the skin-stone covering.

Gazda later found larger sheets of the *skin* folded many layers thick at the bottom of the box, and again were ghostly creatures made by the small dots and lines on the brittle, yellow material.

But among these were unsettling shapes that it took Gazda some time to recognize, and frightened him when he did. For there were creatures made of dots and lines, but he was certain that they were tiny night apes draped in heavy garments like those he'd found of Fur-nose's.

Groups of night apes like himself were there on the skin, upright on their hind legs as Gazda, Harkon and the bone-faces could stand—and one thing was plain, many of them had fur upon their faces growing all around their noses!

These night apes in the black marks appeared to be standing in open canyons of light and dark stone surrounded by tall cliffs on all sides. There was no jungle to be seen and no ape like Goro or Gazda's mother.

Night apes they were, made of dots and lines, gathered in a canyon of light and dark rocks. All of them were upright, and displaying—preparing to challenge. Was a new king to be chosen?

He did not understand the tiny night apes in the canyon, or recognize what landmarks lay around it, but the things he saw on the skin-stones left Gazda with an eerie feeling. A memory whispered in his mind and caused a sinking sense that the black shapes were not strangers to him.

The marks and lines tugged at his brain in ways that left him nauseous, and made him dream of the canyon in which the night apes gathered.

There was one such day when he came awake from dreams of these night apes and fire. No sooner had Gazda laid his head upon the bed to sleep, than he found

himself leaving the tree-nest and walking across the clearing to where the dark grove of trees spread up the slope and pushed against the jungle.

So many years had passed, and Gazda had yet explore the unusual growth of sickly trees, an oversight he never managed to correct. He remembered too well the eerie black fog that leaked from its roots, and the presence he'd once sensed among the shadows.

And these things were there with him in the dream as he'd approached the grove; the dull mist wafting up around his ankles as feral eyes watched him from between the bloated trunks.

Then he saw a stone wall had been built behind the forest, and at its foot a canyon had opened in which many night apes clambered and screamed. There was a roar high atop the wall, and looking up he cried out with the others as fire rained down in burning streams...

Gazda lay upon the bed listening to his racing heart and he might have fallen back to sleep had a sound not come suddenly from just outside his lair—then the entire structure trembled, and dust drifted down from the ceiling.

He quickly pulled his long knife before creeping toward the door where he listened for a moment to something just outside.

Breath racing in and out... a creature panting in distress and pain.

With long knife ready, Gazda pulled the door aside and slid his head past the frame to see...

Kagoon!

The lowering sun's rays burnished his old friend's face—but he was gravely injured! The bull ape had dragged himself up onto the raised platform and now lay with his enormous shoulders against the wall. The planks beneath him were stained with blood.

"Kagoon!" Gazda rushed out to him, eyes searching the clearing and the jungle eaves for enemies that had done this.

"Goro..." Kagoon blurted, with breaking voice, "...days ago..." The wounded blackback shrugged his torn shoulders, then drooling blood guessed, "Two days—Omag..."

Hooting worriedly, Gazda lowered himself over his friend sniffing at the many deep fang marks and bruises on his neck, chest and shoulders—and licking at the dripping mounds.

Decay... Gazda could smell decay in the flesh...

"Ulok... at the Two Trees," Kagoon moaned. "Omag and the old queens supported it and blackbacks also." His voice rattled.

Gazda slid a strong arm behind the giant shoulders to cradle his friend's massive head. Cooing softly as Eeda had done for her son, Gazda brushed at the torn sideburns that hung in gory tangles to either side of the bull ape's broken jaw.

Kagoon half-smiled at this, but his happy panting turned into a coughing-fit. Afterward, he had barely the strength to shudder as he gazed into Gazda's eyes. The night ape's strong fingers stroked his forehead.

"Omag did this..." the blackback said haltingly, gasping, almost drowning in a wave of pain before pushing along with his tale.

“It was that cane of his,” Kagoon sighed. “Like your shining fang, Gazda. None of us knew its true power...”

