

Journey of Thade

by Jackie Bole

1. Spirit broken, Thade remained imprisoned. Everything he had strived for-lost forever. His world was shattered...

Expressionless eyes stared out. His mind raged. "What will they do to me?"

Trembling hands pushed the hair back from his face.

"Will they leave me here to die?"

Slowly he rose. The armor-once regal, beautiful-was disheveled.

Broken. Bloody.

"I have been betrayed!" his mind screamed.

His head snapped back as his fists raged against the glass barrier...

The inevitable had hit home.

"N-n-o-o-o...!!"

A rage so profound ignited deep inside sending him reeling violently into the glass with powerful force.

The savage instinct for survival overwhelmed revealing a snarling, growling beast; beating and pounding on the impenetrable glass in a desperate attempt at shattering it.

Stumbling back, logic filtered into the confusion. He was trapped in this cage and there was no escape.

"Let me out!" He shrieked.

Every nerve in his body began to short-circuit and he began to shake. In a state of denial, Thade threw his body into the glass with such vengeance, the repercussion slammed him to the floor leaving him dazed and shaken, his head swimming from the blow.

Curling into a tight ball and wrapping his long arms about himself...blackness.

His eyes rolled up in his head. His body writhed from seizures.

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"I will die here." It came like a warm breeze. The first thought

that entered his mind when he came to.

A low groan of pain escaped. A surrendering kind of sound one makes upon seeing their world collapse in all of its red raging glory.

Fear gripped tightly and he shuddered. He could not move - paralyzed by the haunting conclusion whispering in his ear; "Yes... you will die here..."

Such a welcoming tone.

Thade embraced the warmth which accompanied the decision. Closing his eyes, he waited, and the truth that his death was nigh washed over him.

Taking in a deep breath, he let it seep out in a wheeze.

This hell hole was his prison and his tomb. He passed out, giving in to his plight.

Letting go, Thade slipped into deep repose. There would be no physical escape from here...

There was no more prison. No more tomb. No more anything. Just darkness still and thick.

He had done this to himself. But would there be restitution for him after his demise? How would he be remembered, as a traitor or warrior?

It did not matter, now. The fever would burn his brain up in a matter of days consuming any rationality left to his thought process.

His heartbeat slowed taking him deeper, sinking him into an abyss void of noise, sense of touch, tucking its blackness around him as a blanket in winter.

There was no more prison. Or tomb. There was no more anything. Just darkness still and thick.

Time no longer existed.

Pain no longer existed.

NOTHING was what existed and it was welcomed with quiet abandon.

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Kneeling next to the seemingless lifeless body, touching his chest,

listening for life-sounds, another had entered the chamber where he lay dying for so many days. His skin was hot. Roiling. Unaware of a journey he had made for a very elaborate hallucination, Thade was rescued from the place. Far into the forest. Away from the desert. Away from Calima. Away from those who had placed him there... His armor was stripped along with the torn and bloody mail beneath it, leaving him naked and vulnerable. Finely woven linens were draped over him chilling his burning body. Soft cool hands bathed the fevered brow. Stroked his hair. Arms held him firmly, safely when siezure tore through him. Embracing him in its regression. Forgiving when the froth of vomit drooled from his mouth, cleansing his face. These hands applied rich oils to his skin, massaging it into his temples, across his forehead, erasing the war-torn lines creasing his face like a road map, to relax his furrowed brow.

2

Death-like slumber enveloped him -- held him hostage, yet the hands worked to cool him. Drops of water were placed on his tongue, its wetness sliding down his throat extinguishing the fire that burned there. Smells of rich oils aroused his senses and for the first time in many days Thade dreamed. Or at least he thought he had. The angel touched him. Its ethereal voice echoed in his ears, calling him back from the throes of death. This figment seemed to fade in and out of his dream, their fluid robes flowing about feet which did not seem to touch the floor. And the strong scent of Mihr...He had not smelled it since childhood. Under the influence of such a high fever his brain offered no logical explanation, but instead, presented the delusion that the vision was that of his mother whom he had never known. He called out to her begging she return... Thade drifted deeper. He was slipping away. Shadows, shifting ever

closer like heavy thunderheads, were taking over his dream-state.
Hovering.
Waiting for the death rattle.

Icy chills coursed down his spine, and still, he felt the cool water on his head as his body was covered warmly.

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She clasped her fingers together tightly as she knelt, an ardent request for guidance beseeched; "please, help us..."

"I cannot break his fever. I fear he is dying. What can I do?"

Silently she waited. Perhaps the gods had heard her prayer. A prayer so heart-felt they could not ignore the appeal.

From behind closed eyes she could tell the sun was setting behind the trees, casting shadows across the ground in long fingers, reaching out to grasp the last rays as they filtered through the canopy. Barn swallows took flight from their high-hidden nests swooping for the insects as they crawled over the dewy undergrowth.

Lips moved with inaudible words; the plea, repeated over and over like a rosary to Omnipresent forces.

"Wisdom will come to me." she said on a sigh.

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Before the last glimmer of day faded, lamps were lit softly filling the main room with golden light, casting the walls in a pastel honey glow. A comfortable atmosphere, simply decorated, consisting of a sofa, a suspended wicker chair, and a beautifully carved table positioned before the sofa. Under foot a rattan rug stretched. Odd finds and artifacts, from days-gone-by, nestled inside of a tall curio that stood prominently beside the door.

To the other side of the room a dining table filled the center surrounded by six chairs; all pieces carrying the same carving as the sofa table depicting twisting vines dripping with grape clusters.

Pictures, depicting dreamy, far away vistas and lazy blue rivers,

capturing a place from the past, hung in a row. A time when it was peaceful and calm...

Now the house itself was not a house at all, but an ancient redwood measuring a thousand feet in circumference. Despite the fact that it was hollowed out it remained alive blending in so well with its surroundings that there was never any threat of being detected by the apes -- if they ever had reason to venture out that far.

It was this solitary life she chose. One did not get hurt if there was no one to inflict the pain. However if there was ever a request for her assistance -- be it man or ape, she always went to them, never seeking anything in return except that she be left alone and that they not attempt to convince her to live among others of her species. To her, there was no "other species".

"You are so vulnerable out there," The "folks" would lament. "We worry about you."

"I'm fine." She would assure, giving a gentle kiss to the aged cheek. "I will come when you need me here."

She would walk into the forest, vanishing into the flora.

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With lamp in hand, she made her way back to the bedroom where the wounded soldier lay. Creeping to his bedside she gazed down on the simian. He was so still, for a moment she thought he had died. Resting her hand on his chest she felt it rise exhaustively.

"At least he is still alive."

He felt the touch. Somewhere deep within he was relieved to know someone was there, and that he still breathed.

She released a long-held breath of relief. Placing the back of her hand to his cheek she felt the fever.

Frustration furrowed her brow as she shook her head. "Why can't I break it?!"

She hurried for more cloths and began packing the soldier under his arms, to the nape of his neck, behind his knees, and to his kidneys; ice-cold well water, soaking his body to keep his brain from

burning up. Sweat dripped from the tip of her chin as she recycled the cloths; warm for cold, warm for cold. Her back ached from bending over him. She was ready to drop. Taking a chair from the dining table she positioned it at his bedside and worked diligently from the pail of water between her feet.

"Come back," she said, wiping his palid face. "Don't let this get you. Hear me. Follow my voice."

Studying him, she had come to the conclusion that he was of the utmost importance. The cut of his auborn hair, the groomed goatee which encircled his pale lips. Even in this poor of condition he held an air of authority. Looking over at the armor -- so beautifully gilded in pure gold of two simians poised in battle; it was a promise of severe punishment unto any and all humans crossing his beliefs.

It spoke of a warrior.

Perhaps, even, a ruler.

Her fingers glided over the broken armor, sinking deeply into the gashes criss-crossing the breast-plate, taking liberty of the gold once embossed there.

Destroying it...

Destroying a legacy...

"Why...?" She pondered.

Why had he ended up imprisoned in such a place?

What could he have done to cause someone to be so cruel as to allow another to perish in such a way?

She smiled sadly. It did not matter now. Getting him well did.

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Thunder rumbled across the sky waking her with a start as lightning stabbed among the clouds. Hearing the wind picking up she did not remember dozing off -- sprawling forward in the chair pulled closely to the bedside, her arms stretched protectively across the soldiers chest.

Great gusts rattled the shutters, whistling their arrival through the cracks that to enter was no option.

As she rose to secure the shutters, he called out desperately. It was another night-terror. She had grown used to them. For many sleepless nights she sat next to him bathing his brow, offering up gentle words of reassurance that he was not alone. That someone was there.

His face contorted in rage as he screamed at the demons behind his closed eyes, swinging out physically at the phantoms only to recoil as if under attack -- shielding his face -- begging mercifully for them to leave him.

Compassion drew her to his side. To simply ease his tense brow, offer words to let him know the demons were not real...

"You're safe. Hear my voice and know you are alright." She stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. "I'm here."

Taking his arms down from his face, she held his hands. "I'm real. Feel my touch."

Her breath sung over his face as he felt himself lift from the blackness. His face relaxed as if in a contented smile and she slipped her hands free. "I have something for you."

Spinning from her seat she went to the window. The shutters flapped incessantly before she leaned into them unlatching the eye-hook and allowing the burst of wind to enter. Returning to the ape's side she pulled the linens from him allowing the cool air upon him. Gossamer netting, which surrounded the bed sailed and billowed over his body, caressing his skin, sending sensations making him twitch. She pulled the mosquito net away exposing the soldier to the rush of air, and she watched the heat rise off of him.

The storm grew in intensity pelting the tree tops, sending wind chimes, somewhere outside the window, into a tempest symphony -- a terrestrial rhythm anxiously conveying its distress to the forest. For a moment she watched the lightning through the breaks in the canopy; the thunder, so furious, shook the objects on her dresser.

This was a good one, she thought. Returning to her patient she took his hand while observing him for any sign that he had received any relief. His fever had dropped some thanks to the storm, and she sank wearily into her chair. That was when she felt -- or at least

thought she had -- a slight squeeze.

Was he aware that he was not alone in his nightmare? She leaned into his face.

"Can you hear me?"

He suddenly grasped hold of her hand in a most desperate way. He was fighting back...

Weakly, though...



Another week had passed and Thade's fever still lingered refusing all efforts to break it. For short durations, it would drop only to return with seizures, nosebleeds, and bouts of nausea, evoking, in his caregiver, a great concern that, in fact, infection coursed in his blood, and if it was not intercepted now he would have no chance of recovery.

She paced in frustration, stopping only long enough to replace the warm cloths with fresh cool ones. Smoothing the towel across his forehead she realized how sick he really was, how it was beginning to show in his features. Her lips went paper thin in a grimace. "Hang on." In the dark, he glowed an eerie paleness while dark circles, from sunken eyes, grew ever more prevalent. Breaking into a sweat one moment only to be freezing in the next, he was dying.

Almost sobbing, she fell across the body. "Don't die on me. It will come, I know it will. Just hold on."

She barely heard his heart beat resting her head there to listen. He hadn't made a move since that one time, and his bodily functions were going to start shutting down in a matter of days if she didn't...

In that instant she had awakened to an antidote. To save his life she would have to administer something that could very well end it. Herbs such as Foxglove, Goldenbough, and Aaron's Rod which had proven fatal if given incorrectly could kill him instantly. But there was nothing else she could do except try it -- cautiously...

Another storm was approaching rapidly as herbs, roots, and

berries were gathered. Thunder threatened when she grabbed one last handful before bolting for the tree-abode.

Grinding the botanicals with a mortar and pestle, a most acrid odor was released causing her to lean back in disgust. It smelled like a barn yard just after a summer rain. She added to it some Meade creating a tincture which in turn created a sort of "shoot and cringe" reaction; the wine disguising, little if any, of the bitter antioxidant.

Harsh, bitter flavors filled his mouth. He could not protest when it burned his tongue, making him sick to his stomach when he swallowed. It passed his pallet too often, it seemed, as the potion was fed to him day and night. Drop by drop.

Oh these tortuous demons! Locked deep in his prison he cried for redemption as tears streamed down his cheeks, proclaiming he had changed his ways, his ideals, and how he had learned from his misdeeds; all slurred and mumbling before falling just above a whimper when she laid her hands on him, petting the down of his forehead.

"You're safe, now." hushed.

Sensing the caress his brow rose in surrender, relaxing in his struggle against the nightmare. The voice, soothing and so much more powerful than his antagonists, charged into the blackness that was holding him hostage, driving his demons back to hell empty-handed.

Thade tossed and turned. His head turned from one side to the other as if he were looking at someone or "some-thing".

"Death...?" he called feverishly. "Where are we going?"

In a voice as clear as a bell, he said, "Please, do not return me there."

Shaking her head, she turned to him. His eyes were open, yet only blank expressionless orbs stared making her jump. The very essence of his plea broke her heart to see this once proud warrior broken down to a dispirited wretch. "no," she promised softly. "you will never go back there."

He stared through her before a deep sigh escaped.

"Rest now."

He obeyed the voice...

He slept...



Morning brought the sound of thunder to his ears as it pressed on through endless grey sky.

He opened sandy feeling eyes, feeling like he had only dozed off, weary from studying his maps. Things were out of place, though. The sheers billowing about the bed threw him. He felt sore and parts of him burned, especially his left shoulder, but for the life of him he could not recall what the hell had happened.

Not yet.

Vision clearing, Thade realized that he was not in familiar surroundings, which only aided his confusion; adding a touch of disorientation to taste. The bed he rested in was not his or anyone else's he had romped in. The articles around him were alien. Nothing was recognizable when his eyes fell upon something new -- gawking uncomfortably about. Chewing nervously at the inside of his cheek, Thade tried to move. He was so weak that if he were to stand he knew he would not get far. He felt the fine linens under his hands covering him. Upon lifting them he discovered they were all that were.

Exasperated, he brought his hands to his face, releasing a low frazzled groan, and rubbed his eyes. There was no grate of sandpaper-like roughness against his eyelids. Befuddled, he brought his hands down before his swollen eyes. They appeared to have been manicured. Not looking this good in years. Running his hand along his jaw-line, it had been shaven and his goatee neatly trimmed. Only his cracked lower lip flawed the smoothness.

"How long have I...?" He spoke aloud, his query interrupted by movement in the doorway.

He could not make out just who or what stood but it appeared that they were just as unsure of him as he was of them.

He tilted his head quizzically as his eyes narrowed. "Why do you

linger among the shadows?" he rasped. "Let me see you."

Cast in the grey of the day, she entered cautiously moving slowly so as not to startle her now awakened guest. Thade followed them with steely-eyed precision noticing how this form seemed to flow along -- that they were of the female persuasion.

"Such a tiny thing." His thoughts relayed.

The curve of her hip nor the way this stranger carried themselves was not what captured the General's attention. It was the cascade of raven-black hair which fell almost to her knees. The breeze through the open window floated strands about her like blythe spirits, mesmerizing him.

"Was this the one who saved my life...!? This waif...!?"

Closer, and more pensive in her steps, she came, clutching her robe when she passed the window, yet still allowing a glimpse of the form beneath, moving lithely into the light of the lamp. Hypnotized, Thade awaited expectantly, raising his head to peer down his muzzle once they appeared, catching the rich earthy scent of botanical oils as they wafted heavily into his nostrils. He was prepared to give his thanks to the simian, but like a kick in the stomach, he discovered his savior to be what he least expected...

A human.

His body tensed. This had caught him completely off guard. A dangerously fierce growl came from his chest; a warning for her to keep away.

"Who are you?!" He snarled, the black rings around his eyes worsening.

Smiling gently, she leaned into the glow of the lamp, a sweet expression beaming down on him. "Don't you remember?"

"Don't come any closer!" The warning was adamant. Distrusting her immediately, watching her with the deep-seeded loathing for what she was. He made a sudden upward motion with his head as if in a half-nod, then tilted it to one side releasing a belittling snort of disgust.

Startled by his crass aversion, she lowered her gaze, her eyes

saddened. "I understand now." She said.

Looking back to him she came face-to-face with a snarling mask of fangs. "How did I get here?!"

He scared her speechless. All she could do was shake her head in disbelief. The words, though simple, were lodged in her throat. His deep resentment burrowed under her skin when he glared from beneath his heavy brow, watching her every move diligently.

He smelled her fear. Yet it was not the usual pungent odor of sweat and piss that commonly assaulted him. Hers came as a whisper -- rich and sweet. Though her scent did not displease, he leered at her suspiciously. In her throat Thade heard the rattle of words forcing their way up, breaking just above a whisper; "I brought you here." Her voice wavering just on the verge of tears.

In a movement as natural as breathing, she then reached out and wiped at a bead of sweat breaking on his brow; "You were hurt..." she disclosed, catching the perspiration on her fingertip. Long hot fingers coiled around her hand like a snake. His reflexes, so swift, she could not withdraw fast enough. He tightened his grip, drawing her down until she was but a breath away from his own face. Terror flashed in her eyes as another resonant growl ascended.

"How long have I been here...?" His deadly gaze bore into her, leaving her at his mercy, if it existed in him at all.

Feeling her tremble delighted him, arousing the knowledge that he could induce such fear. He smiled to himself over it, and with each passing second his grip grew tighter. If she did not answer soon he was going to break every bone in her hand...

"TELL ME...!!!"

Whether he had succeeded in scaring it out of her or hurting it out, she began to cry as he twisted her wrist, his nails digging into her forearm, cutting like four blades as he glared malevolently, demanding his question be answered now.

She could not breathe. Her head swam. With all she had, she forced the words out with a scream. "THREE WEEKS...!" she blurted. "You've been here for three weeks!"

Thade looked as if he had been struck. Three weeks?! She felt his

grip loosen, saw the stupified expression was over his face.

Jerking away suddenly, Thade's nails dug through the soft flesh of her forearm leaving a trail of bloody tracks in their wake.

She backed away quickly toppling the chair as she wiped at angry tears. "You are a beast!" She scorned.

Thade searched himself, then suddenly swung his head to her. "Do not ever touch me!" He hissed, black, emotionless sockets stabbed at her, reflecting his hatred.

"I brought no harm to you." She revealed, trying desperately to hide hurt feelings.

Thade sensed her genuine bereavment and for a split second felt for her. He saw the blood on her arm. Taking in a deep breath he perceived, possibly, that he could almost feel sorry for doing what he did.

Turning toward the door, she stopped there and turned to him. "It is obvious my work is done." Then she walked out, her head down, visibly disheartened by his reaction.

Although he did not trust her, or any human for that matter, she had peaked Thade's curiosity. This was no ordinary human he was dealing with. Even in his blind rage, he realized, when he caught sight of her for the first time, there was something unusual here. For she was clean and well groomed, and to his surprise, civilized. Nonetheless, he did not hold much confidence in her. She had to be up to something. Still, to find out more about her purged. Maybe if he discovered who she was and why she had done what she did, by freeing him and healing him, he could find closure. It would have to wait. The exertion from the brief struggle had left him suddenly weak and sleepy. His eyelids grew heavy as sleep descended upon him, detaching him from the real world once more...

Separated by only a curtain, she sat in her chair pondering over the dilemma, quite shaken from the attack. The compassion she once held for the chimp-soldier had been dashed to bits, leaving her bitter while she examined her twisted wrist, turning it gingerly back and forth, watching the bruises develop along the trail of deep

gouges along her arm. After nursing him back to health, only to have him lash out at her so viciously, she felt betrayed. However, she knew she had to approach him again in order to help him fully recover. With that in mind and calm discernment, she nodded in agreement. Get him well then send him on his way. Goodbye He awoke to find his meal waiting and a note on how to take the tincture she had prepared. At first, he wouldn't touch a thing but when he began feeling weaker, there was an understanding. Eat, take your medicine, rest, or die. Period. It went on like this for days; while he slept, she came and brought fresh water and fruit, slid pillows out from under him to change the cases, then just left him be. Maybe once in a while she left a book. But he did not want to read! He wanted to talk! But she was sly. It was like she knew when he was really sleeping and when he was simply trying to catch her there. The boredom was terrible and he soon lost interest in eating. All he wanted to do was sleep. His actions had gotten him in trouble again, and it felt as bad as being locked up back in Calima.

Vivid dreams filled with violence and madness hurled Thade back into the chamber; the glass barrier coming down with a thunderous roar. His will to survive was on the brink of collapse as he pointed the gun at his own head. Click, click, click... His cries fell on deaf ears as they stood like statues and watched him self-destruct. All of it came crashing down on him: the loss of his dignity, the rejection from his peers. He couldn't even kill himself!

It all surfaced on his face. A furrowed brow, the whimpers stirring from deep within, along with inaudible words best kept that way. The nightmare demons had him tossing and turning again. Then, the angel appeared -- releasing him, taking his hand to lead him back.

Thade's eyes opened abruptly, very much aware that another presence was in the room. That she was watching him. Sitting right there next to the bed. He turned over suddenly and their eyes locked.

"Why did you release me?" His voice, cold and demanding was etched with the nightmare.

The dark pools did not avert this time. She challenged him,

looked straight into him.

"I couldn't leave you."

Skepticism danced across Thade's face. "You felt pity!" He scoffed, rolling his eyes away.

She lowered her head. "Yes."

Thade's cold, untrusting heart had met its match with soft, emphatic understanding. He could not pull away easily, denying what confronted him, what he purposefully fought to ignore... Her profound compassion for all living things. A quality he was unaccustomed to when dealing with her species.

Scrutinizing her, studying the shape of her, she was unlike any human he had yet to come across. "I feel for you." Her soft spoken words captured him. He stared, unable to take his eyes off of her.

Her hand reached out then stopped short heeding the previous warning.

"Forgive me," and she folded her hands on her lap. "I have touched you so many times that it is difficult, now, not to."

Thade observed her smugly. In the back of his memory, it was her hands that had soothed him. She was a human, but not of the usual breed of female; the man-like amazons that could take on the strongest gorilla troops or the wyldest of chimps. This one was tiny! Fragile. With soft cool healing hands.

He must have been wearing some kind of expression of submission, for when he awoke from his little day-dream, she was smiling at him. Quickly, he scowled at his reasoning and at her.

"You were unjustly accused..."

The words froze him.

Closing her eyes, she shook her head and said, "You only did what you thought was right." Thade was extremely taken aback by the words. It reflected in his expression, changing from total distrust to utter disbelief that she knew what had transpired. For certainly she was not there to witness the battle! He would have taken down this elf swiftly! He closed his eyes tightly; "how does she know of this?" Her words rang in his ears: "You only did what you thought was right..." It left him isolated. Tears of anger and frustration

fought to come burning their way to the surface.

"I am sorry..." He barely heard her words feeling her touch when she tried to comfort him, her hand resting on his arm. He flinched. The feel of her stroking him made him shudder. Being touched by her was not what made him tremble so. It was the comfort he derived from the caress. A security there. She would not harm him. There was no threat.

He let down his guard and a rare and unusual emotion emerged. A nervous laugh escaped him. "I must be losing my mind." He declared.

The very idea of having any kind of amnesty for this human had him doubting his sanity.

She withdrew her hand upon sensing his discomfort when he latched onto her unexpectedly, grasping her arm, startling a yelp from her.

Oh no, she had forgotten! "Please..." she begged.

Opening his eyes to her, she was positive of his intentions...To finish what he had started! To pull away was fruitless. He had her but good.

"Please don't hurt me." She begged, closing her eyes from his steely gaze.

Anticipating that the next thing she would experience was to be the excruciating pain as he snapped her wrist, she prepared herself and took in a ragged breath holding it. But it never came. He brought her hand to his muzzle, taking each finger -- and, like a curious child, examined each one, sniffing at the oils, all the while, watching her. A wan smile appeared, precariously, upon his lips as he observed her bewilderment upon opening her eyes. Withdrawing, her hands clenched into fists. He pulled them back, opening them. He studied the bruises. Touched them, trailed a long digit over the scratches to her elbow, his face revealing an emotion she could not interpret, for it contained a mixture of fury, sorrow, and confusion. She fixed on his eyes, searching. His return was apprehensive -- threatening absolute control over her. Lowering her head, she shyed from his stare unsure of just how to take it -- as a challenge or

something far more physical. Pressing her palm to his cheek, Thade felt its softness, dreamily closing his eyes.

She felt excitement shiver through her, saying aloud what she thought was to herself; "Phallen, get a grip...!"

"Phallen..." Thade mused, coming in a purr, having caught her low retort.

Enfolding her hand in his, he turned it palm up; "I am sorry I hurt you.", kissing the bruises.

Peering from her palm, he wondered if she could see how he felt. If she would understand him or simply trust in him. Or run, helter-skelter, from him. With a soft purr, he surrendered to whatever it was to be as he looked at her, weary to gaze into those hypnotic orbs now that he had. Studying her solemnly he brushed back the raven hair which fell about her face; the paleness of her skin, long black lashes which hid her eyes whenever she lowered them. The full brows that complimented those pools of mystery. Her nose was fine and straight, turning up slightly on the end giving a child-like mien to her. He saw her full lips, rarely giving way to a full smile of straight white teeth seeming to span her face, feeding into her self-conscious that her mouth was too big. Her chin came to a soft rounded point as the jaw-line sauntered back to elf-like ears. One more thing she kept hidden. But as Thade saw her -- really looked at her for the first time, he noticed none of these flaws. He had no rational answer as to why he had become so smitten by her.

"Maybe she is like a pet..." He fancied. If that were the case she was like no pet he ever had!

Throughout his life he was taught to kill humans... Destroy them... This one, though was different. She had no tribe, lived alone away from everything. She was clean, groomed, and dressed in the finest textiles this side of his city. How? Why?

"When you are well, you must return to your people."

Thade snapped out of his day-dream. "They have turned against me, Phallen." He lowered her hand -- streamed a long index finger along her life-line.

"They came back for you." she pressed.

His eyes went to hers. She felt his hand squeeze. "Tell me."

He waited, all feeling pushed aside; delving for retribution, wanting to hear it all now. And Phallen had seen them return. She knew his future. She pulled gently from his grip and began to pace slightly as she began. "A gorilla; very powerful in rank, was especially upset at not finding you..."

"Attar." Thade recalled.

Phallen nodded lightly, her face all aglow in the lamp light. "He said something about being "too many years to allow you to fall", that it was a "mistake to leave you like that."

Falling silent she thought perhaps Thade might explain what the gorilla had meant. But upon looking at the soldier she realized how bothered he was by this news.

"The Senate requested your reinstatement..." Her last words sent a charge through him. Even the thunder seemed to hold itself back; the silence pounding in their ears.

Phallen slipped from the room feeling that she should have left the ape where he was so he would not have had to endure such an extended illness. There would have been doctors there who would have healed him much sooner and he would be back with his comrades. To let him digest what he had learned, maybe he wouldn't kill her.

* * * * *

"What has this human done for me?"

He knew a change had occurred. It was so different now. "I can't hate her now."

Yet, in the back of his head a still, small voice warned, "you cannot trust her."

His chest ached. To get well and leave here... She would fall away from him just as the others had. Leaving him alone and angry.