And as his friend spoke, Gazda was amazed to feel the story brush against his fingertips before it took shape inside his mind.

Chapter 31

The Cripple’s Cane.

Goro’s tribe had been feeding north of Fur-nose’s lair and east of the Grooming Rock. It was many miles inland from the coast and blackback scouts had reported finding many ripe bananas growing near the clearing by the Two Trees.

The king had wasted no time calling the tribe together and leading them through the jungle at a slow and steady pace.

The journey lasted for much shifting of the shadows that the rising sun sent down through the branches, but the apes arrived finally at the broad, flat space by the Two Trees. The land there was open to the blue sky, and the sun was high over them warming the tall grasses and the banana trees that grew along the eastern edge of the clearing.

There Goro ordered the group to feed after he, Baho and his loyal blackbacks spaced themselves evenly around the others to stand watch for predators and bone-faces while they ate.

The Bakwaniri had not attacked the tribe since the incident that led to Eeda’s death, and while the king thought the bone-faces strange, he considered them less a threat than hungry leopards.

Omag, Ulok and the aging queens came late to this place, followed by nine young blackbacks, so when they dined it was on green fruit passed over by the others. The late-comers had doubtless been slowed by the crippled ape’s labored gait.

The wasting disease had twisted Sip-sip’s back until a huge hump of muscle quivered between his shoulders, set slightly higher than his head; and his right arm had shortened so much that he depended entirely upon the axe-head when moving on the ground.

Many apes still joked about “Sip-sip’s baby” but as walking grew more difficult for Omag, the tribe saw that the crippled ape needed the device for mobility... or so they thought.

Omag’s protégé, Ulok, was unhappy that his late arrival meant he had to eat unripe fruit, and he grumbled his displeasure to his companions and blackback comrades, before turning to the entire tribe and voicing his ire most vociferously.

This year, Ulok’s broad muscular back had grown a dappling of silver fur to match the bright bands at his shoulders and hips, and many in the tribe were growing anxious as they anticipated a challenge to Goro’s reign.

Such speculation was all that the females and blackbacks could talk about when grooming or tending to their daily needs. The young bull ape was massive,

and had grown to look so much like Goro that he was sometimes mistaken for the king.

After growling his complaint, Ulok postured and pumped up the swelling muscles that rippled beneath his bristling silver mane. The bull ape glared across the clearing to where Goro sat with his queens, before quite deliberately raking at the earth with his rigid hands and snorting loudly.

A palpable shudder quivered over the tribe as Omag rose from where he sat with the aging queens and limped over to Ulok.

Sip-sip stood upright, swaying before his enormous young ward, and then with great flourish, he bowed so low over his cane that his ragged forehead scraped against the grasses.

And a gasp went through the clearing.

Sip-sip's behavior was an outrage, for none but the king could be shown this sign of respect before the tribe.

Goro had watched this display from where he lay in the grass with his queens about him grooming. Nearby his young sons rolled and played.

The silverback grunted powerfully and the females called the infants close before moving away toward the forest at the clearing's edge. Goro rose up on all fours, his chest rumbling deeply and threateningly.

Baho moved near Goro and with him came six of his blackback allies—some of them his sons. The combined darkness of their fur and staggering mass of their muscle dominated that side of the clearing. The message was obvious to the blackbacks gathered near Ulok. If there was a challenge to come, then none but Goro and Ulok could settle it.

At that same moment, other blackbacks could be seen moving along the edge of the clearing toward Ulok.

"Something would be settled that day—we all knew," Kagoon croaked and coughed. Gazda held the injured ape and pressed his hands against the wounds that clustered at his friend's shoulders and neck. "The tribe was split."

This division had existed for their entire lives. Many apes had always believed that Goro was weak because he showed mercy, while the recipients of his mercy, like old Baho, believed that the quality was his strength.

Omag and the aging queens had always been vocal about their thoughts on the subject and all knew that they had passed along their contempt to young Ulok.

The king was soft, they said, and did not act like an ape, or respect tribal law.

"Goro growled and showed his fighting fangs to Ulok then," Kagoon continued softly, the images flickering through Gazda's mind. "But his eyes—they burned upon Omag."

Goro swayed in place and barked fiercely. The action set his mountainous muscles quaking and he yawned to show his enormous fighting fangs, giving Ulok a moment to reconsider whether he was making a mistake. The challenge could still be forgotten; could still be forgiven.

But Ulok only glared and raked at the ground with his claws!

Goro's eyes flared angrily as he stamped his feet and reached out to tear a thick sapling up by the roots. The silverback howled repeatedly as he swung the tree back and forth, voice rising in pitch and fury as he rocked from side to side.

The insolent Ulok looked away and down at Omag, to see the aging queens glancing up from where they laid on their bellies by the crippled ape.

And with that Ulok's lips rolled back from his fighting fangs, and with a terrible roar he charged at King Goro, his mighty fists tearing up rocks and plants as he pounded forward.

The king was taken aback at this flouting of tradition, for ape custom regarding challenges demanded long displays and several mock charges.

But Goro was no coward so he leapt forward, thundering across the open space, anvil-like head lowered, and long canines snapping—a battering ram of muscle and fury.

The giants crashed head to head almost in the center of the clearing, and a great, meaty *whump* resounded from the collision as the great apes rose upright and standing chest to chest rained blows and bites upon each other.

Bellowing, the titans beat and ripped at one another's foreheads, faces and chests. In moments, blood sprayed in droplets upon the dappled grass.

So terrifying was the sound that came from this battle that the infants and young ones scampered higher into the trees as their worried mothers followed screaming and scolding the combatants from their refuges.

But Goro and Ulok were deaf to these feeble complaints as they savaged each other with fang and fist and all the terrible strength in their mammoth forms unleashed.

Ulok was strong, and may have been more so than the king, but he was also younger and impatient, and Goro had realized this when the challenger abandoned custom and charged without the proper displays.

He was impatient, and that exposed a vein of cowardice.

Ulok had charged without delay because he had doubted himself brave enough to see the king's answering displays. The challenger was strong but that was *all* he was.

Goro would take nothing for granted for already he bled in many places, but he would test the younger Ulok's patience, and in it seek his challenger's fatal flaw.

The jungle around the clearing had been stirred into a raucous storm of noise as each living thing was agitated by this battle of the apes.

Neither Goro nor Ulok had given an inch of ground, and such an explosion of power had there been that both had faces like bloody masks as their fists pounded flesh and fangs ripped through thick hides.

Yet it was at this point that Goro decided to test his challenger's impetuous nature. After receiving a flurry of blows, the king grunted and stepped back, body slightly turned to expose a vulnerable right side.

Ulok saw the silverback's muscular profile and flank exposed and forgot that moments before they had been fighting to a draw. Imagining himself king already, the challenger screamed victoriously and surged in to ram Goro hoping to cave his ribs in and stop his heart...

...but the silverback was ready.

Goro pushed backwards suddenly, Ulok's head slid under his mighty chest so the king's powerful arm could slip around the younger ape's thick neck and chin.

Then, with a terrific burst of strength, the king jerked upward on Ulok's head, throwing him off balance so that he thundered to the ground upon his back.

Before the challenger could react, Goro's full weight was on him, and his sharp fighting canines pressed into Ulok's throbbing jugular.

Biting down enough to draw a taste of blood, Goro grunted an order he need not utter.

"Submit or die..."

The blackbacks had ringed the clearing as the battle played out. Some of the biggest males moved forward now, drawn by the blood and the excitement. Even Omag had limped across the grass, lurching closer on his cane.

A shudder ran through Ulok's body in a final muscular challenge to Goro's reign that drew more blood from his neck.

But he could not break the king's hold upon him.

So the challenger hissed shrilly, "Ulok submits!"

The tribe watched breathlessly, some in the trees; others huddled under green cover and more still coming closer to the fighters. Such a challenge to the kingship was answerable by death or exile according to tribal law, and while Goro was a gentle king, he was no fool, and would understand that Ulok would challenge him again one day.