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"Let him go now..." Unwilling to become anymore involved than she already was, Phallen withdrew any emotions held for the chimp-soldier, preparing herself to let him go, to release him and send him back where he belonged -- with his people, who obviously wanted and needed him there. "...It is time."

* * * * *

Over the weeks, a friendship neither needed was developing. It was difficult to just accept this chance-meeting and to leave it at that. Thade was stronger and was able to stand long enough to make it to a high-hidden terrace up in the canopy. She brought him food and drink allowing him to sit and think and listen to the sounds of the forest. She took care of his needs making him well, all the while not realizing that she was falling into a tender trap. Disobeying her own ardent commitment to stay out of his life. He did not need her! Only now did he. And only now. They trusted one another. Thade could not deny it. He felt too comfortable around her, forgetting she was human, taking her at face-value only to shake himself back, circumstances arriving to the fact that soon he would be leaving. There was a strange ache inside that he could not put his finger on. Was it having to say goodbye feeding on his conscience? It had been so long since he felt such a powerful connection with anyone, having turned his feelings off to avoid the hurt endured in the past. He felt, with Phallen, as if he could tell her anything be it good or bad, and he did. Many things and she accepted them without shudder or revolt, never finding fault, and he knew by the look on her face that her acceptance was genuine.

Sometimes she would not say a word. Just sit and listen to him, while other times she engaged in spirited conversation about her journeys to places where the air was cold and white billows fell from the clouds, explaining how it felt, how it fell without a sound covering the ground in a blanket of white. Thade would look at her absurdly. "You are but a child. How can you say you have been to so many places and seen such things? Even I have never seen this

frozen wasteland you speak of."

"I am not a child...!" Phallen protested. "I have been to many places in my life, though many when I was "but a child."

She proceeded to describe the sound of a hollow wind, for there were no life-sounds. No birds, nor insects. Nothing but the wind.

"My father took my brother and I there after my mother disappeared." Thade dropped his gaze into his glass swirling it thoughtfully.

"Did you know your mother?" He asked.

"Only for a short while. I was five when she vanished."

"You are fortunate to have spent time with her." He replied quietly. "I did not receive such an opportunity."

Phallen smiled lightly understanding what loss meant. She felt deeply for him, and at the same time for herself.

"We have more in common than we thought." She said.

Then the uncomfortable silence came. She was embarrassed and neither knew what to say to pull up the reins on this lame horse without stepping on emotions.

"Phallen...?" Thade leaned into the light, eyes gleaming; his query pursed upon his lips.

The girl peered shyly from beneath her brow trying to hide the feelings she had for him delivering an almost comical seriousness to her face.

Thade fell back into the shadows of the evening, veiling his features. "Never mind," He dismissed, waving his hand. "I cannot remember."

But he could. He wanted to tell her how he felt. How she made him feel. Though it was not apparent to her, she was more to him than what he had perceived her to be -- his pet. To tell her goodbye was going to be difficult. The only thought which seemed to quell the inevitable was the one which he swore to do; to return to this unusual creature. She had protected him with her life. To repay her with the same virtue was only fair. But he feared his emotion burrowed much deeper. The more he was with her the more he wanted to stay with her! There was this soul in her that reached out

to him through those soft brown eyes.

"I will miss her!" He thought. He turned to the forest, sighing.

* * * * *

It was to be their last evening. How quickly the time seemed to have passed. Thade would leave in the morning. Could he leave in the morning? Phallen had prepared a beautiful feast, gathering everything from the forest without having to touch anything that did not grow naturally. Orchards belonging to the apes of Derkien were out of the question. They were not hers and they certainly would not appreciate her plucking the fruit they worked so hard on to grow. There was plenty of fruits and vegetables in the forest for her. She even made her own wine derived from honey and sugar cane.

They drank the wine she made, pouring one glass after another, burying the coming day when Thade would walk out of her life back to his, leaving her to carry on where she had left off in hers. That was how she wanted it and she played it off perfectly encouraging his endeavors with words that would send him back with no regret or feelings of indebtedness. She hid what she really wanted to let him hear. With the wine hitting her she wondered if it made any difference. They were from two different worlds. Nothing could change that. Not even a stupid statement. Phallen's cheeks flushed from her own thoughts as an awkward silence fell over them. The lamp in the center of the table cast their shadows, leaping and dancing, onto the far wall, while either one refused to bid the other adieu. She scanned the room. Memories of the past weeks glowed on her skin -- from her misty eyes. Thade watched her, saw the emotion break on her brow. Her warmth was real and it radiated to the surface; tangible and visible.

She avoided his stare. "Don't look at me that way! You are making it hard to let you go! It's not fair!" Her mind raged.

He made an attempt to get her to smile, a cheap disguise for what was going on inside of his own psyche. He was lost. Having laid his trust in her, to leave was crushing his heart. The smile on his lips turned downward conveying how hard it was becoming to

conceal his own crush.

"This isn't how it's supposed to be." He thought.

What came out was a lame, stuttering statement of his esteem toward what she had done for him. "You...", He shook his head searching for words to fit so he could allow closure to a relationship he wished could be much more than a fantasy.

"You saved my life." He finally said. "You CHANGED it."

He stared directly into her, never giving her a chance to avert. "You resurrected me and I feared you." He reached out and touched her hand. "I do not fear you now, nor do you fear me. Never fear me, Phallen." His fervent gaze could not be avoided. It burned into her until she dipped her head, her long, black tresses hiding her. She understood more than she cared to after seeing his desire, unspoken, yet screaming of the affection he wanted to release over her.

Thade waited out the storm when the light hit her eyes. He tipped his head to one side, an inquisitive smile emerging across his face, totally caught off guard by her abrupt dash from the table, her glass of wine crashing carelessly to the floor in her hasty retreat.

Rushing out under the trees, Phallen began to cry, cursing herself for being so selfish and weak.

"Forgive me...!" She cried to the heavens. "I know he doesn't belong here! I cannot let him know!"

Collecting herself as she wiped stubbornly at her tears, Phallen knew an apology was in order for her behavior. Tossing her hair back she turned back, prepared to explain. How long he had been standing there, she had no idea, walking into him. Thade did not move. He allowed her to stumble into him in the darkness.

"Do you think it is easy for me?" His voice came in a gentle rasp as he took her by the arms feeling her skin beneath his hands. "My emotions do not reveal themselves as readily. Though, with you..." He took in a long, slow breath. "I find it difficult to control them."

Closing her eyes, she shuddered as he slid his hands down her arms, strong and warm when they clutched her.

"I struggle with my past." He conveyed, his words falling just

above a whisper. "Now I struggle with leaving here. Leaving you."

She could feel his breath as he spoke. Sensed him moving closer. His facial hair brushed her cheek, his breathing grew short anticipating her embrace, and he began to tremble.

"Forgive me," He whispered, taking in her sweet scent, wanting so to take her up in his arms and ravish her. To stay with her. Instead he pulled back and peered into her moonlit eyes losing himself in the murky, moody storm.

"I beseech you," He implored. "This cannot continue, though I desire it to." His confession, so fervent, his voice quaked in arousal. Finding her hands, Thade took another step back. "To allow myself to weaken would not be fair to you."

He knew by the way she quivered under his touch that she was chaste, and his fierce attraction frightened her.

He smiled down at her cupping her chin. "Come back in..."

* * * * *

To hear the bird songs of the morning brought the inevitable; a smile, wishes of peace and prosperity, and then farewell.

Thade was well enough to make the journey home. His thoughts were occupied by what lay ahead. Knowing he was to be reinstated as General of the Derkien army did not lift his spirits though. To say goodbye to his friend was breaking his heart, and he prayed it could be different. Taking in everything around him, Thade wanted something to remember her by. In the corner of the bedroom, clustered on the floor, conch shells gathered. Surly she would not miss one. Yes she would. Those had been there longer than he had. Just steal the memory. Remember it all.

Nothing worked to ease his mind. Thade gnashed his teeth trying to satisfy the gnawing inside. He knew this was an experience he would not soon forget. With that, his face sat like stone and he marched from the bedroom. He knew once he left, this tree-abode, this creature of the forest would be next to impossible to find. It blended in so well if one ventured out of its premise there would be no easy way of finding one's way back. It became undiscernable

from the millions of trees in the jungle. She would be lost forever.

Phallen stood just outside the door of the tree-abode watching surreptitiously as he came from the bedroom, seeing him glance back over his shoulder for one last look. She took in a deep breath, holding it, closing her eyes as he brushed past her, realizing she would never see him again. A tempest raged within her, yet she remained steadfast. Chills ran up her spine when he passed, smelling the oils mixing with his chemistry.

'Let him go! Don't defeat your purpose for living alone!' Stepping into a beam of light, Thade turned to her shielding his eyes, looking hard at her, taking in her image, burning it into his memory forever. A deep scowl broke on his brow. Unable to comprehend why he could not keep her with him... And his eyes grew dark.

It was just the way it was...

"I will never forget you." And with a bow, not unlike that to royalty, Thade took her hand. "For you are truly a gift." Then he kissed her hand tenderly, letting it drop to her side.

As he rose he could not hide the melancholy. Phallen smiled, hiding her own pain behind unemotional eyes. She had shut him out of her life already, refusing to take responsibility for his broken heart and his freedom from owing her anything. Thade shook his head angrily as a frustrated sigh escaped. So that is how she thinks?! Whipping around he leaped into the forest disappearing almost immediately.

Phallen scoped her surroundings before releasing a sigh of relief. A quivering sound escaped revealing the feelings she hid so well. What she had done was right. To send him away thinking she had only been there to heal him was just. It was only fair to him. He was free in spite of the fact her tears were but a look away, fighting like hell to keep them at bay. Taking a step back to her door she wiped at the tear that rolled down her cheek, when without so much as snapping a twig, Thade dropped down behind her. All she heard was the soft patter as his feet hit the deck. She spun and gasped finding him standing right behind her, his face set like stone as he stared

into the eyes of a very bad liar.

He seized her powerfully around her waist and pulled her close. "I am not dealing with your defiance very well." He admonished, running his hand along her back beneath the black, endless mane.

Breathing heavily, he inhaled the deep earthy smell of her hair, burying his face in her neck. A resonant purr rose from his chest, feeling the rapture from just holding her next to him. Thade looked into her eyes searching, and discovered the warmth she had tried to hide come in great, salty tears. Her facade had been lifted. She was vulnerable after all. He ran his fingers through her hair, then gently held her neck. "I have not felt this way in..."

"Phallen, I..." She placed a finger to his lips. "This is not how it should be." She said quietly.

His mind raged with the truth of why he had come back, why he held her the way he did. He could not let her go. He had always gotten what he wanted and she was no exception.

She shook her head slowly; lowering her gaze. She saw the want in his eyes wishing he would have just kept going, to let it be a tale untold. He lifted her chin, once again losing himself in her eyes... as his burned with brazen fervor.

Phallen pushed out of his embrace spinning away from him. This was hurting her and she refused to entertain his outrageous notion that an ape and a human could love one another. She released a nervous titter, shaking her head madly. Thade reached for her, his touch pensive, gentle, turning her to cup her lovely face in his big hands.

"Kiss me, Phallen." His words, so caught up in emotion she barely heard them.

Their lips touched. To take her breath in him, to feel her hands touch him rushed upon Thade like a tidal wave and he pulled back trying to control the passion burning inside. A struggle, he realized, he could soon succumb to. Adoring her, he saw her innocence. She knew what was happening between them, how this sensation coursing through them could lead to something they both could regret. She was innocent not naive. Just the thought of never seeing

her again descended upon him like a dark cloud.

She smiled warmly touching his cheek. "Well?" She pursued. Overwhelmed, Thade enwrapped her in one long arm gliding through her hair with his other hand, feeling its thickness -- knowing he was safe there. Slowly they came together in their embrace, stronger and deeper than any emotion he had ever felt, sending him into a tail-spin he could not pull out of this time. Reeling. Falling. His head spun euphorically. Caught up in her so severely nothing else mattered as he took her back in one profound kiss; his body rushing with deep, savage abandon. Gazing down at her as she lay back in his arms, Thade knew what he wanted to do was wrong. But it felt so right!

'This is not right!' He seemed to shudder from the words in his head as they intruded on his conscience. Standing her back on her feet Thade pawed nervously at her dress, straightening it, lifting her hair to drape it back.

"I..." Conflict slapped him hard, overloading his brain with a deluge of rights and wrongs. "...must go."

He backed away never taking his eyes off of her, then with the agility of an acrobat, he sprung from the porch disappearing into the forest. Still breathless Phallen fell into one of the chairs. Her head swimming.

"goodbye..." She heard herself whisper.

Chapter 2

"The Returning"

"This is not going to be easy... They are not going to accept this from me..."

He broke from the forest and into the brightness of morning. The odors of blossoms and moist loam and moss wafted into his nostrils. Inhaling deeply he took his first step onto the open flat land.

Looking back over his shoulder, he wanted to dash back to her, but reluctantly, he trudged forward. Going home.

Home. Why did it sound so alien?

"How will I explain?"

"I owe no explanation!" If he had been a mythical dragon, fire would have snorted from his nostrils with that, blazing a trail all the way to Derkein.

And just as quickly as his temper had manifested, he had it tempered and under control; A virtue Phallen had instilled within him without even realizing it.

"They will accept me for they, too, had fallen under the words of a false prophet."

Sauntering through the tall grass, he never felt more alone. Sparse groves of trees resembled lonely lost islands stranded in the middle of nowhere. There was not another soul except for a few birds and they stayed well hidden in those lost trees, rendering up forlorn songs, adding to his misery.

" You could still turn back." Thade's inner voice reminded.

He smiled, nodded to himself. "I could," he replied aloud. "I love her..."

"I LOVE HER!" he bellowed across the savannah.

The birds fell silent. As silent as the senators were going to when he would declare his sentiment for her to them.

* * *

No, his return was not to be a glorious one. There would be no Army Brass playing "Hail the Returning Hero" in the town square.

He was coming home but not as the conquering hero.

He had faced death, smelled its grey existence, walked the blackened corridors of hell - a place he never wanted to return to.

But in whom could he reveal to that he had been resurrected by a human? That she was most extraordinary from the word Go? How would he explain how he had fallen in love with her?

Hell, he couldn't even explain it to himself!

But her warmth, which rose in that embrace, was not imagined. That was why he left so abruptly. To have taken her would have been barbaric, even in his eyes. How the spark ignited in him though!

How could she - a mere human - have affected him so profusely?

She never asked for a single thing, that's how. She saved his life then sent him home.

Home... There was that word again.

He committed himself to returning to her some day soon, confessing he had fallen in love with her. Accepting it completely...

* * * * *

Corporal Omri scanned the horizon from the tree tops. Normally, he could have seen for a good three or four miles or so, but today there was not much to look at. The rain had left a haze over the forest making it nearly impossible to ascertain anything outside of a one mile radius.

It didn't matter much to him anyway. He was soon to be relieved by the night sentry and his forty-eight hour furlough would begin. He had not seen his wife in a week. In their last correspondence she had promised sweet honey wine, or Meade, and Omri could almost taste it.

The young chimp's face creased into a fangy smile as he bounced eagerly on the limb - anticipating his "holiday" - dislodging large fruit pods from the tree, falling haphazardly through the branches and bouncing hard like golf balls, onto the trodden paths below.

Still high on the thought of going home, the corporal paid little attention as he scanned the vista, missing the figure cresting the distant hillside. His head snapped back and with an alarming howl, he scrambled from his perch and leaped to the ground some thirty feet below landing on all fours and loped silently back to base.

Bursting into the commander's quarters unannounced and winded, Omri exclaimed, "Someone approaches the city, Sir!"

Attar turned from his task. If he had been caught off guard it did not reflect for his expression was dauntless.

"Hmmm...?" came his rumbling reply.

Corporal Omri nodded. Pointed anxiously. "Someone is coming!" He blurted. "From the West!"

Attar's eyes narrowed...

Dipping lower by the minute, the sun was disappearing behind the mountain as Attar and Omri - accompanied by three more gorillas - broke from the forest and out into the open terrain, prodding their steeds into full gallop; a race with the setting sun.

Pointing a massive gloved finger, a soldier barked, "Up ahead!" Shaking his finger westward.

All eyes trailed after spotting movement about a hundred yards ahead.

Attar bolted ahead centered keenly on the shadow, his hand going to the hilt of his sword as he rode up on the stranger.

Pulling hard on the reins the beast reared as it was forced, suddenly, into a cantor. Raising his black muzzle into the air, Attar inhaled the air surrounding him deeply, discerning the odor as one of his own species.

"Stop and identify yourself!" his brusque voice demanded - riding up on them swiftly.

Ever so curious, he kept his weapon at the ready.

"It is I..."

Attar pulled his sabre from its sheath and held it defensively, wheeling his horse around for a second pass of the dark figure.

Pulling hard against the reins he leapt from his mount landing directly before the stranger's path. They stood face-to-face for several seconds before Attar stammered, "How...?"

At a loss for word, his mouth agape, their eyes locked.

"How...?" His words faltered again.

In the dusk, the commander could make out the profile. He knew this was no phantom standing before him. The General had returned from the dead!

"Stop stammering and tell me if it is true!" Thade snapped in a gravelly voice. "Does the Senate wish to reinstate me?!"

The rest of the party rode up, encircling the two where they stood - noticing that Attar was considerably confused and that the thin, pale looking simian in a tattered military uniform appeared to

be on the verge of collapse.

"...Sir?" Omri addressed cautiously.

But Attar did not hear him. He was nodding in response to the inquiry from Thade. Stupified by his presence, slowly grasping the reality that he was, indeed, standing before him.

Just then, two gorillas dismounted and stepped up to Thade taking him by the arms. "You are under arrest..." one of them charged while going for a pair of cuffs attached to their utility belt.

Thade wrenched free glaring at them. "Are you out of your mind?" He demanded backing away, all the while watching them intently, his fingers flexing. Waiting for one or both to make a move.

Attar snapped out of his daze and stepped in front of Thade, blocking the soldiers and concealing the stunned ex-general who, in the state of mind he was in at that moment, could have ripped the heads off those two. Omri observed silently from the saddle, harried by the events which, if not for the commander, could have taken on an ugly stand-off. He knew Thade was to go before the council, but not as a prisoner.

A deep growl rumbled in the commander's chest. "He is still you superior! You will treat him with respect!" Attar thundered, leering menacingly.

The soldiers backed humbly away.

"Go back to the compound. If I hear a breath from anyone of his return I will know who to come to."

He turned, without further ado, to Thade. Saw the look of shock and anger on the chimp's face. "Are you alright?" The gorilla asked quietly.

Reaching out, Thade seemed to slump as he rested his hand on Attar's mighty shoulder. "I have seen Hell, my friend." he sighed.

The words came so softly the commander wondered if it was his warrior general. It made him shiver. Where was the fire Thade once possessed? For a moment, Attar could only look at him. And for the first time since their encounter he noticed the armor. Even the mail beneath. It was all beaten.

Thade could tell what the gorilla was thinking and he nodded. I

know, I know," he conveyed. "It will be retired."

A painful grin creased his face telling of a much deeper concern only to fade as quickly as it appeared as his expression turned serious. Too serious.

Back to face the music.

Nonetheless, Attar was glad to see his friend alive. Out of nowhere, the huge simian suddenly embraced Thade in a massive hug - squeezing the breath out of him unknowingly - with his muscular arms.

A splendid smile spanned the gorilla's muzzle when he released him, clutching Thade's shoulders. "It is good to see you!" He declared shaking his friend heartily.

Taking a startled step back, Thade recovered from the unexpected greeting. The power in that hug, though in good will, proved merciless on his heeling ribs.

Closing his eyes, Thade took in a slow measured breath, stifling the pain stabbing at his side. The smile fell from Attar's face when he saw the labored breathing, becoming aware to the fact that his friend was still quite fragile.

"You are not well!" he cried, ashamed of himself for inflicting his friend with pain.

Taking Thade under the arm, Attar assisted him to a waiting horse.

Despite the commander's pleas, Thade refused to take the reins.

Shaking his head, the chimp disputed. "I have traveled this far. I will make it the rest of the way."

"You have not lost your stubborn streak, I see, sir."

But he had. He had all but surrendered.

Just along the tree line the young Corporal Omri waited while the others went back. Watching sullenly. as the two slowly made their way across the lea, he saw the change in General Thade. He was not how he used to be. He appeared to be humbled. Somewhat morose and distant. Something besides his downfall had affected him. There was a loneliness behind his eyes, as if he had lost his best friend.

Having lost his brother, Omri knew that ghostly expression all too well and it shook him to remember.

One of the three gorillas who had attempted to incarcerate Thade remained with Omri. He looked sheepishly away from his commander realizing there was still a strong bond between he and the fallen general.

Eying the soldier contemptuously, Attar directed his words especially to he and his fellow troops who had high-tailed it back to the compound already. "Make certain all understand there is to be no word of the general's return until I say so."

The order was calm yet on the other hand a warning came through as plainly as the moons rising in the sky. Without hesitation the soldier nodded then wheeled his steed around and disappeared into the shadows. Thade watched after him, his thoughts wandering along a path of uncertainty for what was to happen now that he was returning. Surly his Phallen would never steer him toward his demise. She had saved him after all. He dropped his gaze. Stared at his own shadow on the ground. He did not feel the pain anymore. His thoughts were on her.

She loved him.

She loved him not.

Was she thinking of him? Did she feel the way he did or was she over it now, carrying on with whatever she did out there?

He missed her so. He could not help himself. He could not say he had no feelings for her or she for him. Though it had been only hours since they parted Thade still felt her. Sensed her. Smelled her.

She was in him.

He started. Quaking as he recalled their goodbye.

Goodbye?!

They never said it.

Thade's unusual silence troubled Attar. He had never seen his comrade so depressed, so far out in left field and not seeming to really care about anything except for whatever it was that took him so far away.

"What happened to you?" Attar queried, unable to take the silence anymore.

Thade stopped and looked up into the face of the towering gorilla.

He smiled wanly. "I have a tale to tell you."

Quiet.

Distant. Even slightly afraid.

His eyes, as lucid as still waters, delivered the grief that haunted him and if he did not share this with someone - this helpless feeling he felt for the human - he was certain it would drive him insane.

Still staring into the eyes of his friend, Thade could not hide his emotions. His brow furrowed and he took a deep breath.

"There was someone." he sighed.

Entering through the back gates offered privacy, avoiding any discrepancies that could have occurred due to the presence of the former general upon his return to Derkein. The infantry had been informed and awaited his arrival with apt anxiety, knowing not what to expect, retaining reverence, nonetheless, for him.

For what seemed like an eternity, the two were finally seen. Both walking with a single horse trailing after.

Immediately snapping to attention, all eyes watched prudently as Thade - a mere shell of what they remembered - sauntered past with barely an acknowledgment that they were all there.

Attar surveyed the assembly with unyielding admonishment, narrowing his gaze onto ones most likely to incite argument among their peers. However, even they appeared sympathetic to the chimp's profound loss of power and regarded him with as much respect as the did their current commander, Attar.

Handing the reins over to the hostler, Attar said, "I trust you know to keep your mouth shut?"

Eyes locked, the stout orang received the warning with firm comprehension, nodding tersely, wringing the reins in his hands before leading the horse down into the belly of the stable. With a

gesture of his hand, Attar urged Thade toward the officer's quadrant and dreaded how his friend would take what lay ahead.

The halls smelled of pungent oils and fresh paint. Any, and all things that depicted Semos and Thade's legacy had either been destroyed or done away with altogether - painted over. Removed from the walls. This perturbed Thade greatly but there was nothing he could do to change the situation. What had happened, happened, altering the culture forever.

His eyes scanned the quadrant from beneath a heavy brow, recollecting the tapestries, statues in the likeness of he and his father, murals of the hunt painted on the walls - larger than life. Even the blood-red paint.

All of it was gone. Covered with fresh coats of plaster.

"It was all destroyed." Attar yielded, ascertaining Thade's sullen vexation over this dramatic change.

"I should have expected it." he sighed. Defeated, he felt, once again.

That was not the reaction Attar expected. Something more on the line of a tantrum in full swing, out of control, and extremely dangerous - was.

The young corporal, Omri, stood at the intersection of the officer's quad, a ring of master keys in his hand - waiting. He examined each key as he waited for the two, contemplating Thade's seriousness outside of the army. It was none of his business, but still, he felt a strong compulsion to understand whatever it was that harried the ex-general.

Echoing voices made him look up from the cluster of keys as he naturally went to the general's, taking it between index finger and thumb. He escorted them, listening to the hushed conversation behind him, catching only the words which rose passionately. "I do not care" and "I do not plan to stay" floated to his sensitive ears more than once. If he ever got Thade alone, he would confide to him how much he understood.

Omri picked up his step arriving at the general's door several

seconds before them and slipped the key into the lock. "Your room has remained as you left it..." he reported, pushing the door open.

Both, Omri and Attar regarded the ex-general's response as he peered into the dark apartment as if discovering some ancient ruin - apprehensive, fearful to enter so as not to disturb the contents that once influenced the very essence of a king.

"If that will be all..." Omri's voice, though soft, startled Thade. He turned defensively, his jaw tight, eyes set and unblinking.

Realizing it was only Omri, Thade nodded stiffly then shifted his gaze back into the darkness.

Attar gestured for Omri to go. The corporal gave a single nod then slipped quietly away catching Thade's eye before disappearing around the bend.

Perceiving his friends apprehension, Attar ushered forth, the smells of parchment paper, leather and whatever else that had been locked up in there, wafted heavily into his nostrils dank and musty.

Although it had been closed up for several months the odor was not offensive, only reminiscent, recalling the last times they were in that dorm - hatching plans, reading maps, or just discussing life in general.

Locating the oil lamp sitting on Thade's desk among documents declaring Marshall Law, Attar turned as he struck a match. The wick crackled and snapped as it took and filled the room with soft, yellow light. Thade could then see that, indeed, the place was exactly as he had left it - a mess. The only thing not covered with either clothing or some, now, insignificant piece of documentation was the day-bed, which he rarely napped on, but had entertained a few tryst receptions with his "select" courtesans.

Shuffling in, it looked extremely inviting. Even in its un-warmed state. With a groan, Thade lowered himself onto the feather mattress, his pain evident, wracking his body mercilessly. Thoughts wandered back to Phallen.

What was she doing now?

His arm went to his eyes blocking out the light and the adamant

stare Attar had him under. It exasperated him immensely.

"What I am about to tell you cannot leave this room."

At last! Thade was about to allow him in on his little secret! Grabbing a chair, Attar waited, his face wearing a worried, seeking perception for this difficult situation Thade seemed to be troubling over. Divulging in him a confession which will certainly convict him among his peers as unsound.

"Whatever you tell me will never be repeated." Attar assured.

In a calm voice, so unlike his normal boisterous self, Thade commended his friend. "My confidence in you has always been justified by your accomplishments."

Flexing his knee, the general clenched his teeth in agony as shots of pain coursed up his leg.

"Forgive me, " he rasped, resting his leg against the wall. " I forget that I am not the young ape I once was."

Taking a deep breath, Thade knew he had no more to go on. He had come to the task of disclosing his secret. So, with a deep sigh, he began. Slowly, at first, recounting the nightmare they both had experienced, keeping it brief on that subject so as not to step on any toes. His story told of his liberation from the tomb, yet he could not explain how he had gotten to where he was - in the care of a woolander.

As his tale unfolded, he never revealed to Attar that his savior was a human leading the commander to believe Thade had encountered an emphatic hermit-ape. He stated, for the most part, that his memory rested upon the last few weeks of his recovery and according to his host, Thade had suffered from his injuries with fever-induced seizures caused by infection from a severe laceration to his left arm.

Sincere candor shadowed Thade's features announcing just how deeply this person had affected him. "I can not forget her, Attar," he confessed. "She has crept into my very soul."

He was almost sobbing. His voice, thick with remorse for having left her, wavered and he closed his eyes tightly against his weakness.

Attar hated seeing his friend this way - on the verge of tears. He could feel himself reacting with sympathy, stifling his own feelings quickly to permit the chimp to vent freely his own deepest desires.

"Perhaps you should let them know." He quietly suggested.

Thade lifted up on his elbow, ignoring the pain. "Do you think so?" He sounded almost hysterical, abandoning all attempts at controlling his raging emotions. He laughed. Too caught up, lest to cry like a baby. And as Attar observed his behavior he saw the grave, saddened expression on Thade's face; Oh my God, what have you done?!

"She is human!"

The gorilla gasped looking away then took a double-take.

"Surly you jest!" He snorted, his lips spreading with delayed reaction from the caper Thade had just laid on him.

But the gleam in those eyes.

They weren't lying.

Staggered by Thade's presumptuous revelation, Attar's grin fell. His jaw dropped in disbelief. "You are serious!" came a whisper of astonishment as the commander's eyes bulges in shock.

The silence which befell them was charged with a nervous energy that left Thade uncertain as to whether his confession had been such a good idea. He did not feel any better for it. In fact, he felt even worse now that the story had been told - hearing it ring in his own ears! He felt stupid.

No...Confession was not good for the soul.

Not his, anyway...

"Under the circumstances," Attar began. "and in your own best interest for what lies ahead of you, I strongly advise you to let this go."

The commander dropped his gaze, and in a repressed mumble added, "do not waste your time."

Waste his time?!

"She in no mere human!" Thade rebuked, his voice reaching a feverish pitch, confirming his resentment for the statement.

Then he blinked as if awakening. Realizing what he had done -

attacking his friend unjustifiably - Thade fought for control. "Forgive me. I do not mean to take this out on you. Believe me when I say I know what you are saying, but can you see what I am saying?"

An apology, in the past, was practically non-existent as Attar could only recall one other time.

He accepted it humbly.

"You do not know her." Thade said.

The hulking figure peered from beneath his brow at his insane comrade.

"Rest..." he prescribed, rising from his seat, his mighty hand resting gently on Thade's shoulder. "we will talk more tomorrow."

"I am in love with her..."

The gorilla jumped as if jolted by the door latch. "Tomorrow..." he recapped, then pulled the door open.

Stepping out into the deserted corridor, Attar closed the door quietly behind him making sure it locked, then leaned against the wall slapping a hand to his face. "This is a nightmare!" he thought, shoving off the wall and swaggering to his own room.

Closing his eyes, Thade entered - almost immediately - into deep slumber.

Indeed, tomorrow was another day.

Phallen fell back on the sofa.

Where to start over now? Now that he had gone.

She had no idea just how strongly she had affected him - leading her to believe it was all a misunderstanding...A really big mistake to have kissed her like that.

Obviously, his status reigned among the most elite, arriving to the conclusion that she would never see him again. That he did not need her services any longer.

And her own foolish thought, "maybe he will come back for me" , would soon fade.

"Oh the fairy tale would have been wonderful if it were one! They always had happy endings," she mused.

But highly unlikely in this case.

"I need to retreat for a while." she said aloud before sleep impeded.

He dreamed of her...

She slept dreamlessly...

The water reservoir, holding many thousands of gallons of rain, warmed as the suns traveled up through cloudless, blue skies. Thade awoke to the sounds of business-as-usual outside of his room. He knew he was to go before the Counsel to answer to his guilt... and also to protect his innocence. "Will I be able to re-establish myself?" He sat up, swung his legs to the floor and stretched, yawning widely. Resting against the wall, he could still smell the oils on his skin and it reminded him that it was not a dream. She did exist. Bringing his hands to his face, Thade wondered if he would ever chance upon her again. Did he dare? That embrace! He could still feel it, sweet, innocent on his lips. Hell!, he could still feel her in his arms! And when he closed his eyes, he saw her, the fragile human he had fallen head-over-heels for.

"Will I never forget you?!" A frustrated cry declared. Running his fingers through his hair, Thade bit his lip. He did not know her well enough to feel so strongly, let alone the fact she was human should have repelled him. Why, then did he carry such fervent feelings for her? In the back of his mind was the answer. All she wanted was to see him well, oblivious to the fact of what he was... He was wanted "Home".

Closing his eyes, he sighed heavily,
"Phallen..."

* * *

The Highlands would clear her mind. All she needed was time.

"I gazed upon you far longer than you have upon I, and

now, there is nothing." She closed the door, leaving it all behind, and walked away...

She is leaving...!!!

Thade awoke in a cold sweat.

"WAIT!"

Sitting there, half asleep, Thade shuddered. "I must find her."

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* * *

Omri found nothing.

In his efforts to locate Thade's "Nirvana", it was one big jungle... Except for one tree. Upon further inspection it revealed itself and the young corporal stared at it.

"Amazing!" He exclaimed, walking its circumference -- his fingers trailing along the rough exterior. "It's at least a thousand feet around!"

Finding the door was a bit of a trick considering it was cut right from the side. It remained steadfast when he pushed against it. Pressing his ear to it there was nothing. So he knocked. Not a sound. No one was there. Peering high into the thick branches a terrace was only visible if one really looked. He saw the floor and was stymied again by its sheer size.

"Absolutely spectacular! It has levels!"

Thade had met an unusual being this time. No wonder he was so heart-sick! Climbing back on his horse, Corporal Omri took out a pad and pencil and scribbled the coordinates back to the tree hastily.

"Just between you and me, General," and he tucked the map away; "I believe you have met your match."

'It's too bad she has flown.' It was also too bad that Commander Attar had sent him out to locate such a place, if it existed at all, and that he would have to report that it did. The good part was he did not have to say where.

A false map would send them in the

opposite direction...

* * *

"I found the tree-abode but it was deserted." Omri announced, handing the bogus map over to his Commander.

Studying the scribbling, Attar bit at the lining of his cheek. "Very well. At least we know it was no an hallucination."

"Should I bring her back if I locate her?"

"No..." The gorilla shot immediately before dropping a stack of papers at the corner of his desk. "Thade does not need her in his life. Not now or ever." Omri nodded lightly as his eyes wandered the room. 'Not much in here to inspire a warm heart, is there?' he thought, seeing how the decor pretty much consisted of a one-sided belief which now lay in ruin.

He stood at attention.

"That is all, Corporal Omri." The bass-voice releaved. "Your furlough..." "It was supposed to have started yesterday, sir." "Your pass..." And he handed it over.

Omri's mouth fell open: RETURN FOR DUTY IN 24 HOURS.

Great...!

* * *

48

Slipping down the hall, Omri made his way to Thade's quarters. His eyes shifted uncomfortably up and down before rapping on the door. There was no reply.

"Sir, I need to speak to you." He said, pressing his mouth into the door jamb. Still nothing. He pounded this time and the door flew open. The young chimp hastened in taking Thade by the arm as he went, closing the door quickly behind them. Wrenching free the General glared at him.

"What are you up to?" Thade demanded, eyeing him suspiciously. "The bastard's come to kill me!"

Omri took a breath, then said it; "She has left, sir."

Their eyes narrowed on one another and the Corporal shifted

nervously on his feet, prepared to dive out of harm's way if he had to.

"What are you talking about?" Came

low and secretive.

"C'mon, I know what's going

on." Omri felt a bit relieved when he saw a slight spark in Thade's

eye. "I searched; located the tree, but..."

The

elder chimp scowled deeply -- the creases Phallen had erased

returning -- before he turned and hid his face. Intensifying by the

second, his rage reddened his cheeks as he released a deep

resentful growl.

"No one was there?"

"No, sir."

Thade hung

his head nodding, walking further into the room as his hands

clenched into fists.

"Is she really human?"

Leering back over his shoulder, Thade

hissed, "It does not matter."

"Well, obviously it does! If

it didn't you wouldn't be tied up in knots right now." Omri crossed

his arms, a smug look settling on his muzzle. "Do you think it wise to

pursue..."

Thade came around in a split second and slammed Omri up against the door. "I AM SICK AND TIRED OF PEOPLE TELLING ME WHAT I SHOULD OR SHOULD NOT BE DOING!"

All fangs and nails, Thade glared up at the lanky chimp contemptuously.

"Shit! Just announce it to

everyone I'm here!"

"What do you

mean by that?!"

"If

Commander Attar knew where I was right now I'd be courtmartialed by sun set, that's what I mean!"

"He did not send you here?"

"No, sir, he did not."

Thade bit his lip...walked away.

Corporal Omri stretched his neck, turned his head to-and-fro before an audible popping sound occurred followed by a deep sigh of relief. Straightening his fatigues, he came off the door and stood at ease in the entry. From that stand-point, to remain silent seemed the best

cure for a volatile disposition such as Thades'.

His angel, the beautiful human had moved on leaving it all behind her. 'No...' Thade shook his head. 'You will not be mine...' Her memory was all he had for solace. And as he shook with anger thunder pealed. Omri

stepped quietly into the main room. He knew how love ripped a heart apart. It was happening in front of him.. "You love her, don't you?" Thade grinned. "Does it

show?" "Slightly." Omri jibed. Their eyes met, only this time amicably - the young chimp looking back at him with cool attribution. It appeared he understood.

"I will do what I can." He said. "You would do that for me? Risk your future for me?" Omri smiled easily; "Yes. She has touched you. I know you care. And even though you damned near put me through the door before opening it, I know you have changed."

Thade nodded admittedly. "Just find her. Bring her back to me." "What if she...doesn't want to?"

He could hear the whimper under Thade's deep sigh before he collected himself; shoulders back, chest out, head high... "Let's not go there." He replied softly.

Pointing a finger at him, Omri winked. "Right... Stay positive."

Thade chuckled sadly. "Something like that."

49

Cracking the door, Thade peered up and down the hall before gesturing to Omri that the coast was clear. The wily simian stole down the naked corridor then disappeared around the bend.

"I am so...!" Thade could not even finish saying it to himself. His conscience was not afraid to say it; 'So timorous, Stupid! You're a coward! A submissive ass-kisser!'

'Alright already! I'm not that far gone! Maybe I'm

waiting...'
Waiting... Their last goodbye...it
wrenched at his heart. The last time he gazed upon her beautiful
face, deeply into her eyes as they delved into his very soul. It had
shaken him. Sent him running scared only to eventually snare him,
paralyzing him emotionally in the end. "you love her, don't
you...?" Omri's words echoed. He had seen Thade; how he carried
himself, the way his shoulders slumped as if beaten down...
Alone. Oh, she was more than a possession for the former General.
She was a life-line. To be without her, Thade would soon be lost...

* * *

To stay. To leave. To be one with her again was all he yearned
for. "Will I never see you again?" He sought. "You would leave me
here? Leave your home for the sake of my future?" He held his
head. "This is not where I want to be if she can- not be here with
me." Where were the
answers? Why did he feel this way toward her while his simian
females could not even evoke a stroke from his hand? Passion... Just
to hear her voice. Take her up in his arms again...

It sent a shiver down his spine and he closed
his eyes envisioning her... He felt it all...

The letter he penned -- entrusting it to Corporal Omri
-- read nothing like his true feelings. It was short and sweet and to
the point:

My Dearest Phallen,

I have arrived in Derkein to discover everything which
you had disclosed. It is in my most heartfelt hopes that this reaches
your hands, for I have not been at peace since our parting therefor
bringing me to the conclusion that you, above anything and
everything, are most important in my life. I have given instructions
to this Corporal to bring you back with him. Though it has been
many weeks since we parted you have haunted my thoughts.

Please, do not hesitate.

I await, though impatiently,
for your arrival...

Yours,

Thadeus Paige,
General of the Derkein Army

* * *
* * *

50

And he waited, hoping with each passing day there would be some clue as to where she was. The good Corporal searched, but he could not find Thade's elusive butterfly. And every evening, anticipating finality, Thade was left with only an oath of unceasing search. Receiving that with an unsettling confirmation, the ex-General slinked back into his room growing ever more withdrawn as each day ended like the last.

"Keep looking." Was all he said before closing the door -- allowing no one to enter.

She was all he needed.

The curtains were drawn. The only light came from a lone lamp, its wick set so low it threatened to flicker out. There were no shadows. Everything was still. Sounds from outside filtered through the open sash as he sat in the middle of his room, a glass of brandy in his hand -- holding onto her; the urge to break free growing stronger, lest to lose her even from his memory.

A poet at heart, he penned quite a bit in his seclusion. None of it really making sense when he read it, still, he placed it in a large book that rested at the top corner of his desk.

Sprawled across the top, pen in hand, Thade scribbled his thoughts before glancing around at all of the scattered papers from long ago. He snarled at them darkly, then, with one sweep of his arm, sent it all sailing, a frustrated yell erupting in tow as he tore at the paper madly throwing it in a basket next to the desk. With not a care for his life or anyone else's at that point, he smashed the oil lamp into the papers sending up a huge fire-ball. The flames licked dangerously at the textiles draping the ceiling, threatening a rapid spread, perhaps throughout the whole quadrant. He stepped back and watched, mesmerized by its sheer

hunger to consume everything, a wicked smile pursed on his lips when, from nowhere, he was pulled back, stumbling and falling hard against an old trunk in the far corner of the room. Rubbing his sore head and focusing on the uproar, the flames were quickly extinguished producing a great billow of smoke that now choked the air from his lungs. Literally pulled from the room by his collar, Thade was safely dumped in the hall dazed and drunk. Opening his burning eyes several simian faces leered down, some with concern while others in contempt. "What in the hell were you thinking?!" Omri twirled from the door, smoke rising from his body. "Are you TRYING to kill yourself?" Still stunned and lying close to the wall, Thade gave a dry cough before shaking his head no.

Jutting his hand out, Corporal Omri said, "If you insist on hurting yourself I will have no choice than to have you put under arrest." Thade broke into laughter at the absurdity, dismissing the helping hand and standing on his own. "Oh you are a funny one aren't you, Corporal?" Thade mused.

No one else was laughing though. He realized they meant business and he had no rank to pull. He dipped his head erasing the last of the giggles before coming back, thinking, 'you little shit, you! If you didn't remind me so much of myself at your age I'd tear you a new asshole!' "You're lucky I came instead of Commander Attar. I volunteered to come and take you out of here for a while. What if HE would have?"

Thade felt a twinge of panic. He was losing it and felt helpless to prevent it. Shaking the fogginess from his brain, he grabbed onto reality with both hands, collecting himself. "I appreciate your concern. I must have blacked out. I don't remember a thing."

Omri gave a slight signal with his hand and the troops dispersed in a low voiced huddle.

51

The young chimp stole looks up and down

the corridor before pulling Thade in. "Sir...! You need to get a GRIP! They already think you've lost your mind and now you give them proof! How are you to ever regain your status with a record like that?"

"You have no idea what I am dealing with." Thade confided. "I believe I HAVE lost my mind."

"It is time to let her go. She is so long gone..."

"NO!" Thade cut. "I will not. She holds my heart, Corporal. She gives me strength."

"What did she ever say to make you think she cared? "

"She said I was beautiful." And he smiled.

Omri released a sigh as he nodded. "So is that all it takes to calm "the savage beast"?"

Grinning objectively, Thade shook his head with a chuckle. "Beauty lies in the eyes if the beholder."

Best to keep his mouth shut, Omri hum-hawed around the retort half-shrugging as he went toward the General's door. "Well all I can say is I only found her tree-abode..."

Thade reached out for the wall, stunned. "She was not there?"

Omri looked at him. The General was pale and apparently on the verge of collapse. "I didn't say that."

"What are you saying, then?"

Omri fought for restitution before looking back at Thade. "Yes, that IS what I'm saying, General. She was nowhere. There was nothing there!"

Thade spun away and ran for the exit not caring anymore what anyone thought of or did to him.

* * *

There, in the stable, Thade's steed waited. Recognizing her owner even though it had been many months since he had ridden her, the mare began kicking up straw, bumping up against the stall, and whinnying; letting it be known how she had missed him. Grabbing the bridle from its hook as he went, Thade came to the

animal's stall speaking softly as he ran his thick fingers through her mane. "We meet again." His voice whispered soft and low. Entering the stable, he threw a blanket across her back smoothing it before saddling her, all the while anticipating reunification. If he did not tell Phallen now, he felt he would lose her forever. Placing his toe in the stirrup, Thade hoisted himself upon the mare's back nudging her forward out of the stall to allow her full lead down the straw-laden alley at a steady gait, grazing a startled guard when they broke into the court-yard. Patrolling the compound, Attar heard the startled yowl and spun on his heel narrowing his gaze on the stable house seeing the dark figure as it charged forth. Without his blazing armor of superiority, Thade looked like "the neighbor". "STOP...!"

"WAIT...!" They came simultaneously. From separate corners, Corporal Omri was soon rushing along with Commander Attar, each in an individual pursuit for totally different reasons.

52

"STOP...!" Commander Attar shouted, rushing the horse, sending it rearing in alarm.

Thade held fast riding out the sudden burst, bringing the animal swiftly under control. Realizing who it was, Attar grabbed the horse's bridle.

"You cannot leave the compound. I have not released to the Council your return."

The chimp leaned from the saddle, his face a hideous mask of emotion. "I must go." rattled from his throat. With those words Thade heeled his horse sharply sending her bolting for the compound gates. Upon seeing horse and rider rushing in their direction, the sentries scrambled for the heavy wooden doors, throwing their backs into getting them open, doing so just in time as he flew past slipping narrowly through before the sentries had them full opened. Breaking out into the city, at first glance, he was not recognized. The physical influence he once possessed was all but tapped out -- having been so close to death. It had taken its toll

leaving him thin and gaunt. Not until someone realized just who he was, Thade could have made it through the city and out the other side without a hitch, but he had been spotted.

They eyed him thoughtfully, watching him as he passed before shouting; "The General has RETURNED!"

All movement in the area froze. Heads turned, gawked, squinted in the sun to see him. It only took one yowl of approval to start an expanding display of public reception. Their fearless General had returned! Clapping and calls of welcome were relayed along with hoots and whistles. A rush of emotion flooded over Thade as he eyed the crowd, his expression changing from confusion to elation when he realized that he was still revered as a great leader. No one had forgotten nor forsook him.

"Welcome back!" Their voices sang as they came from their shops and homes, extending their hands to his, stroking the horse he sat upon. Thade grinned sardonically, seeing that he still held them in his power. With this knowledge, he smiled; it would not be long before Phallen was there with him.

Approaching hoof beats awoke him from his deliriously satisfying day-dream. Peering over his shoulder he saw Attar and about twenty of his soldiers riding hard to rescue Thade from the angry mob. He smiled slyly back at them when he felt a hand rest on his thigh. Reaching down, Thade turned slowly to them. A deep purr rose from his chest as he took their hand gently in his.

"Josee..." He uttered softly.

His personal courtesan; looking lovely in green brocade, her head covered with beaded braid -- stood next to him.

"Welcome back." Her voice was low and sultry as her ringed fingers ran up his thigh.

Sensations rippled down Thade's spine at her touch. Tipping his head, he smiled capriciously, knowing she would always be there.

He pulled away, feeling himself beginning to respond. It would have been easy to pull her up and race off to some secluded place as he had done in the past. Things were different now.

"No, Josee." He rejected gently.

There was a new consciousness about him now. To do anything that would give Phallen the benefit of a doubt of his true intentions was out of the question. Thade shook his head sadly to Josee, letting her know her services were no longer needed.

"You know where to find me." And she slipped from his fingers.

'I am never where I want to be!' He thought, gingerly guiding the mare through the crowd and away from the soldiers making their way through the crowd, all the while nodding with appreciation and wearing a wan smile.

He had lost interest in the whole fanfare. It was keeping him from his "pet". Serpentine through the mass, Thade found an opening and dashed for the gates of the city, yearning to return to Phallen; to feel safe again. To reveal the truth - his love for her...

There was no time to open the gates as he raced, Godspeed, into them, the mare seeming to fly as she sailed over the top...

* * *

In the forest horse and rider had become one, flying the path as a bee to the hive...

* * *

The news spread like wildfire: Genral Thade had returned from the grave. The reports of his sightings rang through the Senate House sending the Council into a frenzy -- rushing to eachother's homes; first, one then the next until they had congregated after a half-dozen or so, all of them in a tizzy as they bustled to the State House to incorporate an emergency hearing.

Receiving the summons was no surprise to Attar. What-with that big exhibition Thade had presented there was no wonder this was to come. Taking

the summons from the purser Attar smirked. "The little bastard."

Now he had to think. Disclosing how long Thade had been back, well that could be condensed. Describing a change in attitude? Piece of cake. Explaining how he had run off in pursuit of a human? Attar shook his head. He had a headache. Better to keep his mouth shut and see if that one surfaced. He was hoping, maybe, it would not...

* * *

The court-room was filling fast as the citizens crammed the public seating section, intrigued by the sudden appearance of their own, once revered, leader. The doors swung open again and again and the hall filled to standing-room-only capacity. Flanked by their own soldiers, Commander Attar and Corporal Omri stood before the bench when the announcement for all to rise rang from the bailiff. It was as if on cue the two officers tugged at their tightening collars, watching as the Council filed into the court-room, their black robes neatly pressed and pristine flowed about sandaled feet until lifted briefly to ascend to the dais. Shuffling past the chairs of their peers each superior settled into their own, glancing furtively out on the two nervous soldiers.

54

With the fall of the gavel, Senator Lantres announced, " This hearing is now in session."

And as Council took their seats - so did the citizens. Perching a tiny pair of spectacles atop his simian nose, Langtree thumbed through the papers lying before him, stroking his beard incessantly as he came across some of the more interesting aspects listed therein.

"It has been brought our attention that Thade has returned," Senator Nado began, his great jowls jiggling with every word. "But it seems we have been the last to know. Can you explain how this may have slipped past you, Commander Attar?"

Council heads swung in unison to the commander and corporal, scrutinizing them presumptuously while the two fought to remain cool and

collected.

"Commander Attar...?" Sandar summoned.

The gorilla snapped to attention, trembling in his guts; praying the question about to be posed did not involve that human. "It happened so suddenly. He was weak. He needed rest."

"And so to inform us slipped your mind?"

"Has HE lost his mind?" Nado pressed.

Lantres peered over the top of his glasses at the orangutan. "Have you? What sort of question is that?!"

Puffing his chest out, Nado defended himself; "The kind that needs answered!"

"Indeed, you have no idea what ..."

Sandar's face turned a deep scarlet as he intercepted: "This is bullshit! We are not here to debate amongst ourselves! Save it for the library, gentleapes!" His angry gaze jutted out to the "audience".

Humbly, Nado added softly, "We cannot have him going off half-cocked. It could endanger the city and all who live here." Langtree sighed deeply, stifling his inundation. With a much gentler approach, he petitioned; "Is it true Thade has returned?"

Young Omri peered from under his thick brow.

"Yessir."

"And will you describe his disposition? That is, in regard to how he WAS?" One could almost hear a pin drop. Omri nodded, then, a curt smile skidded across his lips. "He is quiet within, sir."

Surreptitiously, Corporal Omri made eye contact with his Commander: 'Shut up, now! Shut up. Shut up!' Attar closed his eyes from the stare, praying for a miracle.

"Can you be a bit more specific?" Nado pried, tipping his head inquisitively. Attar awoke from his fantasy. "He has found peace."

Nado leaned forward, elbows resting atop the mahogany desk. In his droll, lethargic way, Nado charged; "It is rumored that Thade was released and treated by a "Human." Accentuating on the last

word with an air of unpleasant disclosure.

The courtroom was abuzz;
'The General...? Most prestigious in upholding a pure culture...
fraternizing with the very species he loathed?!
PREPOSTEROUS...'

Senator Sandar's face grew harried before diving into his hands in despair, massaging his temples; 'Could this get any worse?' rambled in his mind as he shook his sore head. His daughter, Ari, had been betrothed to this "one"! Choking back the tears, Sandar knew: The engagement had ended long ago. Still, maybe their differences could be worked out...

Attar and Omri looked to one another. It was time to speak out. Carefully selecting his words, Attar took the lead. "Indeed, he was freed by a human. His disposition, upon returning, has revealed a change. So, I cannot say it did not evolve from inter-species communication." Sandar

leaned forward, clearly distressed by the news. "Where is Thade NOW?" He demanded.

(55 thru 58)

"I do not know, sir."

Just then, the doors swung open. All heads turned to see Thade as he entered. He paid no attention to the ogling crowd as their eyes followed him down the aisle. Upon reaching the bench Thade bowed tersely in respect. It was quite obvious to the Council that he had, indeed, changed! He did not concern himself with the conflict about to arise, even though it was that which was about to convict him...

He held himself proudly. "Forgive my lateness." He implored humbly.

58

Senator Sandar shook his head. This was a sad day to him. His brow wrinkled in despair as he looked, sympathetically, for some support from his colleagues, but they all carried their own separate crosses. "What are we to do with you, Thade?" Sandar asked.

The ex-General held his own

when Omri went to speak for him; signaling with his hand for silence. "I am fine." He assured.

With a hint of a smile, Thade took a stand, the boldness still gleaming in his eyes as they locked on the Council. Bring it on, boys, he dared, unruffled by the damning outcome. There was nothing else they could bring that he had not already seen, done, or been through.

"You already killed me," Thade retorted, scratching at his chin in mock-thought. "Perhaps you could admit your errors."

"Our WHAT?" Boomed.

The whole room buzzed with excitement. There was going to be a fight. The gavel banged for order and the guards stepped in one pace to correct any discrepancies. Stealthily, Thade observed his surroundings. This could get ugly. I could make it so... "To send this into total bedlam will only take a few minutes, Sirs. Tell me, where shall I begin? With Senator Nado? We all know how he left his wife for the young, beautiful..."

"STOP RIGHT THERE!" Sandar exclaimed coming up out of his chair. Thade waved for him to sit. "Now now, let's not get our robes wrinkled, FINE gentleapes. We ALL have faults." The look on their faces was worth a thousand words and Thade revelled in it. He knew he was in contempt, but what-the-hell, what did he have to lose that he had not already?

"I will be the first to admit it!" He proclaimed, baring his soul for all to see. "Is it not true how we had all fallen to a false God? HE DOES NOT EXIST!" "You are in contempt!"