But, Ulok was Goro's son, and the king did not want him exiled or dead or to have the tribe lose the bloodline. They would need a new silverback one day, and when Ulok had learned from this defeat, he might grow to earn the position.

Then, Goro as a former silverback might offer Ulok guidance, as Baho had for him.

Goro was Goro, and he slid his great fangs out of Ulok's flesh and rising into an upright stance of victory he loomed over the cringing challenger.

The tribe immediately sang out in joyous panting and hooting. The open space of the Two Trees rang with happy screams in appreciation of Goro's decision to be merciful. His supporters knew their king—and his detractors only scowled, for what more could they do?

"Yet Omag also knew his king," Kagoon said, before a coughing fit spilled more blood from his mouth. "As Goro had awaited Ulok's submission, Sip-sip slipped up close behind the king." A shudder of outrage shook the injured ape. "So when Goro rose to his full height, the crippled ape also rose up, reversed his cane, and gripping it by the wood, he swung the flat and shining stone at the king..."

Goro did not see it coming. The axe blade cut into his neck. A great spray of blood shot into the air and the silverback's head almost came away from his shoulders. The king was dead as he rolled forward onto the cowering Ulok who pushed the twitching corpse aside.

The startled challenger climbed up onto his knees and stared at Omag's hunched form, mentor and pupil soaked in the royal blood.

And Ulok remembered the long talks about leadership that he had shared with Omag and how the crippled ape had helped to choose this day for the challenge.

Now Omag had done this thing for Ulok and for the tribe, because by sparing the young challenger Goro had broken the laws again.

The apes needed a king that respected their traditions—especially by the Two Trees.

And such an ape would Ulok be.

Panting and hooting his gratitude, Ulok gained his feet and nodded at the older ape that stood chattering and showing his own teeth in happiness and joy.

The apes that had witnessed this were screaming their anxiety, for Omag had done the unthinkable. He had not challenged the king but manipulated Ulok into the traitorous act.

Yet, many believed that this grisly turn was Goro's fault. Had the silverback not been so soft—pardoning his challengers in defeat—then would he not be living now?

Had he not spared Baho and Omag, and now Ulok?

Old Baho and those loyal to him had retreated at the death of Goro; as the air had filled with the strong smell of the king's blood, and there at the edge of the clearing did these apes wildly protest this gory event.

Baho had ordered his blackbacks to take up guard positions near the trees that held the females and little ones, for the stink of blood filled all with fear.

Still, most of them watched as Omag bowed to Ulok, his head nodding vigorously, his yellow fangs snapping close to the ground, while behind him, the aging queens did the same... as did other blackbacks loyal to the usurpers.

Rising to his full height, Ulok grunted his thanks to Omag and then turned angrily to glare at Baho where the former silverback and the others protested.

"But Omag was not finished," Kagoon groaned mournfully, and Gazda felt the sad sound echo in his own throat. "Ulok turned away..."

And Omag brought the axe-blade down upon the back of Ulok's head. Blood, brains and bone flew into the air as the bull ape's skull exploded, and the tribe again went mad with terror.

Baho moved with his blackbacks higher into the trees as Ulok's great body tottered and then fell forward.

With a barking call from Omag, still more of his loyal young blackbacks rushed out of the trees to form a solid wall of muscle behind the crippled ape.

It was clear to all that in Omag's hands, the flat and shining stone was a weapon of unstoppable power. All the blackbacks—the entire tribe—had watched him slay two silverbacks in succession and in many minds the crippled ape had become invincible.

Even old Baho whimpered his fears as Omag shook the bloody weapon over the bodies of his victims.

The aging queens Akaki and Oluza crept closer to kneel before Omag as he pointed the dripping axe-head at the apes in the trees. Gore fell from the weapon in gobbets and crimson rivulets crept along the twisted arm that held it.

"Omag is king!" he roared, excitement briefly mastering his speech impediment. "Submit or die!"

He waited then as the tribe of apes slipped out of the trees and approached their new king where he stood by the corpses of Goro and Ulok.