"Good. At least now you admit it" His eyes scanned the the court room passively. All which had pertained to his legacy had been stripped away from there, too, leaving bare walls and half-finished murals of nature; depicting peaceful forestry and calm blue lakes...

Blue lakes...

He recalled the paintings on the walls in Phallen's tree-abode...

With a low, saddened tone, the chimp admitted, "I am a vulgar ape, but my passion for truth is not. And in my absence, I must admit I had no intention of returning until..."

All noises ceased as they hung on his last word. Langtree smiled warmly at Thade, leaning forward in a dreamy way, totally absorbed by the chimp's passion. "Until what?"

The gentle query floated across the room.

Thade felt the heat in his cheeks when their eyes met. "Until she told me to." "Who is SHE? That HUMAN?" Nado charged bitterly. "A savage of the forbidden zone? Their skin not worth their weight in GOLD?! This bad-marsh (medieval: tyrant, despot) has rotted you."

A disturbing shiver ran down Thade's spine. His face grew dark as he took one pensive steps toward the bench. "I MUST disagree." He said all-too-calmly. The whole thing was beginning to take its toll on him. He was feeling bad and it was starting to show.

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"She has stirred in me an emotion I have not felt for so long."

"You speak as if you are in love with her." Nado jabbed. Thade heard himself say: "I am..." and he smiled intrepidly. Try me now...

The silence was like the approach of a storm -- all still and silent, a whistle of wind followed by distant thunder, black clouds in the distance, rolling ever closer in its break...

'He's in love with a human...?!'

Thade glanced, nonchalantly, over his shoulder at the buzz. He did not give a shit and it showed on his face when he turned back. "So, now what...?" He challenged, crossing his arms.. "Are you going to arrest me? Are you going to court-martial me? KILL ME?"

Staring in disbelief, Sandar uttered, "oh, Thade, what have you done?" He had known the General for

years. "You are walking such a thin line. Surly, you have taken into consideration, your future?" Nado injected sharply, noticing how upset Sandar had become.

60

Thade let go with a smirk. "FUTURE?" He cried. "I HAD no FUTURE!" He turned resentfully. "I was left to die." Stabbing a sharp digit over his shoulder beyond the public seating and into the abyss, he finished sharply, "THAT was my future."

All, except Langtree, hid their eyes. The sagacious Senator heard the sincerity in his "Godson's" voice. He rested his chin in his hands, focusing on his peers with unforgivable shrewdness.

"You have taken away everything." Thade sighed heavily. "Perhaps you wanted me dead... Maybe to have left me that way would have been better." From the youngest on the bench, Senator Yahn spoke; "Why?" "Oh perhaps to carry on in one's blind way to a desolate future..." Thade surmised with cynical reprise.

He surveyed his company coolly, taking over the rebelling spirit within; "She sent me back. She knew what was to come and now I defend it! Damn her and you damn me!"

"You were damned from the day you were born." Nado condemned. Sandar reached out and clutched the orang's arm, casting a warning glance as he shook his head. "Oh, don't shush me. You know this is bullshit." Nado pulled away casting a scowl on his neighbor. He leaned forward boldly blurting, "In time you will get over this infatuation."

Thade froze.

Infatuation?

His expression went from confusion to complete understanding. "You don't know anything." He calmly replied. Nado scoffed.

"Maybe it's you who doesn't."

Sandar fumbled for words when he saw Thade slowly begin to walk

away. "You know this is impossible. It is preposterous for you to even entertain such an idea."

"I know, but I can't help it." He threw his arms up surrendering; not to them, but to the true feelings he held for Phallen. "I don't need this anymore." Turning, Thade saw the emphatic expressions both Attar and Omri wore. He smiled wanly placing his hands on their shoulders as he passed between them. "I'm sorry..." he mouthed.

"Have you found this unusual being?" Langtree's voice echoed passed him and Thade spun. "No."

"Well when you do, please, introduce us." Langtree requested.

"I-I will."

Thade was out the door...

* * *

61

He was psyched and ready to roll. Lantres had opened a door for him with that comment and he was going to step through in all of his blazing glory. It scared the others, though. They knew this -- Phallen had gotten under his skin with trickery; they were sure, but to convince HIM that she had was not going to be easy. She was a part of him now... "I will find you, my beloved. And we will be together."

II

Glaring over at Lantres, Nado declared, "You have lost your mind." The Senator grinned at the remark as he watched his Godson disappear through the doors. "No," he said lightly before turning to his friend, "just delighted that he has found someone worth caring about."

* * *

Slipping his foot into the stirrup, he heard the distant rumble of thunder. It fed his desire to break free from the city and from "their" condemnation. Only Lantres rang through and Thade knew that at that very moment he was being chastised for being honest in his petition for a meeting. The ex-General could not tell himself that it was unfair. In his field there were no second chances for

redemption... except in his case. He was the only one strong enough to hold the enemy at bay. His strength alone was one to be reckoned with. He just happened to trust the wrong constituents at the wrong time, that was all... Was it...? 'They turned their backs on you and you know it!' Thade tasted the bitterness as it rose up into his mouth. It was more resentment than desire that pushed him to the outside. There was only one for him and she was nowhere to be found. Falling into his hands, Thade screeched. He wanted out and now! The Senator's last words echoed in his head: "When you find her, please, introduce us"... Lantres was family -- knowing Thade's father, and cared as much as the chimp's own father had. The sagacious Councilor had nothing to do with what had transpired in the past. In fact, he had been forwarned by Thade's father of his sons fall; to protect him from its repercussions; "Weave him a net, for he WILL fall. Please be there for him. PLEASE, take care of my only son..." "I am so tired." Thade said. From his side, he heard, "You must rest..." In a blur, he was escorted back to the compound...

As the last of the citizens filed out, the doors were locked behind them. Mingling in the crowd were the many airs declared; opinions of pro and con; If she would have never interfered, Thade would have come home - via - the rescue team; while the right-wingers stated that if it had not been for her, the General would have succumbed to thirst and hunger along with the injuries sustained. There was no closure no matter what they said or argued over. What was done, was done. Period. Oh how Sandar longed for Thade and Ari to be in love as they once were. But there was nothing there. He did not love her nor did she, he. Thade was in love with Phallen; a "wood-Sprite", an "elf", and, since she seemingly ceased to exist: a "Specter"! To have vanished so quickly, there was no other explanation. He needed to forget her -- to return to his awaiting empire...

Convincing him that it was in his best interest was not going to be easy... He loved her...

III

...Racing through the forest, anticipating how he was going to approach her, Thade knew he was going against everything he had learned. Still, the very effigy he desired -- which he normally hunted -- hid among the tall timbers. Eerie stillness greeted him when he alit from the mare's back at the very tree he was resurrected from. No one answered. The door remained steadfast. Only the wind as it whistled knew he was there. He was too late. She was gone. He began to hyperventilate; the sense of loss hitting full force, creating a fury of sheer emotional turmoil.

"N-n-o-o!!!" His fist hit the door in one massive blow springing it open to rattle on its hinges, crashing against the wall, reverberating through the rooms an empty response. Raising his muzzle into the air, a fading scent descended. "It IS real!" He declared stepping in.

It was all as he had remembered. One thing was missing: "Phallen?" He bared a vicious snarl as a snort of disgust released. It was his own fault; his own pontificating belief she would be there! Before he could think, his fist thrust through the door, splintering it in his rage. "Oh shit..." cursed under his breath when he realized what he had done.

He could not hide the pain any longer. He had never encountered anyone as unselfish as she; to give to him -- life. Having hidden his feelings for her only to find it to be too late to convey them killed him. 'I am so stupid!'

she just "GO"?

How could
"Phallen..."

He moaned, losing himself in the past.

Was this really happening? How could he have been so taken by her? As if scanning a book for reference Thade's eyes darted to the ground.

"What has she done to me!" His pondering, evoking the memory, left him hollow...void...A cut so deep in his soul only she could heal it...

"I thought you set me free..." Softly spoke.

To fall with reckless abandon... to lose himself in his wildest dreams... his passion... into her arms... safe again... She

walked in his dreams, haunted him in his wake, her voice whispering in his ear...Thade clutched his head, begged for closure."Let it be so...!" "She promised to let go! She said I was alright and I was beautiful! She never said I would love her!" His memory badgered. Searching for solace, his tear strained eyes fell upon a footstep in the soft ground. In one wide stride he crouched over it running a long digit over it before gathering the soil in his hand. Smelling it, he let it sift through his fingers as he stared out in the direction they took... "I know now..."

... Sitting up from a dead sleep, he looked around, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. Staring into the shadows a feeling of isolation crept over him sending a shiver down his spine. His quest was turning into a nightmare -- haunting his thoughts. It was a short click to madness. He already tried to burn it out. What next, CUT it out? 'There's an option for ya. That would solve everything. At least for you, you selfish bastard.' His conscience had a way of working on him though he never showed it. He grew deaf to its wisdom after a time -- creating the "General" everyone feared yet admired.

He had power...

Had... It had a magic to it when he stopped and thought about it. 'You're listening now, aren't you? You were the Alpha and the Omega once.' His conscience chided. There was nothing left. Everything he had strived for and succeeded in had been overturned. Even Corporal Omri held more jurisdiction. Burying his face in his hands, Thade knew it had all been lost forever...

65-66

III

Burning the "Midnight Oil", the Council huddled in the library - sharing a drink, along with their views on the episode that had unfolded hours ago. Leather-backed law books laid open -- several volumes thick -- each one turned to a section delaring the ban of inter-species relations -- dating back even before Thade's

father.

The ink, so faded, took a magnifying glass just to read, their last search lay atop the volumes, for they had gone over the sections again and again in a fever to find closure for their General. They all ended with the same sad conclusion: Thade would have to give up one or the other...Period. 67

The most recent encryptions penned in the books were by Thade's father, Kalib (Kah-leeb)-- scribbled within as if in haste or anger. He had his moments now and then and by the way the quill seemed to have dug into the parchment, it was turmoil. They had faded considerably in the past forty-some years... Raising his glass to pug nostrils, Nado sniffed the brandy's woody aroma..."It is not wise to encourage him." He

addressed.

With his own glass in hand, Lantres waved him off, rebutting, "Thade is not unlike his father was at his age. And you must take into consideration that he IS growing older -- no longer an apprentice, but a full fledged leader." The Councilor leaned for his pipe and tobacco. "And..." He continued, cutting Nado off rudely and not giving a damn, "I do believe he wants to settle down now. He definately had time to think things through and he's a better ape for it. Sometimes one must fall and fall HARD to see their misdeeds."

Sandar threw his cards on the table. "But Lantres...Why a human? Has he taken leave of his senses?"

Lantres shook his head and smiled while studiously preparing his pipe. "To answer your last question first, he has not lost his mind as some insist on thinking," Looking up momentarily to see the wrinkled orang's beady eyes boring into him. "As for your first question -- ask him." Striking a match, he puffed persistantly until the smoke burlled into his mouth. "I don't have a problem with this." He noted after blowing the smoke out gently. "As for the rest of you, well, if you really want him here, you should start biting your tongues or vote to exile him."

Sandar peered worriedly to Nado, who, in turn raised his brow. They were in a quandry as to risk allowing Thade to have his way or to

begin the due process of exiling him from the city and all who inhabit its limits. Nado was feeling the brandy. His lips became looser by the minute: "I vote we recruit some bounty hunters to track this THING down and cut her heart out."

"Oh you are disgusting!" Lantres charged. "How did you end up on this panel -- the flip of a coin, or a bribe?!"

Sandar's mouth fell open, his face turning ghastly white. "SENATOR!" He admonished.

Lantres clamped his pipe firmly in his teeth. If he had bitten any harder on the stem it probably would have snapped in two as he leered across the table. Someone had to bring the peace back and the most unlikely candidate spoke humbly.

"Perhaps I am being hasty in my decisions." Nado apologized.

Lantres tipped his head in acceptance, although he was still upset. "Perhaps then you could give us some insight." "Imprison him." Nado croaked. "Put him back where he was." That was it for Lantres. His fists hit the table shaking everything upon it and he was on his feet in a flash ready to tear the orangutan a new asshole.

"NOW NOW! Let's not get out of hand. We need to keep our mouths shut: Senator Nado!" Sandar mediated, rising up out of his own seat to keep the two separated.

Nado's feather's had been ruffled by his own obtrusiveness as he went to stand. "Should we divulge what we know of Kalib?"

Lantres' pointed his pipe at him. "YOU DO and it's your ass!" "This is getting us nowhere. Please just sit down and let's be civil." Sandar begged them. "I am trying to remain calm and if you two do not stop I will use my seniority to have you both jailed." They both realized how ridiculously out of hand it had gotten. It had been a long and trying day for everyone and to have been behaving as they

had only seemed to make matters worse. Locking of horns was not going to solve the dilemma -- unification would, though -- if they could get past their differences.

Lantress extended his hand. "I'm sorry, Senator." Nado chuckled to himself before taking the hand. There were words flung in anger but nothing could really break a brotherhood built in trust.

"No, Sir, I apologize. I know how you love Thade and to say the things I had was improper. Not only did I disrespect you, I disrespected everyone including myself and my own belief for freedom and liberty."

A warm embrace and a couple of claps on one another's back resolved the whole misunderstanding. Unfortunately the task at hand still awaited resolution. "We know Thade, right?" Lantres addressed, waving his pipe in inclusionary rite. "There is a change in him -- a conclusion. And if it is due to this "interest", I have no qualms about it."

Sandar took a drink of his brandy, its warmth spreading through his cold bones, numbing the pains associated with growing old.

"But she is nowhere to be found. In a way that's a good thing. The only problem with it is to convince Thade that it is. Not to open wounds, but should we talk to him about Kalib?" Nado stepped pensively over egg shells with his last query knowing how sensitive Lantres feelings were.

"I know him. Let me talk to him alone." Lantres addressed.

Swirling the brandy around in his glass, Nado stared into it, hypnotized. "How do you think he will take it?"

Lantres stared at the floor shaking his head.

"I don't know..." He looked up gravely, at his peers: "I really don't."

IV

..."I will take you back with me..."

She awoke with a start, sitting up from her slumber on the beach - his pensive words preying upon her dream-state - to break into the conscious realm as she gathered her senses.

He was

haunting her.

There was an atunement piercing through the distance. His innermost sentiment crept over her, came to "claim" her as his very own.

"He won't cross the water." Phallen assumed. "He can't." She knew chimpanzees could not swim, therefore the spanse was stretched much further between them. Why he insisted on trying to find her stymied her. There was not a chance in hell they would be accepted anywhere. Besides, he barely knew her. Or did he? Hearing the distant rumble of thunder was nothing new, but this time it frightened her. Something had trailed her -- either by thought or physical form. Standing motionless, she listened.

Silence. Not even the wind blew.

"This is going to be a bad one." Running across the beach into the wood, Phallen raced the storm.

The cabin loomed -- standing alone and peaceful among the conifers -- untouched and over-grown. The door had swelled from humidity and squeeled loudly in protest when she pushed it open.

"I'm home!" She called knowing there was no one to answer. A sad sort of laugh emanated from seeing the place so dark and lifeless. The dust had settled on every flat surface, kicked up, now as she made her way across the living room. Unlatching the sash, Phallen pushed the shutters wide open allowing the rush of the wind to enter -- 'I remember doing this to cool your fever.'

Allowing the breeze to embrace her, she fell into its caress -- lost in a kiss... "I will never forget you," whispered in her ear. Tears burned in her eyes from having to let him go. She had never felt such passion from anyone by simply kissing them. Electric passed through them when they had, bringing to life a "want". 'No... This is for the better. As long as we never meet again it will cease and we will go on in our own lives.' Common sense over-ruled...

Engrossing herself for the task ahead, Phallen took in her surroundings. 'Has it been this long since my last visit?' By the looks and smell of it, her question had

been answered. In a free-standing wardrobe she found dry clothing, protected from chewing intruders by a cedar lining. A loose tunic and a full length "patches" maxi skirt was good enough for the task at hand. cinching the shirt at her waist with a sash, Phallen went to work to make the cabin her new home. Covers protecting the furniture were tossed by the door revealing intricately carved wooden tables depicting cherubs suckling rich grapes while the chairs recorded a history of two growing children -- their innocent faces shining through a rich layer of time and tung oil. Upholstered furniture, done in soft green brocato, accented the historic accessories naturally. Firewood still sat next to the hearth waiting to be kindled on a chilly night. Her feather bed, covered by a heavy canvas tarp, lay in wait. Pulling the heavy cloth off, gathering the thick cloth in a ball, she so wanted to just fall into it even though it needed fluffed and turned. Simply to lie on it and pretend she was a little girl again...

Flipping the mattress was easy. Not to collapse onto it was not. Instead, a trip to the cupboards revealed that her tea, along with specially prepared botanicals, were as dry as the days were

long. Comfortable enough that things were right, she returned to her bed and did fall into it, sinking into its softness like a lover's arms.

Exhausted from her swim, she fell asleep to the sound of the approaching storm, dreaming, again, of him coming for her, taking her away to a dark, nightmarish place as he breathed heavily on her lips. "I have hunted you down and now I will decide what becomes of you..."

* * *

"What could convince him to abandon his ideas?" Nado leaned up in his chair grasping the decanter in long, lax fingers.

The others shrugged, looked uncertainly at one another, seeking but not finding a solution.

* * *

"He'll screw it up." Omri surmised.

Attar slammed his beer. "Shut up and give him a chance."

"He's a gonnar." Omri predicted before taking a drink.

"You're out of your mind. Go back to the tree you fell out of."

The commander swaggered from the bar leaving the corporal by himself, resigning from the fact that if Thade did not come out or let him in he would pull the chimp out and drag him - kicking and screaming - to the cantina.

Anything to get him out of that hole he had dug and burrowed into...

Attar's fist shook the door. "Open now or I'm breaking it down!"

There was a few seconds of silence then the sound of the lock tumbling back. Thade opened the door wide, sweeping his arm in a gesture to enter. Attar ambled past heading straight for the nearest seat which he fell into drunkenly.

"Are you alright?" Thade asked, closing the door.

"Never better!" He replied highly. "It is to you that the same question is posed. Where have you been?"

The chimp smirked as he made his way to the chair across from his friend, " All but here." he answered.

Attar clasped his hands together. "Don't lose so much time on her. She is not worth it."

Thade shook his head. "I want to waste my time on her."

Attar snorted, "Why is she so caught up in your heart? Surely she has run to her tribe."

"She has no tribe." Thade said smoothly.

"No tribe?! All humans have tribes. Who protects her?"

Thade looked up from beneath his brow. "The forest protects her. That's all."

"It's time to forget her. You don't eat, barely sleep, and you never leave here! I implore you, Come out with me."

But the plea fell on deaf ears. Attar nudged him. "I'm sorry,what?" the General said.

"Get out of this room!" Attar declared.

Thade shook his head and sank back into the suspended chair. "I really am not up to it so do not try to convince me. My friend, I do not wish to be anywhere if she is not with me."

"Come now, describe her to me. What makes her so special?"

That was all he needed to hear, plunging into describing his human in detail. What she was, how she was, and the tender mercy she integrated by caring for and after him.

"You grant much credit but she is still but a human." Attar belittled.

With a smile, softened by the memory of her embrace, Thade replied, "Oh you will see, my friend. I will find her," He sighed deeply, awakened by a new sense. "That is my goal. To be with her again is all I need."

He may have been three sheets to the wind but the words ushering forth from his former superior were so foreign that Attar could not help but think Thade had been twisted from his detainment at Calima.

"But she's human." he argued with almost a whimper.

Thade glared across at him intensely. "'I know that."

"You hate humans!"

"Not her..."

"You say she is different. What spell has she cast upon you?"

Thade laughed, knowing there was no magick. "Please! There was no sorcery, except, maybe, if you consider compatibility a link to spells. She was there when no one else cared."

And as he thought about the whole thing, his face turned red as anger rose. Hovering on the brink of fury, thinking about how he had been left to die, his words were hard pressed. "I had fallen. That was my destruction. In that, no one came to me. I was left to die alone at Calima."

Staring past the gorilla's shoulder, at the door, waiting for the word Go from Omri who had been searching secretly the out reaches of the forest, Thade sat on the edge of his seat.

Eyes still fixed on the door, Thade's voice was distant. "She loved

me. LOVED ME! Do you understand that? She rushes through my veins. Do you know how true love feels?"

His words were so passionate that Attar could not help but to respond. "Do you hear yourself? You cannot be serious!"

They both sat in silence for some time before the commander concluded, "She is untouchable."

Thade shook his head, "No," he stated. "Just so damned far away."

* * *

Zephyrs cooled the streets bringing much needed relief from the heat of the day. With all of the rain, it had made it almost unbearable to function in the daily tasks of just getting up and going to one's job. Now, the cooled air was welcomed, bringing them out onto patios and doorsteps to feel it. Lantres looked up at the night sky. Blackness was stealing across the blue velvet sky, robbing the city of its moonlit passages. This was a powerful storm moving in. He dreaded the rainy season.

Passing eight-foot torches, lit by the lightkeepers an hour before sunset, the senator hurried for the army compound as the trees bowed and swayed in the conopys. The zephyrs had turned to chilly gusts, blowing leaves and loose paper across his path. This was going to be a good one, he knew, when lightning strung across the sky followed by a low shuddering rumble. Again his eyes went to the patches of heaven through the canopy -- the resinate command for attention quaking, seemingly, right over him, evoking memories of the past -- the floods, mudslides -- taking whole communities in one awesome deluge of nothing short of a catastrophe -- wiping out half of the mountain-side...half of the people. So many lives were lost in that disaster...

Seeing the brightly lit entrance of the compound, Lantres hastened his steps. He felt a little more at ease knowing he was about to enter those gates and be in a safe sturdy building before the malestrom released. The sentries snapped to attention when

he approached, pulling the doors open in stiff formation. "I need to see Thade." Lantres requested, locking his fingers behind his back. "YESSIR!" One of the ape soldiers chirped, wise to the coming storm and more than happy to escort the Senator. Lantres tipped his head courteously, falling in behind the heavily barded chimp. The maze of corridors held not a single remnant from "The Lagacy". Witnessing the barren walls, the senator could not help but grieve for Thade. He could only imagine what went through his Godson's mind when he saw that his world had been ripped from his fingers. Unable to look upon the sterile walls any longer, Lantres kept his eyes on the shadow of his escort, following blindly past great rooms and empty mess halls, a morose frown deepening on his face. Iron torches luminated the passage-way casting disfigured, flickering lite onto the pristine walls. It was making the senator more and more upset as they wound deeper into the once beautiful compound. What Thade and his ancestors had created had been chipped away, tossed into fire, stolen for its worth...Destroyed...

Coming up to a curve, laughter greeted. Some of it reaching near the din of a roar, only to halt immediately when the Senator rounded the corner. Choking back their laughter, the trio of gorillas stood at attention respectively as Lantres passed - the Senator's escort eyed them uneasily, his gaze trailing while he merged. Lantres did not look up, though he did smile once he had gotten beyond their sight; 'To be that young again!' Those three soldiers had no idea how badly he would have loved to join in -- to have marked his visit by the mirth and merriment they so enjoyed. Oh to be that free of worry... His smile soon faded as they reached their destination. At the end of the hall was Thade's quarters. Soot surrounded the door for which he was heading, bringing a myriad of questions to mind the closer he got. Rapping firmly at the door, the stocky chimp announced; "Sir, Senator Lantres wishes to see you." At first there was no response. Then a most violent sound of breaking glass and ripping cloth came before the door opened. Thade peered from behind the door -- teeth bared and

prepared to defend himself. "I have said all I am going to say! Leave me!" Thanking his escort, Lantre pressed into the door; "I NEED to talk to you NOW." Thade shot a glance over the old chimp's shoulder before granting him admittance, feeling threatened now that it seemed everyone knew of his "pet". With a wide gesture, Thade bade him to take comfort in the most welcoming seat. As Lantres sat, he smelled the air. "Something burns." Lantres proclaimed once he caught the smoky scent. 'Check your ...' "It was my fault, My Dear Godfather... No one else's... Not yours, mine or Phallen's,,," Thade peered hard into Lantres' eyes. "I had fallen under the influence." The Councilor eyed him suspiciously, having already heard the confession once... "Tell me again." he refreshed. Thade turned the lock and strode into the room, closing his eyes -- wishing he had never come back... "I know why you are here..." And he plopped down in the seat adjacent from Lantres' "comfy" chair. Sinking into his own, Thade kicked his legs out, crossing his feet at the ankles. Waving his hand, Thade reminded; "You are wasting your time."

76 Lantres raised his hands in defense: "I never said for you NOT to retrieve her, Son!" Catching Thade's wavering attention -- making the ape realize his purpose, Lantres stressed, "There is something you need to know, though..." "It does not matter why." And Thade turned away in a huff, his brow furrowing. Leaning forward, Lantres stared him in the eye. "You have to hear ME!" Seeing his young squire settle, the Senator relaxed; 'Good... I have his attention...' "It will change you forever." He said aloud. Motioning to the decanter that sat among the clutter on Thade's desk, Lantres could not help but notice the blackened cinders. Thade caught the sideways glance but did not bother to explain. With all of the "big mouths" in the compound, he was sure Council would hear of his drunken escapade sooner or later. "Nothing you say can change my mind." He plainly said, caring not what Lantres had to say. "It may..." He replied coolly. "Pour two and sit with me." "I have had enough." Thade shot, though he obliged his elder by retrieving the decanter and a

glass. Observing the shaking hands as it poured, Lantres chanced a glance at his Godson. "You will need one..." He warned accepting the crystal from his hand. Thade backed into his chair with anticipation. What their discussion was about to reveal was serious. "I don't care what you or anyone else thinks. I should have stayed away." Sulking in his own sympathy, there was no reasoning with him. His stubbornness held. "Answer me one..." Lantres dealt gently...

* * *

Phallen sat up from a dead sleep. Thunder rolled above as if seeking the cabin -- shaking its contents... "I will find you. I will bring you back with me...!" She thought she heard the low growl of his voice as the storm broke. His hands touched her. His caress -- passionate when he took her back in his arms and held her close as if to never wanting to let go... "I will never forget you..." Warding the words off, the embrace remained. They had shared that and his feel lingered still. One emotion she could not dismiss had passed between them like an electrical surge. And if Thade could not keep that for his very own, then there was nothing left for him... He needed her... She did not... In her eyes, Phallen had not realized any of his advances; the shaking, the apprehension... "He felt nothing." Staring out at the distant lake, she wished to believe her own words. "He is where he belongs." Lightning blinded her...

* * *

"Do you remember your mother?" Thade dipped his head, peeking surreptitiously from his reclined position. "She died shortly after my birth." He responded, squirming, uncrossing his feet only to counter-cross them. "All I know is what my father told me: that she was beautiful... a gentle soul." Lantres could hear Kalib speaking and he shuddered. "Yes..." He acknowledged. "I was there." Thade sat up suddenly, interested more than ever. "Your father was elated. He had a son. And by the woman he adored." The old chimp smiled as if in triumph for Kalib, beaming at Thade as he continued; "I see so much of him in you." "How did my mother die?" Thade asked pensively. "Oh,

Thade..." Lantres groaned. It was obvious Kalib had never disclosed to him how his mother had died, and now it was placed upon his shoulders to try to explain. With a heavy heart, Lantres extended his hand clutching Thade's. "She died giving birth to you..." If he looked away the words would be gone. At least Thade wished they would have. But they struck him hard, hurting him worse than any wound sustained in battle. The anger in his pain exposed itself, as he lowered his eyes, the tears falling freely, spilling down his cheeks, salty on his lips. He hid his face, hooded beneath the burdened brow -- refusing to look up. "Your father never told you because he never wanted you to feel responsible." Lantres took the last of his drink in one gulp feeling its effect as he offered up a second to Thade. He took it in trembling hands, tears falling into the glass as he held it between shaking knees. Now he wanted to be alone. Wanted it to all stop and go away... "He loved you so much..." Lantres consoled. "SHE loved you." Watching the disgraced General grapple the unfolding truth, the old ape fell silent. Thade closed his eyes, feeling he had killed his mother. "Thade...?" Lantres called softly, bending to look at him. "It was not your fault." Thade shook his head. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

Taking his hands, Lantres stared him dead in the eye. "Your mother was human..." Thade's breathing became erratic. A feeling of unsoundness overcame him, as it had when he had realized there was no way out of his cell back at Calima -- imprisoned, detached, numb, even physically ill. The glass fell from his hands shattering between his feet. All he could picture was his beloved Phallen... "This is too much!" He breathed falling back into his chair, hands covering his face in horror. "Is there ANYTHING else I have NOT been told?" His words came, muffled by his own hands. "You love your Phallen and you cannot deny it." Lantres seemed to warn. "Yes..." Thade admitted. "But she has flown. I don't believe she feels the same." 77-80

"If she has done for you all that you profess, her feelings are just as rich." Resting a weathered hand on his Godson's knee, he urged, "Go and find her! This passion is alive in you. Don't let it slip

away." Pointing his long index finger at Thade's heart, Lantres added, "Do not allow yourself to become bitter." And he crossed Thade's chest. "There is a calmness here. A patience cultivating. Let it grow." The ex-General knew where his strength laid -- in Phallen. To have her by his side he could rein as mightily as a king, bring forth a powerful force of protection for what he loved... his people and her. The aged Senator sensed the new energy -- the confidence -- as it rose in his Godson. "I want this..." Thade declared, a steely glaze creeping over his sorrow. "Entrust me to lead again." "You have always had my blessings. Convincing the rest, well, that may take some ass-kissing on your part. Sandar thinks there may still be a chance that you and Ari will reconcilliate." The ire that was building came to an abrupt halt at the mention of her name. Thade's eyes lifted, softening; "Is she alright?" Lantres nodded slowly. "Did she ever...?" Then he waved the query off. "Never mind. If there was anyone, I hurt her most of all." Oh, but how he had loved her. The flame that had once burned their eternal love, had since, been snuffed, extinguished by sheer indifference. Bitter feuds -- never resolved, never forgiven -- were left to die as he had been, at Calima... "There IS no future in the past, Son." Lantres counceled. Looking into the old ape's eyes, Thade saw an ally. "FIND her, Thade." He smiled secretly at Lantres. "I'm working on it."

* * *

The moons hung low, casting their silver two-dimensional paths onto the waters when Phallen stepped from the shadows of the trees into their light. Rich, wet smells of earth hung heavily on the air, dredging up the stench of earthworms and other loam-dwelling insects turning the soil. Silently, Phallen stood at the water's edge letting it lap lazily over her feet as she slipped her garment from her shoulders to let it drop. Her tiny frame waded into the water, releasing the days work... It mattered not what he did, anymore. If he took up with an "old flame" or a new love, as long as he was happy, she was happy FOR him. Her world had not changed. She remained the same. After all, many weeks had passed and she

felt sure that Thade had re-established himself... found among his species, a mate... Floating, dreaming, recalling their embrace, something cooed he was not over her. She sunk under trying to drown the notion only to emerge near the opposite side of the lake. Listening to her own breathing, Phallen watched as heat lightning danced among the clouds... She never felt so alone... 'Why is this so different?' Her life had always been a solitary existence. Questions no one could answer; answers to questions she did not want to hear... 'If we had been meant to be, we would still be together.' Night-birds shrieked, fleeing suddenly from the tree-lined hills. She twirled, watched motionless...nothing.

81-82

Warily, she dove under swimming back, aware that someone was watching -- hidden on that hill among the trees and orchard grass. Wading up onto the beach, the warm air met her skin creating a mist which rose from her like a spirit. The long jet hair streaming about her dripped with an almost blue hue... No wonder he had been so captivated! She was breath-takenly beautiful for a human... A mere five feet four and perfectly proportioned from head to toe... The voyer crept up the hill, the image of a pure mystic lodged in their mind as they groped blindly for the reins to a tethered horse. Racing back, her image so fresh, they wondered if she knew just who Thade was...

* * * The Senator and Thade had been talking for hours, the elder chimp had explained many things to Thade about his father and mother and how, it seemed, she was not unlike the human Thade had fallen in love with... "A very bright human... One who did not run with a wild pack, but instead opted to learn to read and write. Staying close to the city to learn our culture, our way of life to replicate our life-style... General Kalib (KAH-LEEB) had arrested her for trespassing, having never seeing her in the city before -- thinking that she was nothing more than a thief. Instead of turning her over to the slave-traders, though, he decided to have her domesticated. And his OWN humans were just the ones who could do it... In such a large home, one would have

thought she would simply blend in among the rest, but she didn't. I really don't think she ever could have. Not with her knowledge on the "Books of Semos". Verse and chapter flowed from her, professing the words that she held so deeply in her own heart as we had in ours..." Lantres took a sip of his drink, his mind fogged from the present... "She had soon become Kalib's favorite servant, winning his affections. He called on her exclusively, to his den, to have her tend to his every whim no matter how frivolous. He knew there was something about her... A forgiveness...? An acceptance...? Maybe a longing to be one of us. Nonetheless, she was his.

83-84

It seemed she had been pardoned from having to do the task of chores the other "Domestic's" were forced to carry out. She was labeled "General Kalib's Whore". Lantres chuckled lightly... "She was no "whore". There was no sexual foreplay going on. She was just so damned smart! And your father loved her intellect. Hours were spent in debate and things just simply developed. He didn't see her as a human, but as a partner, a friend that he could tell anything to..." Lantres focused on Thade; "Not unlike how you are with this certain "One." Thade felt his cheeks grow hot; perhaps as his own fathers' had when he realized his own partiality lay in face-value... Thade shivered. How could history have repeated itself so exactly...? Kalib had let his guard down... "He had become so taken by her -- falling deeper in love with each passing day." Lantres took a deep breath. "He was so taken by her." And his brow rose. "She was not average. She had the greenest eyes one could ever hope to look into. And her hair was thick, red and long, like your Phallen's. Kalib had become obsessed with her. If anyone dared suggest she be removed from the house he went off, accusing them of being jealous -- only wanting to possess the treasure he had uncovered. He was right. They all wanted the trophy-girl... Whether it be politics, the arts, or religion, she held her own in the argument. Not only was she rich in beauty, her knowledge was prolific, never falling short of a come-back or verse. Thade sat on the edge of his seat. It were as if

someone had been eavesdropping on he and Phallen by the way things coincided. Lantres gazed past him, reminiscent of the youth he held in those years... the reckless abandon they all seemed to throw about. Would he had done anything differently? The old ape shook his head at his own thoughts as he smiled. Examining his own hands, Lantres' eyes became melancholy. That was then...This was now... Snapping back, he started as if prodded and uncrossed his legs to lean into the light... "They married in the garden behind your father's house. There must have been two-hundred in attendance -- not to mention those watching from the gates... And the reception...!" Lantres fell back in his seat throwing his arms over the arms of the chair, an air of exasperation flowing. "I DO believe the whole city had celebrated that night." All mirth aside, he said presumptuously, "I do believe she conceived on their wedding night." "Being a General in the army took him from her, leaving her to worry if she would see him alive again. There was no time to tell him she was with child, for he was there one day, gone the next, and it had never been discussed who the surrogate mother was going to be. She made everyone in the house swear to secrecy. No one was to tell Kalib about her condition. "Returning from tours that took weeks to accomplish, Kalib would always bring her gifts from the far away places -- embroidered robes of silk, lacy necklaces sparkling with gems, exotic oils which evoked a passion for life...

85

Now, Khet was not revealing her secret, physically or verbally...YET, having her alternative motive waiting until Kalib's next tour left -- to terminate the pregnancy before it was too late... Confiding in her simian friend, Khet had no idea she was married to a Commander. Fearing for the fetus, the young ape told her husband, who, in turn revealed to Kalib what Khet was intending. Without notice, Kalib returned home at once, infuriated. The front door flew open imbedding the handle into the plaster wall... "K-HET...!" Lantres did his best to imitate without raising his voice too much. "They said he was heard all the way into the city. Running, hiding -- everyone vanished and the house fell silent

as he made his way to the parlor. She would surly be in there... The clock on the mantle ticked a heart-beat way... His temples throbbed... He had to get her... It was out of hand now... Sniffing the air, Kalib followed the scent of her perfume, his armor creaking with every step. His breathing was heavy and labored as he drew closer. Terrified, Khet bolted from her hiding place, blocked by his presence, from the front door that was still stuck fast in the wall. Lashing out, he missed by inches, startling a yelp from her as she flew past with a leap. The only place where she felt she could find refuge was his den. Surly he would not destroy anything in there -- his collection -- his artifacts... his life-story... The door slammed open at once changing her mind in that instant as pictures crashed to the floor, their glass shattering, tearing the parchments that were once encased therein, their ancient literature turning to dust as air hit them. Blinded by rage, he stepped through the glass, forcing the door shut behind him, causing a cabinet of rare pipes to tremble from the seal. Khet was cornered. "You..." He snarled, closing in on her, his face red with rage. She darted to her right nearly getting past him, but his movements were much faster, blocking her way and sending her sailing back against the wall. Bearing down on her, Kalib stood over her, his breath hot on her face as he pinned her. "It was an accident...!" She cried, her tears dropping to the floor as she tried to explain. There was no intention on her part to carry the child full-term... but to have it terminated... Kalib was insane from this information. She was going to kill his child?! The General saw red. Blind with rage, he went into a tirade, destroying the den, sending Khet fleeing from one corner to the next, nearly being struck with a heavy chair he threw -- breaking out the full-length stained glass window. Facing her, his knuckles popped as his hands curled tightly into fists. Spinning, he smashed his fists atop the glass cabinet that held the pipe collection... "You would KILL MY CHILD?!" He shrieked. He whipped back around and in one bound was upon her, snarling from this news -- this revelation. "You would do that to ME?" By this time Khet was hysterical. To

justify her purpose came in great sobs, how she had thought he had not wanted a child from her, but to pro-create with a surrogate -- of his own species... 86-87 "I didn't know..." She wept. Her shame, as if she had done something terribly wrong glowed in her tears. Kalib froze. "Oh my love, what have I done?" Falling to his knees, he buried his face in her robes, sobbing. "FORGIVE ME!" He begged. His hands went to her belly, embracing the life which grew there. Resting his head there, he listened, beseeching; "This life that grows in you... PLEASE... Do not take it from me."

Lantres raised his brow... "Well, you know..." The aged chimp reclined uneasily, genuinely upset over having to recall that piece of the story. He swallowed dryly staring into his empty glass. Obediently, Thade re-filled it, pressing as he sunk back into his chair, "Please, continue..." Nodding, the Senator took a long shot from his filled snifter, releasing the vapor in a long silent whistle. Focusing back, his recollections opened like a book... "Kalib's anger faded. They had misinterpreted one another's ideals. Luckily, he had caught her just in time -- revealed to her his desire for her to carry his children...his "genetic seed"..." Thade peered at Lantres inquisitively. "Genetic Seed?" "There is so much more than I can tell you, Son. This is but the tip of the icebergh." A shiver seemed to travel through the both of them at once when the lamp abruptly went out leaving them in total darkness. Thade leapt from his chair, groping in the dark over his desk for the lamp and a match. Pins and needles coursed through his body when he struck it. The smell of sulfur wafted into his nostrils as he turned the wick in the lamp higher -- hearing the sound of a raging storm for the first time. A brighter glow filled the room, chasing the ghosts and phantoms from their darkened corners. Thade fell back in his chair - - physically and mentally beaten -- wanting to hear it all before totally losing his mind... "As the months went by, Khet's pregnancy appeared to be as normal as any other. Menial tasks, though, became harder to accomplish in her third tri-mester. Kalib stayed by her side constantly, never leaving, tending to every need

no matter how it vexed her to remain idle...To watch him. She loved him for it. Then, in the night, it had begun... Khet went into labor. Sending for the doctor and mid-wife, the house was a bedlam. Everyone was running about and shouting. Khet's personal servant, whom she fondly called "Options", stayed with the couple as they waited for the doctor. The pain of labor must be excruciating. And for poor Khet it must have been even worse. Every time she cried out Kalib said his skin crawled. All he could do was cradle her head in his lap, assuring her that she was going to be alright -- that their child was coming. The doctor arrived huffing and puffing while taking the stairs two and three at a time. Preparing to examine her, he pulled the covers back and gasped. A great red stain was growing... 'I think you should leave, Kalib', his voice shaky. Not on his life! His child was about to be born and he was going to be there with Khet when they were; end of argument..." Thade did not like where it was going, but endured the pain, conscious of the bitter end to come. "Things didn't go well for Khet. She was hemorrhaging. It took everything she had to bear the child, who was born kicking and screaming... Then there you were." 88-89

Lantres shuddered, took in a guarded breath, appearing as if he had revealed something that should never have been uttered twice. Holding his breath, the Senator tipped his head inquisitively at the sound coming from his Godson. Thade was devastated. Doubled over, trying to hide his mortality, it broke through his world without prejudice, tearing down his defenses, stripping his self-importance, and sending raw emotion to the surface without mercy. Lantres put his hands on Thade's shaking shoulders, trying to comfort him. "Are you alright?" Thade could not speak, nor move. "Perhaps tomorrow we could continue..." "No..." Thade croaked collecting himself, wiping shamelessly at his eyes. "I'm alright." They sat in silence for a time, both in fear of what lay in eachother's eyes now that bravery and chivalry had been pushed aside. "Please..." He asked. "I need to know..." Lantres tugged at his beard nervously while he studied Thade. With a terse nod, he sighed. "Are you sure?" "Yes..."

"Watching his beloved struggle tore at his heart -- bearing his son -- her desperate attempt to keep from crying out... "I heard her from the study... That last guttural groan to bear you -- taking, in exchange, Khet. "The bleeding was out of control. There was nothing the doctor could do. How to stop it was beyond his, or any doctors' knowledge, then... 'Stay with her', was all he said to Kalib. "Handing the new-born to the Mid-wife, he sent them to only one other new mother who could help. Kalib was in a state of shock. He could not understand how Semos could be so cruel as to give him a son, yet, on the same token, take from him his one true love..." "Watching his beloved Khet fade away before his very eyes was almost more than he could bare. For Death to claim her after the countless times he had stared it in the eyes was beyond his comprehension clutching her against his body, denying the Reaper its victim. 90

Calling her name softly, gently shaking her, Khet's eyes opened weakly, staring as blankly as a doll's eyes, into his... No depth... No sweet refrain..." Lantres shook his head sadly, wiped at a tear rolling down his cheek... "He was lost... To never feel her embrace again... Staring into her empty eyes, he shook her... Nothing there... The green eyes hazed over -- beyond reach; shock-driven... Blank. She was limp in his arms. I like to think that somewhere, deep inside of her, there was a WANT... But Khet could not recover. Her life-blood was all but depleted as she lingered on her last breaths; growing ghostly white... Kalib felt how cold she was becoming, holding her against his warm body. He was going to lose his soul-mate... "She held on for two days; so ashen..." Lantres' breath hitched, feeling the loss all over again, for his comrade. "Never regaining consciousness, Khet died in his arms, slipping quietly away." "He could not let her go; the truth pounding in his heart when he felt her leave her body... A howl -- something I had never heard, nor care to hear again, erupted out of his chest, like a demon from hell. His tears fell on her face -- in the sockets of her eyes, making it appear as if she, too, were weeping creating a morbid portrait..." "He could not release her, begging

for just a little more time. "Rocking her, he was left alone to say farewell, his words of devotion falling on deaf ears while brushing the auburn hair into place, staring down into the beautiful sleeping face, realizing her eyes would never open to his again... "One can understand the mourning process. It takes time to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. But Kalib was showing no sign of letting go, and the doctor was concerned for him. He had to take the body, but the General refused to surrender it. "Twenty-four hours was long enough. Khet's body was beginning to show decay... Speaking to General Kalib's Second-in-Command, Solo, he explained the circumstances; how it had to be... "It was a gruesome picture when they entered the suite... 'It's time to let go'... "A curt gesture and the soldiers entered. Prying fingers, pulling arms, and dog-piling finally freed the corpse, now stiff and grey with rigormortis. It fell from the bed with a sickening thud; retaining its huddled position, the blood lost, now thickly brown... "Holding Kalib down took five of the strongest gorillas as the undertaker removed her body." Lantres chewed anxiously at a troublesome cuticle... "Those of us who stayed for support, heard his foreboding pacing above... To and fro, to and fro as Khet was taken away. "Kalib was catatonic. I was positive I had lost a brother that night... "When Commander Solo descended the stairs, I begged him to stay with Kalib. 'I was afraid for his life', I admitted, although I knew that by saying it could have ended my friend's career in the army. "Solemnly, Solo understood and remained with his Superior, attending, but not interfering when Kalib vented, condemned, or destroyed whatever he came into contact with..." "Bouncing off the walls, pulling dressers face down with a tremendous crash, Kalib was ballistic. Taking up a rod, he set out on a journey of destruction, swinging dangerously at whatever lay in his path, disintegrating it with one mighty swing until there was nothing left but the tapestries. Winging the thick piece of wood through the stained-glass window, he leapt upon them, hanging by their anchors until his weight pulled them from the wall, shredding them to pieces. The darkened pool of Khet's blood on the bed only fed his rage as he

clawed through the sheets, grabbing the mattress and throwing it through the broken window. To stare at the mural-tapestry at the head of the bed, having concentrated on its intricacy in his passion for "Her", Kalib tore at it savagely; the beads sewn around the edges, broke away, bouncing and rolling to all corners of the room..." 91-92

"It sounded as if a cyclone was trapped in that room. In fact, there was. Its name was Kalib, and it was on a rampage..." Lantres felt for his satchel, probing for his pipe and tobacco. It was time for a smoke... Concentrating on packing the pipe just right, he ventured a look to his squire. Thade was stunned beyond speech - or any visible emotion. A cold affirmation crept over the ex-General. He comprehended more than what Lantres was relating... Great halo's of smoke encircled Lantres' head as he puffed persistently... With a mild, tobacco influenced reply, the aged ape continued... "As suddenly as the first crash had occurred, all noises ceased. And we held our breath. Surly, General Kalib had thrown himself out the window!" "Or had been halted by Commander Solo..." "Something much stronger held General Kalib... A distorted mask of frenzy changed suddenly... Coming face-to-face with the portrait of he and Khet... Her painted eyes never looked so alive...! They looked out at him telling him to calm his fury; to let him know how much she had loved him... And as he gazed into those green, painted eyes, he fell to his knees, bawling like a child... "I beseech you!' He cried, his hands clasping tightly together before falling to the floor in a heap..." Puffing profusely, Lantres hid his remorse behind his pipe smoke. There was no way to conceal it after witnessing his friends' loss; and to behold the crumbling of Thade's world -- possibly due to Kalib's weakness -- well, the story had been told... "She lay in state, dressed in her wedding gown..." "Looking as if she were but asleep when Kalib kissed her lips once more..." 'Goodnight, my Beloved...' He cooed on her cheek... A young "Secretary Lantres" offered comfort, only to be coldly turned down. There would be no condolences for the "love" lost. Her life--ending-- took from General Kalib a whole

sequence to the answers of what life meant; leaving him bitter...

* * *

He cursed the days wasted there. Sitting in the dark the words played back -- the scene Lantres described laid dead at his feet... Miles away... Even as he spoke aloud to himself the words fell to a whisper for fear his own ears heard: "My mother was human"... For whose sake had Kalib kept the secret!? "Is this why I find myself attracted to Phallen...? Because I have HUMAN blood in my veins?" Thade sat at his desk, his fingers coiling tightly into his hair, pulling, releasing his rage upon himself while curses spat... "I am UNTOUCHABLE!" Fingers explored the deep creases returning to his face... 'Help me...' Prayed. Darker than any moonless night -- blacker than the day his father had died -- total shame fell on him. Suicide crossed his mind... To take one's own life, whether it be a simian or human movement, was blasphemous, but Thade had contemplated it, tossed its pros and cons into the air. His world, as he knew it, was done. There was no God... He fell beneath sin... A breath escaped when he realized he had not been struck down due to his new belief... "Oh, my pet..." A knock on the door brought him crashing back to the here-and-now. Through closed lids, he turned his eyes, followed by a slow rise -- aching inside. He trod wearily across the darkened room wiping at his swollen eyes. Upon opening the door, Thade announced weakly, "I really need to be alone..." Ceasing in mid-sentence, his throat catching a lump as he swept them up in his arms... "ARI...!" She hung onto his neck, hugging him back -- sensing that his embrace was not yet willing to release. "I am SO glad to see you." He sighed against her shoulder as he held her, closing his eyes against the tears. For that moment the gloom faded granting, if only for those few seconds, a recess. Putting her back on the ground, he gestured for her to come in. 'Help me, Ari! I feel I'm losing my mind.' "I heard you were back." She smiled, her eyes scanning the dorm curiously, to fall upon the cinders next to the desk. "Fire?" The girl-chimp queried. Thade ducked boyishly from her gaze. "You-you could say that." He stammered

lowly, a pencil-thin smile crossing his face. Ari knew. Being a politician's daughter, she heard it all. Still, to keep mum was the best thing for this situation. Placing her hands on her hips, she examined him up and down, tilting her head to one side as she caught the first sign of depression in his eyes. "Thade, what troubles you? And don't lie. I can always tell when you do." He chuckled lightly shaking his head. "Yes, you can, my dear. As for my troubles, well, I really don't want to talk about them." Ari agreed with a nod. "Tell me this though; are you alright? You look so sad. I've never seen you this way." "Well, if you consider my plight as a GOOD thing, I'm actually elated. Perhaps my downfall has something to do with it. After all, I really am NOTHING now." He replied sarcastically. 93-94

Crossing the room, he glanced over his shoulder. Ari stared back. With an obliging sort of move, Thade requested rebuttal... "I can't blame you." She began slowly. "I can't blame you for anything. It wasn't your fault. To point a finger results in three back at me." She acquitted honestly. "That was what she said." Thade admitted gruffly, running his finger over a pristine suit of armor. "Who?" "The one who saved me. She said the same thing." He envisioned Phallen, her unusual characteristics, the long raven hair. "But she has vanished." "They mean a lot to you." "O-o-h-h yes-s-s." Ari went to him and kissed him. "I am happy for you, Thade. Father said that you had found peace. It's apparent. It shows in your eyes... something I have not seen since we were children." She smiled warmly stroking his beard. "It's..." Looking deeply into them;"compassion." Thade's depression would not allow him to responde. His dead-pan stare screamed that something much more complicated was eating him alive inside. Something that pulled him up by the collar and was shaking him furiously. He could not discuss it -- Not with Ari, not with Commander Attar; not even with Omri. Only two could help him escape from this new prison: they were Lantres and Phallen. Thade grinned sardonically. "Compassion, hmm? That is the ONE thing I lack, Ari. What they see is surrender... a blank. I'm numb with angst. The correct word to

describe me best now would probably be patient. I'm in no hurry to get to anywhere. WHO am I?" Ari's eyes welled with tears. Thade ran the back of his hand along her cheek tenderly. "Your sympathy for my problems is sincerely appreciated."

* * *

Little had Thade known that, when he had hugged Ari so passionately, Corporal Omri was just rounding the corner, stopping him in his tracks. Back-tracking stealthily, the chimp watched as the two disappeared into Thade's dorm. An old flame had been reignited... That was enough for him to regret anything bestowed to the ex-general. To search the far ends -- to see for himself the human fondly referred to as "pet", Omri felt it his duty to protect her from Thade. She was too good for him. "Flippant bastard!" He cursed under his breath. 'To hell with Thade! I found nothing!' Those were his intended words. After seeing her emerge from the water -- her tiny frame -- a perfect form with the blackest hair falling over her like a cloak... Even HE was bewitched. Denying his own desire to take her in his arms told him;

95

'The General does not deserve her'... Omri went back to his dorm, slammed the door, and proceeded to lock the directions to the lake up in his safe. "Sorry,Sir, I found nothing..." He spat.

* * *

They were behind closed doors but there was nothing going on. What had once been between them was over. But when Ari announced her engagement, Thade did seem to wince, nonetheless, coming across with a feigned smile. "I'm glad for you." He forced. Their eyes met painfully before his darted for the door. "Are you?" She posed. "No..." He stated... Period. She stared nervously at the floor. "That's not what I mean, Ari." Deep in thought, she looked up at him and grabbed him by his beard -- tugging; "Don't let go of her Thade." Thade scoffed lightly. "LET GO?! I NEVER had a grip!" His voice rose zealously. Ari kissed him softly, closing her eyes and trying to imagine. There was no return. That was when she realized what they once had was gone.

'Good...I'm free...' She stepped back, watched him drop his head as if in shame. "Don't do this to yourself. If it is meant to be, it WILL be..." Edging toward the door she heard him mutter; "I have lost her." Her heart went out to him; "No you haven't." And she went back -- wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He felt so vulnerable there. Never, had she seen him so distraught. "I hope that whatever troubles you subsides, for it IS SO upon you." "I'll get through it." Thade answered stoically. Ari bit at her nails searching for the right thing to say; something that would bring him out of his dismal sundown. She, alone, could not free him. And to get him to talk about it was out of the question... Nodding resolutely, she reminded, "I need to be getting back. If you would escort me...?" "It would be an honor." Leading her to the door, he opened it honorably. Passing, she drew her hand across his cheek. The soft palm caressed him and he suddenly remembered, taking her hand, turning it palm up... Staring into the scar his face revealed the murky memory. "It is over." Ari forgave, closing her hand. Thade shook his head. "I hurt you so deeply..." Ari smiled knowingly. "It's over, Thade. Let it go... I have." She squeezed his hand. "Come on, let's walk." Deep in thought, they barely said a word as they made their way along the avenue. Passer's-by bid "good evening", glancing back over their shoulder after noticing the far away eyes so void of expression. They arrived at her home, greeted by her father, Senator Sandar. "Oh, hello Father." Ari greeted giddily, her smile going from ear to ear. Sandar was not happy. His stearn face soon ended their happy forte. Turning rebelliously to Ari, Thade kissed her. A soft, gentle caress she had not experienced from him in many moons. "Goodnight, Ari." "We will see eachother soon, I am certain." Came her encourageing closure. His eyes rolled up to meet Sandars'... 'Not if I can help it'; He read. "We will see..." Thade smiled. His facade wore thin but not before Ari turned and skipped up the stairs, stopping to kiss her father goodnight on his cheek. Sandar glared at the ex-General for some time before taking in a breath. "I understand

that you have issues, Thade, but don't involve my daughter!" Sandar eyed him suspiciously, his brow creasing. "Stay away from Ari. Stay away from..." Thade's face sat like stone. "Very well." He forced a smile then turned and walked away, the Chesire grin fading the instant he turned his back. Nothing was the same. Even Ari could not erase the girl from his mind. It was all slowly driving him mad. Something HAD to give - and soon.