There they dropped in front of him and pressed their bony foreheads against the bloody ground, submitting to the new silverback's will and to this ascendancy.

Baho hesitated with his loyal blackbacks by the trees, but Omag saw this, warning: "Baho! Follow me or be the third silverback to die—and neither will your sons be spared..."

Old Baho looked at his comrades and at the terrified apes that trembled obediently at Omag's feet. Then he bravely moved forward and showed fealty to his bloody new king. Baho had no plan. He simply knew that he could not abandon his tribe to one such as Omag.

Chapter 32

King of the Apes.

"We all submitted," Kagoon said before another coughing fit shook him and left his dark face gray. Gazda had already smelled the rot in his old friend's injuries, and could see the larva wriggling in seams of open flesh on his chest and shoulders.

The night ape wiped the blood from his friend's lips.

"Like a fool I did, but now our friend Ooso... our lovely Ooso. She that I longed to be my mate, and mine alone. Omag commanded that she and the other females submit to him as queens. It was his right to start his bloodline, but Ooso would not mate with him. When he beat her, I could stand by no longer, and so I challenged Omag!"

Those red images then flickered in Gazda's mind, and his eyes grew moist.

Kagoon fell silent to draw in a rattling breath before continuing: "He would not fight me. Instead, his loyal blackbacks were told to kill Kagoon. I fought, but they were too many." Another coughing fit took him and he whimpered as his broken ribs scraped and cracked. "I escaped before they killed me, and since then I have traveled to this *secret* place of yours."

"Bravely done, but you must rest," Gazda cried, tears rolling down his cheeks. His old friend knew he had taken Fur-nose's lair as his own, but had never said. At some time he must have followed...

"To warn you..." Kagoon's voice weakened and his breathing slowed.

"Kagoon..." Gazda whispered, voice breaking like his heart. But his friend was dead in his arms.

Gazda pressed his face against the bull ape's chest and wept.

There he stayed until the sun fell behind the trees and the great blue water beyond, and when the darkness in the jungle turned to black, and shadow crept across the landscape like a fog, he felt the first surge of night strength burn in his arms and chest.

Gazda closed up the tree-nest and sped toward the Two Trees faster than anything in the jungle had traveled before.

The tribe was still at Two Trees, though the night ape could see that it would soon have to move. The surrounding banana grove and bushes had been picked bare, and in places the very grasses had been chewed down to the dirt.

Gazda dropped out of the trees and frowned at the smell of blood still permeating the earth. When blackbacks slipped out of the shadows to surround him, he was prepared for a fight, but among them he recognized old Baho.

The night ape sniffed the air, and found little evidence of Omag's recent spoor. The crippled ape's unique stench of rotting injuries and suppurating sores was a shadow on the night, but he was nowhere close.

Then Gazda studied Baho with his night-time eyes and saw the bull ape's injuries. The former silverback's old face was torn and battered, and his bruised shoulders were raw from many bites. The night ape snuffled at his old friend as they brushed knuckles and he smelled blood on the many wounded apes around him. There had been a brutal battle...

"Where is Omag?" Gazda snarled, but the old ape shook his head.

"Gone," Baho answered, and then he clutched the night ape's arm and drew him toward a nearby copse of stunted trees that were silhouetted against the lightening sky. "It is good you are here."

"What happened?" Gazda asked, moving with him, his pulse raging in his ears. So much blood he smelled, but there was something else...

He had almost flown through the jungle canopy hoping to reach the tribe of apes before the dawn; his mind and body set for battle, but it looked like he had missed the fight.

Then it struck him. The blood! *Ooso!* It was Ooso's blood...

The night ape thrust himself past Baho and in the dark found his little friend lying on a mattress of leaves and grasses beneath the copse of trees. Her mother crouched near, grooming the festering flesh around bite marks that clustered on Ooso's face, breasts and shoulders.

Tiny Yulu's frightened eyes gleamed where she watched from another female's embrace.

"Ooso!" Gazda fell at the tiny ape's side; ignoring her mother Amak's threatening growls. He slipped his arm beneath his injured friend to lift her head.