Omri had returned. From outside, Thade could see a light filtering through the shade of the Corporal's dorm. He broke into a jog the rest of the way slowing gradually once within the gates of the compound so as not to look too anxious, though he was racing inside of his own heart... "Well...?" he asked sounding slightly out of breath as he barged in. Omri glanced shortly over his shoulder. In his haste to conceal the maps, he had neglected to lock the door.

"Nothing..." The corporal mumbled, paying no heed to his guest...intruder. "Nothing?" Thade shot. The General came around Omri's desk in a huff. "You have been out there for two days and you found NOTHING?" Slamming a stack of papers on the desk, Omri turned around and looked down at Thade. "You send me off on some wild goose chase -- for some...BODY, then you run off with Ari. I found NOTHING!" The young Corporal stared ahead. He was hiding something and Thade knew it. An evil little grin pursed on Thade's lips. "I believe you did." He retorted calmly. Omri searched his quarters nervously to avoid eye contact, shaking his head adamantly. "Ari and I are no more," he started, using a bit of his coniving charm to get his way. "Please...Tell me where she is?" They were eye-to-eye, all anger aside. "Tell me..." His snake-charmer manner held Omri fast. The plea in Thade's eyes caved him and he went for the maps. Handing the rolled parchment over, he said; "She has crossed East Lake. I think she did it for a reason if you know what I mean." "Her reasons are wrong, Omri. She fled FOR me, not FROM me." Holding the parchments as if they were treasure maps, he tapped a rhythm in his palm. With a quick smile and a half-nod he turned and sauntered out the door -- followed closely by an inkwell, its contents spattering upon

impact. "Damn you!" Omri cursed. "You Don't deserve her."

98

It was late. The city slept. Only the Patrol Guards were on the streets, strolling in the heat. Their thick, bassed voices discussed the last time it had been so hot. Beads of perspiration formed on the gorilla's forehead and he swore as he wiped at it with thick fingers, flicking the collection of sweat away. "There's another storm coming." He observed, his beady black eyes peering up through the openings of the canopy. The other guard, being a chimp but almost as big as his gorilla partner, eyed him questionably. "How do you know?" With an air of certainty, the gorilla scoffed. "My feet begin to ache when the weather is about to change and right now, they're KILLING me." The chimp let go with a cackle. "You are so full of it tonight! Out of all of the things lost, do you miss your mind most?" "I will bet money it rains." The gorilla contended. "It rains every night." Hushed laughter and nonsense trailed far into the city's belly, their wager never gelling, yet, the jest continued...

Tossing saddlebags across the mare's bak, Thade lead the beast from its stall, leaping upon her back once through the doorway, guiding her through the night. 'Will you accept me back into your life? Will you join me in mine?' Leaving her so abruptly with no explanation, he had practically abandoned her. 'Have you put me out of your mind by now?' He needed answers. He needed to see Phallen again. She had, at one time, made him feel needed when no one else cared whether he was dead or alive. In her care, he was in Paradise... 'Do I love you? Will I kill you when we meet? Will you kill ME?Do you love me...?' Where was closure...? It took off in all directions like a murder of crow, uniting in one dark mass -- leaving his thoughts open to most depressing notions. 'Stop...' He told himself, almost begging. 'Stop...stop...stop...' Pulling the horse to a sudden halt, Thade eyed the sentries coolly. Surly, they wondered what he was doing going out the back way in the middle of the night... "Open the

gates." He ordered huskily. "It is not safe out there after dark. There are no sentries posted as of yet due to shift-change." "I don't give a damn about your concerns. Open the gate now." With a low, resonate growl, Thade gestured restlessly for them to obey.

99

Shrugging, the Sentry pulled the gate wide allowing passage, meeting his partner's helpless gaze in the process. Thade glared past them before disappearing into the black of night... "He's lost his mind completely." Was muttered as the two guards came together, sliding an iron bar into place -- settling it into its niche with a clank -- sealing the safety of the city. * * * Perspiration beaded on his brow as he blindly prodded the horse into the forest, engulfed by its darkness, becoming "one" with his mount -- patches of moonlight fingered through the dense trees, strobing as horse and rider flashed along the path. It was going to take a good days travel to reach East Lake. Just knowing that he was going back to Phallen raised his spirits. And being out of Ape City, well, it elated him to the point where he never wanted to return there, ever... Clucking softly to the mare -- a gentle pull on the reins -- she fell into a rhythmic canter. Clipping along, the only sounds belonged to his breathing and an occasional snort from "Black" when she cleared the snot from her nostrils. Otherwise it was quiet... Peaceful... Unthreatening..., granting him time to sense his mortality. He felt old, tired, restless -- all at once, each one vying to be most important right now. "Restless" won, hands down. Falling into the horse's mane, Thade stared into the darknes. "Take us there." He whispered to Black...

II

The sudden strike across her face stunned her... "YOU LET HIM OUT!" Acadia glowered at her, his face reddening. Disgusted, he whipped around, unable to face Phallen any longer as his rage reached its boiling point. Erupting, he seized hold of the nearest object at hand, blasting it at her like a strike ball, missing her by inches, to smash against the wall, spraying shards of glass rain. She screamed and covered her head feeling the needles of

glass stab her hands. Reacting, Phallen lunged at him. "GET OUT!" She dug her nails into his arms as he rushed her, slamming her hard into the wall. "He will KILL YOU." Acadia forced into her ear, holding her by her throat. "He is a tyrant. A SCOUNDREL... Are you bind?" Phallen turned away. His words, so filled with hatred, spat on her face. Who to believe... What to believe in... It all went off with a distressed hack as she fought for air. "He is a murderer!" Acadia drove, pressing his face into hers. She stared desperately into his eyes trying to tell him how things had changed. "No..." "Dear Sister," He gently replied. "Don't be so naive..." He loosened his grip, taking her by the arm as if to lead her. "He will cut your throat as swiftly as his eyes fall upon you."

100

Phallen wrenched from his grip. "Get away from me." Lifting her chin, he asked, "Who do you think killed our father?" She buried her face in her hands... "No..." "Oh yes... Thade beheaded him..." Acadia smirked. "And you think you have changed him." He retorted, the austere look on his face informing Phallen he would not tolerate nor entertain the notion. Tearing from his hold, she dared face him. "Get away from me." "I'm not finished yet." He lulled, the words falling as if he were beginning a fairy-tale. Forcing her to face him, Acadia slashed any optimism possibly held for Thade: "He will tear you to ribbons..." "He doesn't even know where I AM!" She blasted, rising to him. Acadia took a surried step back, his lip curling as he stared at Phallen. "He will come for you, Phallen." He warned, collecting his bow and quiver. "Watch yourself, for Thade has not altered his course." Following, blinded by her tears, she stood on her porch. Acadia slid his foot into the stirrup of his horse. Wheeling the animal around, trotting up to her, he caught her eye one last time... "I will kill him if our paths cross... I promise." Casting a deadly smile, he gave a violent prod to the horse's groin and the roan galloped off toward the mountains. Phallen felt weak. There was no air as her head began to swim. She stumbled against the rough exterior barely feeling it scrape along her arm. Acids rose in her mouth and she fought off the

urge to puke as the truth sunk in. It all came racing back -- the armor HE wore, the ornate detail -- his whole persona... With shaking hands, she held her mouth; 'What have I done?!' She became paranoid of her surroundings. Eyes wide, she scoured the area... 'He doesn't know where I am anyway.' She consoled herself, taking little comfort from her own thoughts as to her safety. "I didn't know it was you, General Thade." She breathed uneasily. Phallen slid back inside closing the door and bolting it.

A low rumble demanded attention at the same moment... "Not now." Groaned, realizing that another storm approached. The flash of lightning through closed eyes brought forth a picture show in strobe -- a death match where, surly, one was to die...perhaps during morose slumber...

* * * Beneath the heavy canopy, he heard the thunder; the rain as it hit the leaves far above, patting gently in search of entry -- a few drops. Slowing his mount, Thade knew the storm would not last long. 'Send what you will, but you cannot stop me in my pursuit.' Rounding a curve, a rush of cool air met him sending a shiver down his spine. He breathed in its chill. "Please be there." He exhaled. Her gentle ways granted asylum from the trials bogging his mind. No hurt or pain interfered while he was near her. Lost in thought, Thade did not feel the rain as it dropped on his head. A few had found their way through the canopy waking him with their coolness. Raising his face he let them fall -- sweet nectar -- descending to his opened mouth, onto closed eyes, relieving the stickiness from the humidity that clung to him. 'Her kiss...' The memory worked its magic across the solemn expression; a wan smile emerging therefrom...

* * *

As the sun peaked over the mountains, Phallen stirred from her slumber. Her tear-streaked face baring four finger-length bruises from the evening before did not spoil her beauty, but her eyes lacked the glimmer once held. The disturbing visit from her brother -- revealing to her the tragic information about General Thade -- the assault, both mental and physical, had her doubting her

own sanity. Thade would not find her here, would he? Shaking her head at her own mental interrogation, Phallen lifted the heavy bard holding the door. Greeted by a beautiful sunrise she stepped out observing the opalescent sky. Birds fluttered above searching out their breakfast -- be it worm or seed -- swooping low to the ground... some landing gracefully atop their prey -- only to ascend to the canopies hastily upon notice. Picking a peach from a basket on her porch, she examined it, unsure if even wanted it. Wincing at the thought of food, she let it fall from her hand. 101-103

'He played me all along. To heal his wounds so he could return to his City was all he wanted.' Phallen sat, totally blown away by her brother's revelation. "He could have killed me!" She spoke aloud, revealing to herself a truth. Trembling uncontrollably, Phallen felt her way to her bed where she fell, her fingers ajumble as her imagination ran amok -- dredging up disturbing images... She had walked through the shards of glass left from Acadia's explosion, not knowing, due to the numbness, whether her feet bled or not. All she could think of was her near plight... And she fainted... ... Was it happening or not...? Her eyes flickered upon the army as they ran through her home, pillaging whatever their eyes fell upon... Funny, though, it was her tree-abode, and she was there feeling the angst, yet, helpless to stop it... "No...! STOP...! Don't you remember me?" Following up, Thade pulled a Bowie knife from his side, cutting her throat from ear-to-ear without a flinch -- letting her slide from his grip to the floor... her life-blood pulsing from the slash, soaking into her black hair... Staring down at her, no emotion baring for his actions, Thade watched as her life expended, smiling triumphantly. Taking a kerchief, he reached down, dabbing at the scarlet billow. "You should have been more careful." He chided, placing the cloth behind his breastplate. Phallen saw herself die... Watched them file out taking her precious possessions along -- trailed by General Thade who stopped just in the doorway. His head swaggered over his shoulder, his body following, a Molotov Cocktail in tow. With that cock-sure nod, he tossed it through the door watching as it exploded, lighting his eyes

with deadly hell-fire. His lips curved upward in a warped smile before he strode to his mount... Phallen sat straight up in bed clutching her throat, her eyes darting about -- trying to get her bearings... It was nothing but a nightmare. Still, she shook. It felt so real. He was there. She still felt the steely grip of his hands on her, the smell of his breath when he spoke; pure, clean, and cool on her face... "Face it," She admitted, hanging her head. "Thade is dangerous." Acadia's violent repute was her wake-up call. "He used me."

104

Closing her eyes tightly, she prayed he would never find her... The shards of glass scattered over the floor. It was becoming more and more difficult not to hate everything and everyone. Trust was non-existent. 'How could I have been so stupid?' With his sublime smile, he swore to her he would never hurt her. Sweeping the glass into a pile, Phallen felt the pain of reality hit again. Tears welled in her eyes spilling down her cheeks to the fragments at her feet. Frustrated, she tossed the broom to the floor and threw her arms up in surrender. "It doesn't matter anymore." 'Damn you and your merciful intentions! Look what you did!' It badgered her so... Deep in her heart she knew Acadia was simply out for revenge. He had been tracking her since she left the tribe; investigating every move she made, waiting for the opportunity to come when he could reveal her for what she was: a traitor... Now he had it, and it thrilled him to see her tremble... She knew, though, Thade had changed. She witnessed no hostility in his eyes except upon his awakening, but it was so short-lived -- never returning -- allowing her to gaze into him, touching him so profoundly. Maybe he hated humans, but he adored Phallen, entrusting her with his innermost secrets... His attraction was unquestionable -- holding himself in check at all times... Until the morning he left her... The way he had kissed her -- so emotionally charged. If it had gone one step further there would have been no going back. Was it a confession of his love for her?

...CRASH...!!! "Do you really believe yourself?" Phallen shook her head miserably to her own question. 'Reality bites hard, doesn't it?' Her Id replied...

* * *

III

Thade broke from the forest just before sunrise. Open land in mottled browns rolled before him, up over hills -- reappearing miles ahead -- the suns rising behind him revealing the valley green... Sitting there, he reconciled. 'She has gone far...' "You have sacrificed your comfort for me." He exonerated. Sending him back to his people, Phallen had up-rooted her own life. She had known he would, some day, return to her. How...? "That kiss." He responded aloud, nodding -- a toothy grin spreading across his simian face. Feeling the grin consume him was one reason why he pursued her. She eased his mind... Made him smile. He HAD to find her now. Had to have her a part of his NEW life, for it was she who ignited in him a desire. A selfish need...

* * * 105

The valley sprawled below. Blooming trees and waving grass held him mesmerized with its varigating greens as it waved lazily in the warm morning breeze. As far as he could see, the lea stretched, and in its beauty he quaked. This was Phallens'. He could not deny the pang of envy, nor the sense of trespass sitting silently atop the hill -- the suns making their way up behind, casting both horse and rider's shadows down the hillside, stretching them into Gods... Giving a gentle prod to his weary mount, the mare descended prudently, placing each hoof gingerly to the soil beneath the tall ferns as if taking into consideration the small creatures dwelling underneath. The lake was just beyond a sparse grove of trees; all in bloom, perfuming the air with their pungently sweet fragrance. Mingling within was a familiar scent though. Thade recognized it -- inhaled it down into his lungs -- recalled how it smelled on her skin... How it tasted... That was the first thing he remembered becoming aware of in his recovery... Mihr. It made him feel... "Safe..." Came spoken declaration...

* * *

Bees buzzed about him, uninterested by his presence, only in the nectar which the blossoms held stock, for which were so overwhelmed with fat bumble bees that the petals rained down on Thade and Black like silent snowfall. It was a forgotten Peach orchard kept alive by the insects hovering around the flowers. Tall grass covered a once woven path between the trunks -- unkempt for who-knew-how-long. Shaking the petals from his hair Thade paid no attention to the bees when they lit on him. He prodded forward. 'Do not turn away from the promise I gave to you. You are my strength. Through you I am forgiven...resurrected. If you turn from me, I will fall... Hear me...!' The sting from a bee sent him diving into the area ... "You little bastard." And he scraped the stinger out of his hand... * * *

III

Phallen sat at the kitchen's table, her tea growing cold. Her hand went to the bruised cheek feeling its heat. Such a hard lesson to learn. Shaking her head she dismissed her thoughts on Thade. 'It is done and there's nothing more. He is where he belongs, and,' She sighed heavily with the burden. 'so am I.'

* * *

Thade scoured the water's edge. He knew he had to cross. This was not to be a good experience... Dismounting, he let Black wander while he contemplated if she were strong enough to make the other side. Surly the mare could, but this was not something he enjoyed entertaining and he cursed Phallen for making him go through with it...

106-107

Staring blankly across the lake he reached for the reins. "It's our asses if we don't make it." Settling into the saddle he gave the horse a reassuring pat on the neck. With a hearty command and a kick to the groin, Thade drove the horse straight into the water, all of his trust lying in the tired mare to carry him over. He no longer cared about himself. Only that he made it to the other side if only to die there in her arms. Up to his waist, Thade squeezed his legs tightly around Black as they closed in on the other side. The water

rose to his chest and he felt panic grip. She was not going to make it. He had driven her too hard and now she was fatiguing. "C'mon, you can do it," He assured, his voice trembling. Snorting water from her nostrils, Black fought to reach the beach -- herself becoming panic stricken. Hooves touched the lake's floor clumsily... wearily. Physically upset, Black bolted onto the beach braying her disapproval, tossing her mane angrily. Soaked and exhausted Thade slid from the saddle falling hard onto the sandy beach, the reins still clenched in his fist. Sucking in great breaths, he was too tired to continue. Pulling the angered horse close, he raised up weakly. "Do not wander far." Falling back, he closed his eyes. The sun's warming rays beamed down upon him bronzing his face as he laid motionless. Just a rest was all he needed to keep going until he found Phallen...

She knelt next to him searching for a sign of life -- running her hands over his body. "What have you done?" She questioned. Her touch sent fire to his brain, igniting every nerve. Breathing her presence deeply, Thade opened his eyes. Reaching up he pulled her close. "Why did you leave?" Tacit, Phallen could only shake her head in disbelief. Brushing back her thick, black tresses, Thade fought to solve the puzzle. "My pet -- my precious one..." and he smiled easily up at her. "How do you make me feel this way?" Tracing his lips, deep brown eyes dove into his as she brushed his cheek lightly, all the while wearing the saddened face of loss. "Come back with me." He told her -- taking her firmly by the arms. Tasting her shoulder, he meditated on its softness, extending the caress up her neck to her ear. "Please come back with me..." Drunk from his lavish kisses, Phallen heard herself utter; "It is best if I do not..." Nipping at her earlobe startled Phallen. Before she could recoil, Thade wrapped her in his long arms. "I cannot let you go. We belong together and you know it." Holding her firmly, he made her look at him. "Kiss me." He demanded. "Then tell me..." Fighting to release, Phallen suddenly ceased -- her full lips parting in a full smile rarely yielded, only to be harnessed and subdued. Thade saw through the guise, grinning back with his own self-

consciousness -- all fangs... Drawing closer, her air breathed on him as they came together. "My darling..." He confessed. "I love you." Thunder lulled across the sky. Phallen broke away, peering perceptively at the grey sky. "It is only thunder." Thade gently consoled as he stroked her arms. Staring down at him, her eyes welled with tears. They fell on him and he blinked...

Eyes flying wide open, Thade felt the raindrops hit him... His hands dug into the sand convulsively as he sat up -- his head spinning from the sudden change... WHERE DID SHE GO?! Looking about for his "Pet" -- frustrated by the dream he thought was reality, Thade swore to himself that she had been there with him... But looking to the sand for her footprints, he realized she had not. "Damn you, GIRL...!" He snarled.

V 108-109 Staring down into her tea as it steadily grew cold, Phallen recanted the past twenty-four hours. Her hand went gingerly to her cheek finding the welts left by her brother. Shaking her head while reaching for the cup the distinctive sound of hoofbeats stopped her cold. "Not again..." She uttered. Acadia had returned. Halting at the hitching-post just outside the door, she listened. There was that moment of silence where she could not tell where he was -- tethering his horse or creeping up to spring upon her like the last time. Her heart pounded in her ears, listening intently to the approaching steps, their shuffled ascension of the steps. Taking hold of the latch, palms sweating, she anticipated the outright brawl about to break out; 'It's MY turn to beat YOUR ass, Brother.' She could almost hear his curses when the feet stopped on the other side. Psyching herself up, Phallen took a couple of quick breaths then flung the door open... "GO AWAY...!" Phallen felt unusually hot under the collar when their eyes met. Her mouth fell open... confusion plain. This could not be happening... She stumbled back, shaking her head. "You're not here. You're a dream -- a nightmare. There's NO way..." The flood-gates opened. Everything Acadia had drilled into her crashed forth. She was going to die. "You..." Her voice quivered. Unable to finish, Phallen's heel caught the edge of the sisal rug and she began

to fall, blacking out from the terror before her... "Phallen!" Thade cried, seeing her begin to go. He caught her up in one swift move right before she hit the floor. Deliriously, the girl struggled to free herself, digging her nails into Thade's arms. "Let me go. Don't kill me." She begged. His eyes grew dark and stormy. "What?!" Disbelieving his own ears, indeed, a storm grew. But not over her. Someone had gotten to her. Sent her running. Sending him into a rage. His chest heaved when he looked down at her as she lay helpless in his arms. The one he adored so much that he risked his own life for was terrified of him! He shook with anger, his teeth grinding beneath his skin. Lying her on the bed, Thade forced himself to walk away. "Her fear is evident." He spoke aloud, pacing restlessly. 110

His mind shot from one scene to the other in search of an answer. He could not deal with her fear again. "I gave you my word." He moaned. Taking a deep breath, Thade realized that in order to gain her trust again he would have to prove himself. Returning to her side he took her hand, turning it palm up. Running a long index finger up her arm, he studied her face. "Open your eyes, my pet." "No...no, you are not really here." She wept. Through the tears, Phallen begged for mercy as she flinched from his touch. To have her reel from him resulted in a sudden flash of fury on his part. "Oh, Phallen..." And he averted his gaze, hiding the animosity. He scanned the one-room cabin desperately when it breathed from his lips; "You did not hear my promise." "You killed my father, didn't you?" Turning to her he never expected nor saw the blow as it landed on his jaw. His head swivelled slightly before he returned a shocked expression... "What...?" Momentarily dazed, he shook it out attempting to grasp at what she had said as blood streamed from the corner of his mouth. His tongue explored the broken skin as his fingers caught the blood making its way through his goatee. Tilting his head he closed his eyes against her austere glare... "WHAT...?!" He snorted. He still did not get it. Phallen attempted a second assault, only this time he stopped her. Taking hold of her wrists, Thade held her fast,

forcing her arms down before pulling her into him. He focused on her eyes, staring deeply. With a clenched jaw, he growled, "STOP..." Releasing her abruptly, Thade rose from the bed-side, his anger evident. He strode across the room huffing and puffing -- cursing and questioning himself -- trying to understand. Spinning back, he snarled vehemently. "I have done nothing to you!" Blood tinged spittle flew from his lips while shaking a determined finger in her face. "NOTHING...!" He protested. While maintaining his innocence, he was guilty of capping the terror she held of him. Phallen cringed in the far corner of her bed, her face buried in her hands. "Oh my pet..." Thade tried to console as he went to touch her. She drew further into the corner, hiding the bruises behind her hair. "Leave..." Quaked. "No... I told you I would never hurt you." Crawling up next to her Thade rested his head against the headboard wearily. "I'm not leaving you." Phallen seemed to relax. She peered at his sombre face with an air of whimsy, the fear, once clouding the deep brown wellness of her gaze cleared. She began to cry uncontrollably as she flung her arms around his neck. "...I could never..." He concluded, enwrapping her. Gathering the thick mane, Thade lifted it back, nestling against her neck. Phallen pulled away before he saw the marks, but not fast enough. Thade went ballistic. "WHO DID THIS TO YOU?!" He roared taking hold of her a bit too roughly in his attempt to examine the marks on her cheek. 111

Forcing her head to the side he ran his fingers across lightly, causing Phallen to pull away. She pushed away. "It does not matter." She alerted, walking away. To him, it did and he let out a growl in disagreement before springing up behind her catching a handful of her dress. He heard it tear as he sprung around, snarling his disapproval -- unable to restrain the anger within. His fangs flashed viciously. "It DOES matter." Pulling her garment from his grip, Phallen smirked, "Don't flatter yourself..." She leaned away cautiously. His frustration flared. His hands tensed into claws as he tried to grasp her ideals -- his teeth arbitrarily grinding a different tune..."You bring me to my knees, Phallen!" He cried painfully. "Why

are you protecting them?" She shook her head defiantly, as if he could never understand when he grabbed hold... "You are trying my patience, my pet." Her eyes flashed "panic" when he held her firmly. She froze like an animal in the cross-hairs... "Let go..." She forced, liberating with a force unlike herself. She was ready for the attack whether he was or not. Stalking toward her, Phallen let go with a "nut shot", sending him to his knees. He collapsed at her feet, holding himself as he writhed in pain. "I warned you." She recanted. Cringeing in agony, Thade fought for control -- his balls on fire... "Phallen..." He shuttered. Never letting her guard down Phallen peered curiously at him. His eyes were closed but his expression revealed the excruciating pain coursing through his groin. "Thanks to you, I may never produce offspring." He groaned, still cradling the "family jewels". "Perhaps, thanks to YOU, there should not be...!" She rescended bitterly. He was numb. Still catching his breath from the debilitating blow, Thade gave a sign of submission. He could not take one more like that. Thade brought out his alpha-male -- all tooth and nail -- forcing his antagonist back in a huff ... "I came here to protect you..." He breathed on her. "Though my welcome was not what I had in mind." She met him head-on; "Protect me?" Forgetting his own pain, Thade cupped her face. Feeling her hair fall over the both of them, he combed it back. A vibration in his chest; like a purr, crept upon them -- emotionally charged, now, from simply touching her beautiful face.

112

An emotion only she seemed to arouse, Thade found his own ever more difficult to control the more he regained control of her. "Come back with me." She recoiled as if struck, shaking her head. "No.." Her tiny frame feared him, though she had taken him down with that awesome blow... Taking her by the arms with the utmost care, Thade drew her close aware that she could bolt at any second, guarding his "privates" from another strike just in case. But she did not. Instead, Phallen fell into his shoulder in tears... "Lay your hands on me, Phallen." Her arms wrapped around his

shoulders as if for support. "Touch me like you did before we parted." He closed his eyes as he felt her lips brush his, falling under her spell almost immediately... Her skin broke into goose-flesh. "I'm sorry I..." He placed a finger to her lips, tracing them; "Kiss me, my pet." Lifting her chin, Thade felt that same awesome sensation that he had the first time -- the same one he had fought to dismiss as "infatuation". Tasting her skin, he dove into her hair -- parting it to her neck where he caressed her down to her bosom... Embracing her breast, he drew away suddenly... Dizzily... Still holding her in his arms, he took her up without hesitation -- clutching her close to his body, feeling her ease into him warmly -- resting against his beating heart. "You are safe now..." He consoled. "No more harm will come to you." Just holding her in that way made him feel whole. She was all he needed. Without her he was half alive...

"She IS my life..."

"She MUST be brought back...!" The four men sat at a round table, each one bearing a crest upon their chest... Blurred beyond contest, they slavered over their steins, leaning over the table simply to grasp a new refill -- garbling out a protest in transit... No one was sober when the two brothers -- blonde-haired -- their skin bronzed like Gods, clashed their steins together in unison... "She lives with the apes, therefore she dies!" Rhenai, an elder, remained solemn. His skin -- worn like leather -- wrinkled around his eyes as he squinted against the absurdities spat around the table, the wisdom reflecting from his eyes through which he had seen far more than these young fledglings flexing muscle instead of exercising caution. His chin resting in his hand, Rhenai rolled his eyes from Acadia to Erasmus then to Erasmus' twin; Pietre(Peter), keeping an eye on the twins -- who, in their blind trust, would risk their lives for the brazened warrior, Acadia. "Phallen is with the apes...has taken up with General Thade!" Erasmus cried, dowsing his brother's attempt to get a word in edgewise. Acadia acknowledged the declaration with a slow nod, then held his hand

up. "Giving us all the more reason why we must take her now -- before Thade is re-instated." His perfect face studied the others. His deep brown eyes grasping the brother's -- burrowing into their souls a death sentence. "You don't know the half of it." Rhenai piped up. All heads turned, the argument silenced by the abrupt interruption. Leaning on his elbow, he waved a lax finger at them. "Thade is seeking sanction to wed her. Sources reveal he is to go before his Superiors requesting asylum for Phallen." Acadia seethed. "I want him... Bring him to me alive. I want to be the one to end his life."

115

"You know how Phallen will react. She will protect him with her own life." Rhenai reminded, his brow heavy with concern. A curt, evil grin flashed across Acadia's lips. "So be it..." He replied flatly. "Kill her also." Rhenai bolted up from his chair, bumping the table, sending the steins tipping. "You cannot be serious!" He blurted. "Surly, it is not beyond your grasp to realize she has fallen under Thade's influence. To kill Phallen would be barbaric. She is blameless." Pietre went to speak only to be intercepted, once again, by Erasmus' mighty mouth. "SHE released him... took him out of his cell...She IS blameworthy!" He rose rose up out of his seat with each damning word, his voice growing to a fever pitch by the time he was inches from Rhenai's face. Rhenai stood to the challenge, his knuckles mashing into the table, his teeth clenched. "Point your fucking finger up your ass, you little bastard. You don't have a clue as to what that ape could do to you with one hand." Acadia stood, pressed both men back into their seats. "Let us not quarrel amongst ourselves." He quelled, eyeing them calmly. "Save your energies for Thade." Though he smiled, his eyes remained deadly.

Capture them both, or take Phallen by force and assassinate Thade? The drunker they became the deeper the discussion got, though it never went much further than killing the chimp -- throwing back great gulps of ale faster and faster until the debate turned into

more of a belch-fest than a resolution of how to go about returning Phallen to the village.

116

"The very thought of HIM touching her makes my skin crawl..." Acadia glowered into his stein, the animosity clawing to the surface with growing abhorrence toward the General. "The idea of her LETTING him touch her..." Pietre chimed, never expecting a fist to come crashing into his nose. Acadia leered down at the blonde big mouth as he lay sprawled on the floor momentarily dazed. Pietre fingered his nose -- the blood flowing freely -- spreading over his face in one great scarlet billow. "That was uncalled for!" Erasmus bawled, groping to help his brother. "I don't need his rebuttal." Acadia sneered. Rhenai, on the other hand fought to keep a straight face, all the while thinking gleefully; "GOOD ONE!" Without another thought about it, Acadia resumed his seat: Business as usual. "They will be taken together. Do whatever necessary, just DON'T KILL THADE!" He scanned their faces lingering on the brothers' -- Erasmus holding a rag to his brothers nose. "We will assemble and prepare in three days." The dark warrior announced, pushing away from the table. Doffing the long black braid down his back, Acadia came around to the twins, leaning inquisitively to see. "Is it broken?" He asked, pulling the blood-soaked cloth out of Pietre's nostrils. Running a finger along the bridge, Pietre shook his head. "Too bad..." Acadia chased, snaring cruelly. "Maybe next time." He strode from the crude structure, leaving the three unwillingly relenting...

* * *

Phallen weighed heavily on his conscience. Memories he wished to keep enshrouded played themselves out, announcing their presence. She was significant, then, in his book of virtues... falling dead at his feet now -- disgracing her people... herself... HIM... 'Father must be turning over in his grave.' His only daughter. There was no forgiveness, Acadia knew. With a snarl, the young warrior recalled how their father had coddled Phallen. He told her things, relating to her ways of living in perspective to what

nature had to offer... "By all means, stay out of the ape's orchards!" Came his stern warning... Did this -- COULD this bastard-ape adore her as their father had? Would he protect her with his life? 'If he were only here, and knew just whom Phallen had befriended, Father would never forgive her...' "Spoiled brat!" Acadia hissed, shaking his head. "You're such a dumb ass." Sprinting through the darkened allies, Acadia could not out-run the truth... How her desertion left him hollow. Phallen showered compassion on the apes, who in turn, only looked upon her as a low-caste -- a sitter for their children... Those children loved her though. They brought her books, taught her to read their text...

117

Although she was a square peg trying to fit in a round hole, Phallen never second-guessed where she belonged. Days turned into weeks -- into months... Ozzy, her father, realized how his daughter had taken his words and ran with them. That was when he laid plans to create her tree-abode... "NEVER let them know where you live, my Daughter." She was handed everything. Even when she went against all that she was warned NOT to do... Acadia's blood boiled; "How could you?" Had she forgotten the attacks? Had she forgotten the face of the enemy lead by General Thade when he brought his army down upon the village, killing anyone daring to stand with rebellion? How the General stood with his cock-sure smirk, surrounded by his henchmen, wiping out... Acadia bared his teeth in his run, spit spraying his face... "GODDAMN YOU, Phallen...!" Of course she was too young to remember. Acadia was but a boy when the storm troopers pillaged the village. The image of his father ripping the little girl, Phallen from her mother's arms only seconds before the woman was swept up and carried off was forever burned into his memory as if it only happened yesterday... The sound of their father's voice -- so final... Concealed beneath the floor boards, left alone in pitch darkness -- too afraid to breathe, ten-year-old Acadia held his hand over Phallen's mouth. "S-s-h-h...We have to be quiet." The boy whispered with barely a breath. Thunderous crashes, screams of

fear... of death broke on their ears as they huddled with spiders and mice. Things smashed onto the floor Acadia and five-year-old Phallen hid beneath... Then his voice. Acadia felt his sister's arms clamp around him, her tiny fingers digging into his flesh and he buried her whimpers in his chest. Heavy, booted feet clomped across the room, wreaking havoc as furniture was over-turned, thrown through the windows... "Take the men for target practice. Herd the women and sell them to the traders..." ...Fading...

118

Silence... "Who came?" Phallen's voice quivered. The boy fought back his tears, his breath hitching when he inhaled. "The ape's came, Phallen...The apes came." Acadia stopped, rested his hands on his knees and caught his breath. "Thade will not escape this time." He swore. Would killing Thade mean he would have to take his sister's life? Would it justify their parent's treatment? Maybe his strong-armed call had convinced Phallen of what a beast the General really was. She could not be so blind NOT to see through his disguise could she? He could not love her. Still catching his breath, Acadia peered around, scowling. 'Thade had used her for his own gain,' he surmised, rising. 'Nothing else.' 'Even one as unusual as Phallen -- her blood running much richer from her mother's side -- could not change the ape's mind.' Information coming from the ape's city revealed a different turn of events, though. Sources said Thade had returned humbled, deeply affected by his experiences involving a human, "unlike any" he had ever dealt with; proclaiming that she was all he wanted -- how he loved her...! Acadia glared disdainfully at the gates securing his village. "The ape is old. He is weaker now." He thought he heard a touch of sympathy in his own voice. Acadia snorted with disgust at his own slightedness. "I will be there to take advantage of your slow reflexes, striking first." With an air of certainty, Acadia strode on, guffawing; "What you now believe must have you living in fear." The brash warrior knew little of General Thade. The seasoned officer was not afraid. He would fight for his Phallen... ..To the death... His skill and agility had not waned... He remained a deadly spar.

Moreso now, for he adored Phallen and vowed to protect her with his life. A life certain to end if Acadia got his way...

Everything grinded to a halt when they entered the gates. All eyes fell upon them, staring incredulously -- packages dropping, their contents spilling about the sidewalk. On Thade's horse, he and Phallen entered the square glowing under the suns' radiance. The citizens gathered around them, their voices mingling as more and more arrived. Some uttering how they had only thought it had been a rumor... something about "a human having been the only one to actually capture his heart..." while other deeper, darker ones murmured; "It was not proper..." Officer's stationed in the square sent message to the Army Compound of the strange arrival, suggesting a convoy... Corporal Omri ran for his mount leaping into the saddle from behind, fisting the reins and wheeling the horse around. Careening around a sharp bend, he jerked hard to the left avoiding a collision with a cartfull of fruit and its vendor. Curiosity seekers began to emerge from their homes and businesses just to get a glimpse at what all of the todo was about. Coming around the Great Bend, Omri pulled hard on the reins, stunned by the mass. Those close enough reached up and touched Phallen's clothing, running their hands over the fabric as if they had never felt or seen anything like it. In a way -- they had not. Not on any human's back, that was. Her greeting was warm as she smiled down acknowledging the kindness bestowed. "I love you all so much..." those closest heard her resign. Thade was not so trusting, though. He observed the growing crowd warily, paying close attention to any sign of rebellion due to Phallen's presence other than as a slave. From beneath a heavy brow his eyes shifted side to side while his ears were bombarded by so many voices, making it impossible to decipher all that was being said. He reached back almost instinctively as someone took Phallen's hand, nearly pulling her from the horse. Thade's head swung like a cobra's, a deadly warning in his eyes. Guiding her arms around his waist, he advised gruffly, "Don't let go of me." Glancing ahead he saw the Corporal break through the crowd. With his upward nod, Thade signaled to him as

he urged his own horse on, meeting up with Omri on the fringe. "We need to get you both safely out of here." The young chimp advised nervously. Falling in behind Thade and his precious cargo, Omri followed closely as they bee-lined for the compound; armed sentries lining their route. The massive gates squealed shut behind them, the gatekeepers staring over their shoulders at the trio as they passed... Wheeling his horse around Thade trotted up next to Omri and stretched out his hand. "Thank you." The young chimp's brow raised inquisitively. Smiling boyishly he grasped the hand firmly. "It's alright." Phallen clung to Thade. 120-123

Being around so many bodies made her uneasy. It had been so long since she had encountered such a mass, be it ape or human. To make matters worse, a gorilla division went marching past shouting cadence, their eyes trailing long after they passed as they kept in step with the rhythmic shout from their drill sergeant. It felt as if she were a target. In fact, Phallen knew she was, for every time she glanced their way she met with a pair of eyes -- deep-set and suspicious. Maybe it had not been such a good idea to be there. Quaking with apprehension, Thade felt her tension. He rested his hands on hers; understanding, flashing a cold stare at the soldiers. She felt so outnumbered; Phallen: one -- the whole ape army: one-hundred-thousand and counting... She closed her eyes -- listened as their voices faded; a mighty roar climaxing, echoing back like thunder. She jumped -- opening her eyes in time to see there was one more about to join them; Commander Attar. He lumbered gracelessly across the dirt road, a petulant look on his black face as he caught Phallen's uneasy glance. She remembered seeing him at Calima, his intimidating stature keeping her well hidden in the crevices. Now, to come face-to-face with his dominant presence shook her. Where was that dark corner when she needed it? To see but not BE seen? The look on the gorilla's face when he discovered Thade had escaped was worth a thousand words as he stood slack-jawed and speechless. "The little fucker cracked the code." He swore scratching his chin. With little afterthought, Attar chuckled to himself. "He knows more than they gave him

credit for." Then it hit him. Thade had not returned to the city. It meant he was in the desert. Likely dead -- having succumbed to his injuries and the elements. "It is my fault if you are found dead." He muttered stepping from the destroyed control room, heavy hearted -- his conscience gnawing ceaselessly. "I should have never left you here." Phallen remained tucked away, hearing his words. Maybe even the Commander's shuddering breath of remorse... She felt like revealing herself; to let the mourning simian know Thade was safe. But in her deepest fear, she knew Attar would have struck her down before a single word of comfort could be spoken...

124

Eternity hung... Crouched in the dark, barely breathing, Phallen held her position, her calves tightening in rejection. 'Go... Please go now...' The search party returned. "No sign..." Not a trace. Attar nodded solemnly. He realized that by this time his friend had to be dead -- covered by the drifting sands... Gone forever... "Very well." Taking one last look around, the tour shuffled silently away. Phallen was ready to get out of there. She felt as if she were trespassing... That same sensation crept back when Attar raised his muzzle in her direction, sniffing the air. He recollected the scent, beelining straight at her with certain suspect. Thade threw his leg over the horse's head landing solidly before Attar, dwarfed easily by the gorilla's intimidating seven-foot stance. To Phallen's blurred surprise, the hulking ape seemed to humble before him -- to bow with respect, though his beady eyes remained focused on her. He dropped his gaze at the curt sound of Thade's throaty recognizance, looking abashedly to the intense stare the General held him under. Baring his fangs temptuously, Thade let Attar know he, nor his "pet", were not about to be pushed around. With that, he turned and reached up to Phallen, who willingly fell into his arms. "Be strong my Pet." He purged before kissing her cheek. He placed her directly behind himself, squeezing her hands securely before taking a step forward protectively. "Tell me, boys... Is there a problem?" He challenged. 'Be nice!' cautioned... He shook his head. Nodded.

Closed his eyes as if meditating. "This is Phallen..." Came his calm refrain, his eyes twinkling as he presented her. "You will never find another like her." He beamed on her as if she were a treasure. In his eyes she was as precious as an Opium Den.

125

His fingers intertwined in hers. His complete love -- whether or not he cared what anyone thought -- did not ease the tension building inside of her. Attar's evil eye... his animosity -- watching her as she watched the dust settle on her shoes -- did little. Aching, Phallen could only stare into Thade's back as she timidly shot glances to waiting benevolence. Turning an ashen, Phallen felt herself going... There was no air! "I can't breathe..." She forced, leaning weakly against Thade's back. Turning attentively to his beloved, he caught Attar's unaccepting glare. Phallen clutched his hands convulsively before going down in a cloud of dust, falling to the beguiling glare. "You fuck, YOU!" Thade cursed, kneeling to the dusty form. His angst proved evident when he shoved Attar away, knocking the gorilla off center. "Get away..." Thade warned. Resting Phallen's head in the crook of his arm, Thade hunched over her when Omri gently approached. "Let me help..." Thade turned viciously on the tranquil tone of Omri's voice before his own body began shaking. "STAY BACK!" The young chimp threw his hands up immediately; "Whoa, Chief! I'm here to help you." "Sure..." the ex-general chastised, watching all peripherally. He was sick from their assumptions. Everyone was content as long as things sailed calmly... His skin crawled, raising the hair on his neck. "Kiss their asses, Omri." Lifting her off the ground, Thade held her to his chest. "You think you know..." He lamented, shaking his head sadly... Sweeping past Attar, he procured; "Things change..." There was no misinterpreting his struggle to retain composure, though his proclamation stunned both Attar and Omri. Leaning against the door separating he and Phallen from them, Thade laughed nervously. The unease in his gut could not be quelled. 'They don't trust you when you're around HER.' Feeling the door

press into his back, the ex-General pushed off, waited for more abuse. "Please...?" Corporal Omri held a key out. Thade grunted his disapproval, fangs bared. "I thought for a minute we had an ally. Instead, I find betrayal." "Wait a minute." Omri protested. "I have always been on your side." Averting his eyes, Omri added, "An 'ass-kisser', huh? Indeed...! I kissed yours. Maybe I puckered up to the wrong one though." He looked to the older simian with a condescending eye. 'I need to escape... He's driving me mad... He...' Thade's benevolent inner voice shut. Omri stood before him as if sizing him up. "Allow me to escort you, Sir..." Cooly rescinded the challenge. "Will we lock horns one day?" Thade inquired, his chin rising. Omri lowered his head as he passed, his hair hiding his face... * * *

Unlocking the door, Omri threw it wide open just as Thade squeezed by casting, still, an untrusting eye his way. "Go away." He ordered, catching the door with his foot to give it a mighty shove. Still holding the key out, the door slammed rudely in Omri's face. He blinked -- waved the key then shrugged.

126

"I know; "Nothing personal." He called before skipping into a run. He knew it was not... that Thade would get over it... "He is in love..." Omri jestered.

Phallen -- as far as Omri could tell, adored the General. It showed in her eyes when she gazed at him. In the short time he had seen them together, Phallen was not afraid to touch Thade -- her hands falling on him easily as if she had grown with him. Thade must have shown her a side of him no one else had ever seen. There was no other explanation to why she clung to him. He was not the best looking ape, for certain. Especially when incited. He could get real ugly then... He was not young; what-with all of the grey coming on his muzzle -- changing the brilliant silver to dull, white, stiff whiskers -- replacing the silk-like goatee, seemingly more prominent since his near-fatal collapse at Calima. Maybe because she saved his life she felt obligated. Was it the feel of her smooth skin under his hands that soothed a savage? Nonetheless, a

devotion lay between them, and because of her, Thade had been forced to recollect his past -- bringing him around to face a fact. That Phallen; her unique ability to heal physically and spiritually, produced the soul of a fallen angel. A precious gem lay in his wake. A pure love. That, alone would surly bring the General around. That and the taste of her kisses. Her skin... A treasure in his life. Omri stopped. He had the whole equation figured out before throwing his head back with a knowing laugh. "She REALLY loves him!" HIM...! She instilled a beginning. A completion. There would be no denying her. All the signs were there in crimson: Mess with Phallen and you will get hurt...

127 Laying her on the day-bed, Thade's emotions rose through a ragged sigh. He felt weak and fearful at the same time. Never seeing her again after all was said and done badgered incessantly. Stroking the jet hair back he watched the innocent sleeper, losing himself willingly. "I will protect you..." Her cheek was soft and warm beneath his hand, embracing it, stirring her slightly. It ached inside his chest, came up in his throat as a lump hard to swallow. Brushing her cheek, Thade nodded to himself -- if it came between he being reinstated or Phallen... "I will never leave you." With a quivering smile he kissed her forehead. "You pulled me from the darkness." Confessed. Watching as her brow rose he studied this 'creature', tipping his with wonder, bowing to her lips.

"What are you?" Queried, his words brushing her lips. Just to kiss her sent him. To make love to her would be the epitome' of passion -- granting release to a relationship destined to become a tale repeated for the generations to come of a love nothing could forstall. "I adore you." Opening his eyes Thade drew back smiling wanly while deep brown eyes filled him. A strange look crossed his face as if his hand had been caught in the cookie jar. "Forgive me." He gently beseeched. Reaching up, touching his face, he pressed into her caress almost desperately, physically moved by her action. Her brow creased with concern. "You are troubled." She said. Was it so obvious? Thade checked his emotions, their cold fingers sliding along his spine. Phallen had

caught it when it flashed over his eyes -- before he had a chance to turn away. She knew that quickly... "What...?" She sought, feeling his trembling hand against her cheek. Seeing him so shaken had her second-guessing herself... What had she done? As if reading her mind Thade prepared to bare it all, resenting himself for causing her to doubt herself -- to doubt THEM. "My pet..." He cooed. "Do not assume my feelings have changed." Though he smiled it did nothing to conceal the sadness which dulled his eyes -- the unevenness in his voice.

128

He took inventory of the room, counting the many objects scattered about. His new understanding of the past opened like a book. 'If she were to bear my off-spring would she die?' Cupping her face in his hands fear traveled through bringing lots of baggage in the form of a deepening scowl upon his brow... "You are so fragile." He said aloud, not meaning to. The feel of her skin beneath his hands brought a rush so profound he could not restrain the shudder. Ever since that first night when he held her, he wanted her. Having closed off the very idea of loving, Thade had closed his heart long ago. Then he met Phallen. Something about the way she looked at him brought a calm. The fear that tried to consume him fled. "Go somewhere with me." He requested.

* * *

Part II When Thade's father, Kalib (Kah-leeb) passed away, he inherited everything. Having loved his father dearly, the chimp only wanted his father back. He cared less about what had been bestowed. To return to his childhood home proved impossible, so it stood, undisturbed, since -- the rooms ecoing of the past -- keeping Thade away. Lessons learned -- some good, some not so good -- remained harbored behind the double doors... No more than ten and warned numerously NOT to jump from the top of the stairs to the landing below, impish Thade, with his testing nature, defied gravity for a fleeting moment. The crash was astounding when he came down in a heap at the bottom taking out a book case glass with his feet and suffering a dislocated shoulder.

Kalib, so disappointed by his son's insubordination, shook his head sadly. That was worse than any "hide-tanning" ever received. Even having his shoulder realigned was not as painful as having let his father down. To find something to keep Thade out of mischief was like trying to locate "El Dorado". Impossible... If Thade was not harassing the house-humans with his out-of-control antics he was raising hell, in the city, with his "Hood" friends. Among the malicious acts they played their favorite thing to do was chase Farmer Harner's goats. The animals, when frightened, had a peculiar fail-safe protection... they would faint, falling stiff to the ground where they ran sending Thade and his cronies into fits of laughter as the goats simply dropped in mid-flight. The boys were good at heart, but when they would get together, they always managed to get themselves into some real trouble, and Kalib was not always there to bail them out. When the General did return, though, Thade would disappear for weeks at a time -- detained at the homestead -- forced to amend the mistakes he made, and suffer for his friends in the process.

129-131

To dispute the charges meant an ass beating, and he took the blame for everything, sparing his friends the same treatment... "Why do you insist on behaving this way? Do you think because I am a General, you are immune to discipline?" Kalib preached. Thade hid a devilish smile under his bowed head as he shook it ardently. "No." "I WILL send you to Military School if you do not shape up here real soon. TRY ME AGAIN!" And Kalib forced his son's head up catching that grin. "I dare you..." Young Thade sobered immediately, nodding obediently... Needless to say, the next day, the young squire was at Farmer Harner's admitting to the old gorilla that it was "he" who had sent his goats into their rigormortis-like state. Obeying his father's demand Thade volunteered to work it off. "You can start here." Harner boomed, pointing to the pens. 'How many pellets can a goat shit?!' After cleaning up after them, Thade could have said... Though it had been dry and sunny that summer, if Thade would have had to rake up another another pile of

goat droppings, he would have slit his wrists instead... To look at another goat and the young ape cringed. The shit scraped from his shoes still fertilized his father's garden... He learned what responsibility meant that summer... Young Thade left the goats -- and whatever else he antagonized alone from then on... "I understand what responsibility means now." Kalib smiled at his son. "Good. Now you will learn how to handle it..." He recognized the mature attitude. It was time to introduce his son to a point of interest: Archery... It was soon apparent this sport was second-nature to Thade as Kalib took his young son out, demanding complete concentration, impressing upon the lad that what he held was not a toy, but a tool...A weapon. This held Thade's interest and he listened intently while his father explained what each part was -- how it worked and why... "Few wish to be archers. Therefor it is becoming a lost art. There is little glory and it can be dangerous. One must use extreme caution while applying this tool to the hunt." Standing in the fields surrounding the estate, Father and Son practiced through the days of sunshine, their arrows burrowing deep into the haystacks, narrowly missing the solid red circle of a bullseye... "It is easy to hit a still target. But a moving one..." And Kalib waved his arm for the humans to be set loose... "Try now..." Thade stood narrowing his eye across the top of the shaft, targeting the back of a man as he raced for the woods... Releasing, it shot straight snagging the human between the shoulder blades, bringing the big man down in a dust bowl. "You are so cock-sure, aren't you?" General Kalib amended. Young Thade tasted the blood of victory and he liked it... Taking him to target practice every day, Kalib taught him everything. By about the third week, though, Thade had developed a welt along the inner part of his forearm -- a gift from the bow-string snapping from its anchor-point. How long it had been there and how long it had been hurting the youngster, Thade never let his father know. It had not been long by the looks of it -- raw and red, almost bleeding, the ape's hair having been pulled out. Yet, Thade never uttered a word... Upon discovering the irritation, the very next day Kalib

presented a leather cuff. "I thought you had been avoiding the snap," He addressed, applying the piece and trussing it tightly. "This will protect you from the string." "I'm sorry Father." "No, my Son. This does not mean you are weak in any way. In fact it is the opposite."

132

An eighty-pound draw, Thade pulled the string back anchoring it next to his ear as if it were no more than forty or fifty, now. Setting the cross-hairs on sight, Thade nailed his target dead-centered. Beaming with pride as he lowered his bow, he met his fathers assiduous eye. "You are ready for competition." Kalib commended, putting his arm around his son's shoulders... * * *

Duty called General Kalib... Sixteen-year-old Thade took himself to the fields, wading through the grass to the clearing in the middle by the old horse barns, remembering what had been drilled into him: "FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS..." Indeed. But the General neglected to figure, in his son's life, something far more intriguing than archery... The opposite sex...! He could not hit the broad side of a barn when a certain female came around, batting her lashes, smiling sweetly at him. Turning toward her, his auborn hair blew in his vision as he collected it to the side, brushing at the loose ends... Taking his wild tangles, Ari grasped them in a tight pony-tail and tethered them at his neck, smiling on his lips. "Hello Thade." "You Are Bothering Me!" He scolded lurching from her angrily. The harder he tried to ignore her the worse he got, and with the competition only days away, Thade did not need her there. Glaring at her slyly, he wished she would leave... 'She bothers me so!' Releasing from her grooming efforts, Thade took his archer's stance -- missing his target after several tries... Throwing his bow and quiver to the ground he stormed over to Ari. "You are SO distracting me! GO AWAY!" He declared, baring his fangs. "I like to watch you, though." And she smiled coyly up at him. "NO! There is no room for you now." He told, jerking his gaze from her doleful eyes. "There is always room for love." Thade froze, peered over his shoulder at her. "Walk over to the falls with

me... I'll have you back in time to practice for the competition..." Ari had taught him everything he needed to know that hot afternoon by the lake. Hidden in the green grass, they made love. A clumsy kind of find-and-see love, and Thade was hitched on her. Having been his first encounter, he loved her whole-heartedly as they lay panting from their labor of love... There was no time for her now. Earning merit, proving himself responsible, was... She would be there later...

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Gaining status, he grew tired of wasting time on her and he scared her off. There was too much to do besides entertaining the daughter of a politician. That was not a part of his training, though she had sparked an attraction he would not soon forget. Approached by Senator Sandar, Thade bowed respectfully, not realizing that he was Ari's father until the accusations arose... "I get the drift that Ari has taken a fancy to your archery." The young apes eyes rolled up to Sandar's. "UH, well, we have talked." He replied jitterly. "She has spoken greatly of you. General Kalib's son, Thade. A grade-A archer. I understand you are to compete in the Grande Masters?" Thade nodded humbly, dropping his gaze. Searching for an escape, he followed the labarynth in the tapestry. "That is why I must leave. I have practice for this weekend." Side stepping the towering figure, Thade headed for the door when Ari appeared, young and fearless, a devilish smile curving on her lips. Hands on protruding hips, her braless nipples protruded through the gossamer blouse. Her hair was newly braided, intertwining golden fibers and beads of crystal. But who really knocked him out was her friend, Josee... Attracted? Undoubtedly... Josee was to become Thade's courtesan, but at that moment she was to become a really nice piece of ass for him, keeping Ari "neat" until their wedding... Having two deeply in love with him...