The little she-ape seemed half asleep as she muttered, and her eyes glinted along the line of her closed lids. Ooso's small body had been savaged with vicious bites and blows from fists and feet, and her soft, dark hair was matted with blood.

Crouching near him in the dark, Baho whispered: "After Omag's blackbacks attacked Kagoon, the new king flew into a rage when he heard that they had allowed him to escape. In his anger, Omag killed three of those apes with his flat and shining stone. I knew as most of us did that this also was against all tribal law, and so with other blackbacks young and old I attacked Omag and his loyalists. In the battle, he slew many with his weapon.

"Half of his followers we killed and the aging queens were captured. Omag fled with what remained of his force when he saw we would submit no longer, and that his treachery could not be forgiven," Baho moaned sadly, reaching out to touch little Ooso's arm. "We found her. By this time, he had tried to mate her, but she... she would not submit. Omag and the queens forced..."

He grumbled savagely, and turned his watery eyes away.

Amak panted worriedly, and licked at her daughter's many wounds. Still more females crowded near keening sadly.

It was hopeless. Gazda could smell the rot in his friend's injuries. She was dying.

“Little Ooso, my friend,” he said, lying beside her and grabbing her hands. She cried out in pain until he pressed her broken fingers to his lips. She blindly sniffed the air.

“Ooso is Gazda’s mate—not Omag’s!” the little she-ape squeaked before asking, “Is Gazda for Ooso?”

“Gazda is for Ooso,” the night ape whispered brokenly. “And Ooso is for Gazda.”

She fell unconscious soon after, and her breathing slowed. Gazda pressed his cheek to her brow and set her bruised palm against his forehead. The tribe had gathered around them in the morning light, moaning softly; but a hush went through them as tears rolled over the night ape’s pale face.

Gazda pushed through where the tribe crowded around his dying friend; moaning with grieving voices for little Ooso.

Baho walked with Gazda, wincing at his own injuries, and said, “Omag did this.”

“He was not alone. Where are the queens?” Gazda hissed.

“We put them in the old thorn-nest,” Baho growled, gesturing to the place.

Gazda followed the former silverback to the thicket of thorny bushes that tradition said was used as a prison for traitors, and he slipped between a pair of bristling blackbacks that guarded the entrance.

Within the dark and thorny place, the old queens immediately lowered their heads and pressed their faces to the hard-packed dirt floor. With open palms extended, their voices came out as whining supplication.

“Omag threatened to kill us!” Oluza shrieked. “With his flat and shining stone.”

“Silence!” Gazda growled, and the she-apes trembled.

“Where has Omag gone? Tell me now!” he snapped, but when neither spoke he grabbed both she-apes by the hair atop their heads and heaved them up, viciously pushing them against the wall of thorns where they whimpered and squirmed and wept.

He looked deep into Akaki’s eyes and spat, “Old queen, you will tell me after *this!*”

Snarling, Gazda sank his fangs into Oluza’s throat and ripped at the muscles and veins there. He chewed at the flesh as Akaki screamed in fear, but she could not look away for the night ape’s hand held her face close to his as he lapped at Oluza’s foaming blood.

His red eyes burned at the other aged queen.

When the night ape had drunk his fill, and dropped the dead Oluza, he turned to grip Akaki’s trembling shoulders.

“Old she was, and her blood was thin,” Gazda said. “I am hungry yet, Akaki. Where is your *king Sip-sip*?”

“Omag—er—*Sip-sip* ran into the forest and east toward the bone-face larder. There is a cave by the river where he eats their females,” Akaki shrieked. “He has been gone three days. Please, Gazda, there is nothing for old queens in the tribe. He made us...”

“He *made* you?” Gazda sneered at Akaki. “*You* made Omag powerful when you put your ambitions into him, and he passed those ambitions into the fists of Ulok and his blackbacks. They have killed other apes unlawfully, and have brought on

Kagoon's death, and soon poor Ooso!" The sudden emotion that clutched his features was banished as he bared his fangs.

"So!" he snarled, moving his face close to the shivering old she-ape as he sniffed the gray fur along her jaw. "They were *your* fists that crushed Ooso's bones and broke her flesh."

Gazda's hurtling rage surged up in him as he roared, "And I will do the same to yours!"

Many apes were waiting outside the thorny thicket, moaning now and mourning the loss of Ooso who had died. Others whimpered in fear at the sounds of horror and violence that came from within the thorn-nest.

So all stepped back trembling as Gazda exited the thicket, his pale body covered in crimson and dotted with bits of flesh. His eyes burned like red flames and his mouth and chest bore dark stains of clotting blood.

He held Akaki's mangled body in his hands before him as he stared around his frightened tribe before he lifted the dead queen overhead and dashed her corpse upon the blood-drenched earth.

Snarling, he smelled Ooso's death in the air, and he grimaced, spinning on his heel, to bare his fangs to the east. For in that direction did the bone-faced Bakwaniri live—and soon Omag would die a terrible death...

His reverie was interrupted as old Baho hurried into his path.

"What of the tribe of Goro?" Baho blurted.

"What of it?" the night ape answered menacingly.

"And Ooso's daughter? Will Yulu go unprotected as you seek vengeance?" Baho grumbled.

"You protect her!" Gazda snapped.

"Please! Gazda, wait!" Baho winced as the flame in the night ape's eyes blazed at him. "You must not leave us. Omag's treachery has left your tribe without a king, and without protection. I am too old. Many loyal blackbacks have died or are injured and few are left to preserve what remains. You are young, the strongest ape in the tribe and the swiftest on the hunt. You have shown this, and none would dare question your leadership if you took it here at the Two Trees."

The other apes had started creeping forward hesitantly, many injured, limping as they approached; their eyes imploring. Fear preyed upon them, and the little ones whimpered in terror. And yet the night ape's burning gaze drew them with its promise of power.

"Gazda is king!" Baho said bowing, and the words were immediately echoed by the group.

"Gazda is king!" the other apes shouted.

Despite himself, Gazda swelled with pride.

He could feel Akaki's and Oluza's blood moving in his veins, and his heart hammered with its strength. How he wanted Omag—oh, to sink his fangs into that stinking flesh!

But his tribe, his mother's tribe... Ooso's tribe would go unprotected. Leaderless they would fail...

Yulu broke free of her grandmother then, and stopped at Gazda's feet to bow.

Ooso! Great sadness gripped Gazda's heart when Yulu looked up at him and he bent to brush her little tears away.

Rising to his full height, Gazda looked over the tribe of apes that huddled before him. They were injured and terrified. Their hollow eyes looked to him for hope.

“Do you doubt I am strongest?” he bellowed, swaying on wide-spaced legs. The closest wounded blackbacks shifted away from him, bowing and scraping at the earth with their foreheads. “Who would challenge Gazda the night ape to be king?”

“Gazda is King!” the apes chanted now, as they dropped down onto their knees and bellies, pressing the ground with their faces repeating, “Gazda is King of the Apes!”

Gazda was overcome by this show of respect and loyalty, and so he hardened his resolve by glaring into the east again. In that direction was the river and somewhere near it the bone-faced Bakwaniri lived.

A look came into his blazing eyes that promised death for Omag—and the Bakwaniri also. Had they not caused the death of his mother?

Eeda had raised him to be one of the apes, and she had died...

If her son took up this mantle, might her loss become a sacrifice?

Of his loyalty there was no doubt, and like the other bull apes in the tribe, Gazda was a blackback with ambition.

He would be King of the Apes.

The night ape set one bloodied foot upon Akaki’s broken corpse, and beating upon his powerful chest with his fists, he threw back his head and roared the terrifying challenge of the bull ape.

The tribe that lay on the ground before him, *his* tribe, trembled at the call, but not least of all did Baho, oldest, who had heard something different in this cry that came from Gazda—different from the call he had made before.

Never had such a roar come from an ape.

Indeed, nothing like that had been heard since before the dawn of time, when primordial forests locked the earth in a dark, unending band of green and shadow.