Escorting two beautiful girls to the dance, Thade, dressed in black silk top-coat and matching trousers was the catch and all were envious, either by his status or by whom he escorted. Arriving in the moonlit eve, the trio remained close as they met and addressed

the Matre' D, following their waiter to an exclusive table at the edge of the terrace which over-looked the misty jungle. There was no cross-seating as the girls sat on either side of their date, feeling the slick material covering his body. The human girl, small in stature, her eyes slightly averted, hidden beneath a storm of black hair, took their orders nodding as she wrote them before looking shyly up. "Will there be anything else?" Her gentle voice asked. "No." Josee shot rudly. Ari peered at the girl fondly. "No, dear. When you return, if there is anything else, we'll let you know." Thade stared out at her, transfixed on her face... He shook his head... Lost, he focused on his dates, dismissing the connection... Falling back against the plush pillows, he draped his arms across the girls shoulders as he smiled. "You think you're so hot, Thade? I think you're all Daddy's Boy." The chimp's arms coiled and he climbed over Ari as she fumbled to keep him seated. His teeth bared as he closed in on the big mouth, ready to do battle. "Bring your ass out!" He challenged, parting couples in his pursuit. Shadowed at the bar, they remained seated, their arms folded across the padding. "Re-lax, Buddie...!" Spinning them, Thade drew his arm back. He blinked. He studied. "Ohmygod, Dano...?" His number one partner-in-crime grinned fully in his face..."YES...! What you gonna do?" Swinging the chimp from his barstool, the two commenced to brawl in friendship across the barroom, throwing chairs and crashing make-outs along their menacing path as each took turns throwing the other, punching and clawing all the way. Taking eachother's punches on the roll, the two roiled until the bouncer intercepted, taking them both off their feet by the collars... "I know who your father's are..." He warned, nodding to the youths. "Do WE want this to remain anonymous or should we just go ahead and throw you on the street...?" Stopping in mid-blows, Thade and Dano held their fists as if in suspended animation as they went over the pros and cons. Snarling arbitrarily up at the grimacing gorilla-bouncer, Dano rebuked, "Fuck you, Mother Fucker! What are you gonna do?!" Thade shook his head; "No, Dano... Don't go there!" The gruff chimp snuffed the bouncer. "Oh come on, Thade.

Where's your balls? Don't tell me you lost those too?" Just then, Ari stepped up. Draping her arm around Thade's shoulders she batted her lashes at the bouncer. "I think I can manage this one if you'll allow me..." "Well..." The gorilla began. "It was all in fun. There won't be any trouble from us." Dano gave Thade a look of disgust before tugging taughtly on his collar. "Fine... I think we're all done now." The gorilla eyed the two before releasing them. Dano brushed by, his eyes sliding across Thade... "Pussy..." Thade clocked him hard. Dano spun, momentarily held up by sheer surprise before hitting the floor. Looking at his hand, Thade pouted. "No, my friend, I'm not. I can respect, though." * * * That was as close as he ever wanted to get to legalalities. There was no time for trivial bullshit... No time for his love life... Placing Ari on the back-burner, so to speak, Thade went after merit. Proving himself to be a responsible ape was top priority. She would be there later, he knew. Or Josee. And he smiled breezily.

* * *

Competition after competition, Thade walked away with First Prize, taking top-ranking scores in all three fields: target, field, and flight. He even received commemoration for "Best in show" -- something introduced due to his unusual flair in approach. Trophies and ribbons collected across the fireplace mantle, accumulating any space as he continued to accel. Taking his new-found hobby and turning it into a passionate competition for perfection... "You're good." Thade lowered his bow and turned to the voice. Dano waded through the grass, throwing his arms up in surrender, smiling sheepishly. Thade gave his upward nod, a sad little grin penciling his mouth. "Look,I'm sorry for..." Thade waved him off. "Don't worry about it. Shit happens, right?" Dano stared at his own feet. He had hurt his friend. And though the archer accepted the apology humbly, Dano knew their friendship was never to be as strong as it once was. "Good luck tomorrow." Thade smiled painfully. "Thanks." Their handshake -- strong with good fortune -- lacked in the warmth of brotherhood each once held for one another. Thade had a niche for falling into a good thing. He

always accelled. And he was good. Damned good. Turning back to his target, Thade anchored the string next to his ear. He could hear the high-tension sing there before letting go, the string snapping against his forearm as the arrow shot straight, splintering the one already protruding from the bullseye, with a crack... He would never see Dano alive again...

* * *

Thade awoke to a gentle knock on his bedroom door before it slowly opened. His father slipped in quietly, his face drawn. "What? What's wrong?" He sat up, swinging his feet to the floor. "There was a fire last night, Thade." Kalib began, his voice quivering. "Dano's house..." Sheer horror covered Thade's face. "No, Father...! No...!" Kalib sat down on the edge of the bed folding his hands between his knees -- his head down. "Dano...?" Thade begged to hear that he was alright. That he had only lost his possessions. Kalib sunk further, his brown shaggy hair falling over his harried face. "No... I JUST SAW HIM!!! Father, I just talked to him!" Wiping his tears, Kalib shook his head. "I AM so sorry, Thady..." Thade broke down and bawled. He could not believe that Dano was gone. Curling into his father's lap, he begged to see his friend alive. "Where is he, Father? Where's Dano? We fought and all but we're brothers! He knows how to play me! I know he's bullshittin' me!"

134

part III

...So many ghosts... The many months away did not still the ache. To see his home, well, he really could not admit to himself just how he would react -- with a smile from all of the good times there, or in great sobs full of remorse. Taking a deep breath, he released it meditatively, forcing himself to swallow though his throat was dry. It had been one thing to understand his father was dying. Still, Kalib was there. Yet when he breathed his last breath, Thade could not grasp that he had passed -- leaving him... 'He could not go. Too many questions still remain unanswered.' Thade was bitter. To ravage everything in his sights -- to destroy all that

reminded him of his father and of their past climbed Thade's "Tree of Pain"... pulled him fast and hard down to earth... "Damn you all..." He swore. * * *

Only red-rimmed eyes gave his pain away... * * *
He had not returned since his father's funeral...

* * *

This day, though, he was...

Part III

How far off could one go? Physically being, his thoughts stretched beyond the stratosphere; into an infinite span of space, grasping for one piece of solitude that could bring him peace and refuge from the pain that surged within. Together, Thade and Phallen rode... He could not speak. Something hard had lodged in his throat, and whenever he tried to convey, it stopped him... Staring blankly ahead, the grass rolled softly in the sun -- green to yellow -- varigated on the breeze as tall Shirley Poppies waved stubbornly therein, their black seeds dumping clumsily from their hosts. Milkweed fairies fluttered by, their haphazard dance of "whateverymaycome" flittered by, some catching in the "Black's" mane... Having already arrived, in his mind, Thade was rigid. Phallen felt him shudder, saw his jaw tighten as his teeth gnashed. She rested her head against his back, folding her arms around him securely. He felt her embrace. The silken hair of his arms brushed her skin as his hands went to hers. His hold, so desperate as if he were begging: "Don't let go! Don't let me fall!"

135

If he were breathing, why, then, did it feel as if he needed air...? It was as if he could not get enough when he took Phallen's hand -- pressed it to his mouth -- pacifying the panic... 'You are the object of my longing.' The long held breath expelled on her palm proclaiming his affection. Closing his eyes, he held her there... "My pet..." Dizzy, he awkwardly leaned to one side. "Oh, Thade, don't do this to yourself." Phallen bequeathed, leaning to his peril. Thade demanded control as he raised his head, hands flailing as he blindly searched... "I have lost touch with

everyone...!" His mouth hung open as if in a silent scream before Phallen grabbed hold... "No,you haven't!" And she shook him violently back to life... "You're HERE!, You're ALIVE...!" "Don't go away now." She wept, curling into the nape of his neck. "Oh, Please, Thade -- Not now..." Her tears ran down his back as she begged... His breath was short as he came to. Her breath on his neck -- the hot tears down his back... He dove into the human hands grasping the reins... "My soul is saved...!" He rebuked icily. His hands clasped tightly on hers in his moment of clarity. His breath was timed and tempered in her ear as he leaned back into her... "I need you to stay with me." Came on clear breath, fighting to control the emotions warring the closer they drew.

Tall grass now brushed at their feet as the mare made her way along a path once well-worn -- grown over,now, due to its lack of use. The shadow of the estate loomed over them. Phallen raised her head and stared at the magnificent spread. There were no sounds except for the birds of prey as the glided easily above the glade. Just below their lonesome calls, though, there was another sound. That of babbling water. Beyond the tall grass and wildflowers an aqueduct flowed beneath the entry way, cascading over the edge of the rocky cliff, into a hypnotic wash-away. It looked like a castle with its manifold of spires and levels -- mist, from the falls rising to its foundation. Phallen saw a castle in the clouds. Thade saw his darkest hours re-born... Pulling suddenly on the reins, he leapt from the horse. He spread his arms in grande gesture bowing deep to the house. "This is my home." Straightening, his eyes met hers. "All the plans I ever made lie here." Sad eyes... Expressionless... Phallen grimaced. He dropped his hands, turned away. "Needless to say none of them came to be..." And his voice trailed off as he sauntered away. "You aren't finished yet." Phallen called. Stopping dead in his tracks, Thade stared over his shoulder then turned. Phallen looked at him pitifully as she shook her head.

136 "It's only the beginning for you." Her deep brown eyes delved into him and he rushed to where she remained; atop the

horse. "For US..." He corrected. Reaching up, Phallen fell into his arms, the tall grass groped at her legs as she landed gently before him. He smiled at her. There was a new-born confidence in his steely gaze. "You are everything to me. All the years of waiting -- knowing there HAD to be someone who could understand me... It was you all along. Now, there is stillness in my soul. It's because you have come." Phallen shrunk from his dauntless stare slipping carefully from his hands. "Your Empire awaits, Thade. Step up to it..." She procured. Fixated by her beauty, Thade felt his chest swell when she smiled at him, took his face in her hands, and kissed his cheek before leaping away gracefully, dancing through the overgrowth to disappear over the hill. Watching after her it seemed he had made up his mind; "Take a breath, Thady!" his inner voice blew when he stumbled to the side a few steps. Evidently she satisfied him as he fought to keep his balance -- stepping into the sway. He took a deep breath, groaned inwardly, trying to keep his emotions in check. But that spark ignited, not-so-long-ago, had become a flame, and it burned in him...

Standing there alone, the insects hidden in the undergrowth were louder than ever. Thade felt so desolate standing there without her beside him. He pictured her face, the soft, knowing fawn's eyes that observed him with skittish expectancy -- aware that she was considered prey; a "game animal" - - prepared to jaunt into the thicket. But when she looked at him, those fawn's eyes effected his ability to take her as a trophy. They reflected Thade's soul, something she innocuously aquired, perhaps while he was in her care. A soft groan surfaced. A sound he could not recall ever having made. A sound of longing... The loneliness did not agree with him. Taking Black's reins, he followed the bent grass. Killdeer hobbled before his feet with mock injury in hopes of leading the intruder far from their grounded nests while shiny black crickets scurried and hopped for safer horizons. Brave grass hoppers clung to his legs for a ride, springing off at the nearest stalk of orchard grass, riding as it bent under their weight. Cicada's buzzed and clicked seclusively, their huge eyes bulgeing from

triangular heads while gossamer wings exercised flight. Tethering the mare to a post, Thade continued up the hill alone. Coming around the side of the estate he approached without a sound. She was standing at the bluff's edge absorbing the sun's warmth like a new-born creature experiencing the soft winds for the first time, the breeze lifting her hair in web-like strands, spinning around her. Stealing silently up behind her Thade slid his arms around her waist. She leaned against him seeming to read just what swam in his mind. Resting her head back on his shoulder she looked at him. "Don't worry, it will be alright." She consoled. He purred like a contented cat, burying his muzzle in the curve of her neck, inhaling her rich sweet scent. "I am in love with you." He confessed on her skin. Her face was aglow with surprise when she turned to him meeting his ardent expression, the setting sun filtering across his eyes cast them steely grey. He observed her coolly, concealing his sharp fangs when he could not help but smile. "Marry me..." He breathed. Phallen caught her breath. He felt her unease. Spinning her, Thade took her up in his arms, combed his fingers through the long black hair to drape it down her back with a sweep.

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With her he felt his strength. When she touched his weathered brow it soothed his worries. He chuckled lightly. "You look right through me. I can't hide anything from you." Nuzzling her jawline, he held her fiercely, feeling her ripple under his hands. "I can't help myself. You do things to me." Each word, more fervent than the last, his desire for her was evoked, anticipating the kiss when their breath mingled. Dipping her back in his arms, cradling her safely, he stared, unabashedly, back into those timid eyes. "You are not of the "human" race." He unconvered next to her peach-skin cheek. The dark infinity in her eyes sent him freely into the abyss. "What am I, then?" Her question came like the breeze. To let her slip away now was unimaginable. HE was the Trophy, now. Her inhabitions had burrowed so deeply into his life he did not care about anything else. "Mine." Enveloping her frame in one long arm, Thade gathered her hair back with his free hand. With the back

of his hand, he stroked her cheek, catching a shuddering breath as every hair on his body rose sensitively. "I love you..." Rose the ardent proclamation, once again, through a clenched jaw. "I have not uttered those words for many years. To say them to you seems only fair." Phallen rested in his arms. She knew she was safest there...

* * *

Part V

Only one of the two suns still hung in the horizon fading quickly. Thade held the key in a shaking hand. "Why do I fear my father's house?" The solid arching door with all of its knots and grooves seemed to have responded to the query, rattling in its jamb if only from the evening breeze. "Are you alright?" Phallen asked. Thade nodded stiffly. "I have never been afraid." He scolded himself. Perspiration beaded on his brow as the lock tumbled back. A deluge of images flashed through his mind. Now there was one more added -- his mother, Khet, slowly dying in Kalib's arms. All of it waited on the other side... 138

A careless grunt emitted. He knew that opening that door was going to send it crashing into him like a tidal wave. He felt her hand on his back, a warm gentle rub of reassurance, providing him with the strength he needed to throw the door open. Dust sparkled in the sudden beam of light, its shining path intermingling with the shards already filtering through vine obstructed windows. Peering in like two curious children who had come upon a latent ruin -- everything had remained exactly as it had been, except for the layer of dust, now dancing in the gust from the doors' opening.

Kalib's curious collections had remained untouched. "This was his favorite room." Thade recalled, stepping gingerly over the threshold, his hand finding Phallen's and gripping it tightly. The traveling vines covering the windows cast the room in gloomy darkness. It crept upon them both instantly. 'Kalib must have been very depressed to favor such a dreary room.' Phallen surmised as she took it all in. His hand slipped from hers and Thade went to the windows. With some effort to unlock them he wrenched the locks

free to give a mighty push against the clinging ivy, snapping it away as the hinges squeaked in protest. The room awoke. It was not dark and dreary -- but the contrary. It was bright and beautiful. Truly, having been a most receptive hall in its prime. Exploding in vibrance, beautiful tapestries adorned the walls from ceiling to floor. Collections of ancient artifacts aligned the walls in sturdy glass cabinets, not unlike Phallen's very own -- from ruins -- were on exhibit once more. Pipes, from hookas to elaborately carved singles of all shapes and sizes, seized one cabinet that was affixed to the left side of the fireplace -- a work of art in itself. "This is beautiful..." Phallen proclaimed on a sigh, taking it all in. Thade spun. He remembered how it was, what it all had been like in its pristine state and for her to see it just as magnificent in its unkempt condition, his heart raced. He drew close to her as if to reveal some secret -- "I remember it as if it were only yesterday. Only one part leaves me wondering." Closing his eyes, he seemed to drift, a hurting laying lines over his brow, marring his features. "It has changed forever." He muttered. Taking his hands, Phallen asked, "Is it a bad thing?" Thade was at a loss for words. He had no line of defense from his past allies. He was alone. His breathing became erratic as he jerked away, his mind spinning. "I don't know, Phallen. It seems there is no solution now. It was different in his time. I want to tell you what I have learned." She looked at him as if she already knew. Coming across as a weak smile, a knowledge -- an eminent forthcoming placed itself as a mask, disguising a troubled cognizance... She already knew... "I want you to know everything..." He whispered. With a gentle nudge, Thade directed her toward the stairs -- to where it had all began for him. "Come with me." He welcomed. Counting the steps, Phallen took each one apprehensively, watching the deep scarlet sun cast everything ahead a blood-red. "This is not good." She murmured, still allowing him to lead. "This is wrong..." Phallen came to an abrupt halt. "No..." She had never entered a male's suite. Thade felt her resistance. "My pet...", He purred. "I am a tyrant, but I would never force myself upon you." He took her arms in his big hands,

his fingers encircling them with ample room. "Trust me..." "This is where I was born..." He informed, feeling her follow him in. Closing the door quietly behind her, Thade drew her into the center of it. "...and where my mother died giving birth to me." Sorrow... Phallen could not believe that he, too, had felt the same kind of loss as she had. Compassion filled her as she reached out to him; "I know..." She comforted. "I know your pain." His hands found her neck, its softness, like a swan's, fragile as her hair fell over them... 'I have you now and I will have my way...' Lust spoke. 'You slipped from my grasp once, but this time...' He buried his face in her neck, hiding in the blackness of her hair... 'NO...! I love you too much...' He came up suddenly, throwing his shoulders back. The ideas he had of taking advantage of her vanished... Drowning in her innocence, Thade's expression begged for forgiveness. "Phallen..." He breathed. "I feel as if I have known you from long ago."

139-141

Phallen, so faultless, was in no way going to be forced to do anything that would make her feel beguiled. Yet, she absorbed his pain -- held him when his shoulders shook... "My beloved..." He beseeched. "I remain as you had found me -- imprisoned..." He laughed to himself before grasping her firmly by the arms. "...Lost..." He concluded, his teeth gnashing forbodingly as he closed in, forcing her, blindly, inward. Her nails dug into his forearms... "You need to wake up now." She advised, preparing to take care of business before it got out of hand. He snapped at her out of instinct, his teeth resting on her hand -- steadily sinking... Tasting her, Thade retracted his bite when he tasted her fear... His tongue ran the length of her arm to her collar-bone where he met defiance when she dipped her chin -- their lips meeting awkwardly... "Love me." He challenged. "Can you?" Her "Beast" hid his face. His words shrunk him and he folded. "Every time I closed my eyes, I saw your face." She revealed, taking him by the chin to raise his humbled gaze to hers. She nodded...

The suite was open and airy. Stained glass light bathed the curious objects in purples, reds, and blues as the sun dipped. In the center of the room, canopied in a golden glow of sheer fabric the massive bed hid within. Only its posts were visible -- jutting almost to the ceiling in a twisting spiraling fashion. Holding Thade's hand, Phallen took in the things around her while he lead her into the bed-chamber, unaware of where he was taking her. Inside there was a whole different world dressed in soft lace and satin, looking as if the linens had been freshly placed. Pastel colored pillows were thrown against the headboard, scattered along the edge of the sheers, resting on a magnificently woven tapestry of earhten tones deep and rich. Elaborate candelabras, affixed to the inner sides of the bed's posts, were swinging arms of wrought iron, sculpted like cupped hands -- palms-up -- where the candles sat. Guiding her to the edge of the bed he bade her to sit. For a time Thade could only pace, gathering his wits and words... how he wanted them to flow -- to profess his innermost desire... Searching his thoughts... All of the wrong ones seemed to pop up. He swallowed them down. This was not the time. He passed her at a nervous pace. "My father believed in the Books of Semos." He started nervously. In a low, controlling voice, he revealed; "Human's are low-caste... VERMIN." and his hand swept, expressing his last statement physically, meeting her gaze, forgetting, momentarily what Phallen was. His eyes softened. Even though he hated all humans, she melted his heart by her bourn purity, and he clasped his hands abashedly behind his back. Stopping his mad pacing, Thade stood in front of her before falling into an Indian-style sitting position on the floor. Resting his hands on his thighs he knew he was beaten, but could not think of a better way to lose. "I am vulgar," He admitted, jade eyes rolling shamefully up. "But my desire is not." Rising to his knees they came face-to-face as he rested his hands to either side of her.. "Phallen..." Her name came on a whisper as he leaned closer. Her smell wafted gently into his nostrils and he inhaled deeply, closing his eyes. "I thought I knew what it meant to "care"..."

and he brushed her cheek with his affectionately. "I didn't until you came."

142

Hovering above her, he shuddered. Revealing his weakness. "Do not distant yourself from me." To relinquish such emotion was never a strong point in Thade. However, with Phallen, he was compelled. Her unjudging eyes made him honest... "I could tell you anything and you would still be here." He related. A bright, open smile greeted his sullen confession. "You have." She sank into the pools of frustration oblivious of his arms as they enclosed around her, easing her back against the pillows. But a breath away, waiting for a sign of rejection, he hung over her. "Put your hands on me." He said huskily. "For the first time, I surrender." Something was ending and something was beginning. Uninhibited, for the first time, Phallen rose to her lover's request, her hands sliding under his shirt. He shook under her touch, falling into the curve of her shoulder to taste her there -- feeling a quickened pulse on his lips as he worked his way to her jaw-line. Breathless, Thade rose up on his hands. "Tell me if I move too quickly. It is only because I long to make love to you... To touch you in ways that you deserve to be." He drew closer brushing her lips with his... "Relent to me..." Though he toyed with her emotions, his own could not be concealed. Having found her only to lose her... If she wanted to escape now... In his mind, he chained her to himself... No. Phallen stroked his silver goatee. A smile crossed her lips. "I love you." She said. It was the first time she ever told him...

* * *

Senator Nado's eyes scanned his peers... "We simply cannot allow another Monarch to take a human as a mate." He condemned. "Our genetics are perfect right now." Lantres shook his head; a despondent smile fluttered across his mouth. "She is the one who makes him see." He contended. "To take one's "light"... well..." "She is dangerous! As long as she remains behind our gates Thade is

mush! Surly, her clan will retaliate once they know she is here among us." "How can they know if no one reveals it?" Lantres shot. Senator Sandar rolled his eyes, waving his hand for mock-air. "THAT is a fine way to live -- in seclusion... YES -- that IS what Thade needs right now." His voice rang sarcastically. He leaned across the table, and in a hushed voice he reminded, "Thade was locked up for who-knows-how-long. Getting rid of HER will allow him total freedom." "HE ALREADY IS! His spirit was crushed at that battle. This "Phallen" apparently saved his life." "Thade's ally comes to the rescue..." Sen. Yahn chimed. Lantres stared into his glass ignoring the remark. To chance a look above that rim at that moment, all of his so-called "friends" were arbitraters -- one voice. "He will walk." Lantres parried. "He will leave." "He is weak with her around. That... that... whatever you called her... the Woodsprite!" Sandar exploded, shaking his head dismissively from the whole picture. "Their relationship MUST be terminated." It was unanimous... Lantres sighed. "Very well, then." He resigned. "Let his wrath fall upon YOUR shoulders." Standing, the elderly chimp calmly pushed his chair in. It broke his heart knowing what he had to say... "I will not be back." He downed his brandy. "I cannot condemn him." He slammed his glass to the table startling everyone. With a disgruntled snort he strode from the room, throwing the arabeque curtain in the doorway to the side, leaving them stunned by his unusual show of anger. Lantres never lost his temper. For him leaving in such a huff was so out of character... "He'll be back." Nado assured, bringing a glass to his lips. Sandar shrunk in his chair, shaking his head. "I'm not so sure now."

* * *

143-145

Phallen pushed him off -- sitting up. "STOP.." A nightmare still haunted her. Puzzled, Thade fell back feeling as if he had done something wrong. Had he moved too quickly, placing her in a situation too uncomfortable? There was no mistake her passion ran high... He licked his lips. "What did I do?" Phallen shot

to the edge of the bed, bringing her knees up -- burying her face there as she shook her head. Seeking, Thade leaned into her shoulder. "Please tell me." He bent to see her face seeking an answer as to why, suddenly, she had denied his affection. Had it been one of his casual lays, he would have simply taken them anyway. But she was different to him. She was delicate. To do such a thing to her would have shattered her. Her fear moved him deeply... "My pet..." His voice comforted. Touching her arm, Thade realized how vulnerable she was. Phallen was "untouched". "You're a virgin." He surmised cautiously. Her smile was infectious as it crept along her lips. Trying hard not to show it, she had little choice. "I have been kissed like this before." She recalled. "But I was held." Her mien dissipated immediately and Thade became irate. "Someone has hurt you?" He challenged. A sound rumbled from his chest. Releasing her, the ape-general stormed away -- his anger rising sharply. "ANIMALS...!" spat from his lips. Phallen turned when he said that. She felt his hands touch her -- lift her hair back to see in her eyes. "Do not fear me." He reminded, taking her hands. "I will never hurt you. In your heart, you know how much I care." She fought for breath when he slid his hands up her arms. He wanted ONLY her in his life, forever... "Oh, Thade..." She told forebodingly. "You know..." As she went to take his hands he recoiled, casting his brooding angst freely 146

"You don't understand." He shot, pacing anxiously, now. "There is so much I need to tell you." Phallen reached out and caught his arm swinging him around. "Tell me..." She insisted, pulling him in. "Let there be an end." He grinned capriciously under the grip before agreeing, turning the table to his favor as he flopped down next to the girl -- head down -- tail between his legs... "An end...?" He queried, looking up. A deep sigh escaped as he fell into her arms... "This is only the beginning, my pet." Lolling in her embrace, for a moment, Thade felt safe. "I REALLY need to tell you something." His voice was smooth... So smooth that Phallen had to look just to make sure it was he. Indifference clashed...

A curious glint flashed in his eyes -- "Listen...!" "I need you to hear me, now. I don't know how you'll take it, but I have to let you know."

Thade took her firmly, pulling her into his sights, demanding total attention. His words did not flow. Nothing came together and his face drew on the pain. Shaking his head -- teeth gnashed -- he forced himself to face her: "My mother was human.." Phallen understood, then, why there was so much excitement in the city on that hot afternoon. Even though Thade's father had shared a piece of his life with a human, any possibility for Thade and herself to remain together had long been settled. For it to pass the Senate in this day was never to occur. "Oh-h Thade." She groaned, rolling her eyes. Dropping her gaze she could only shake her head. "I get it now. It's a "Human Thing" with you... Your father had one so you feel you must also." The ape-general expelled his frustration with a heavy snort as he rose. "NO, that's not IT." He fixed. Stalking away, hiding his indignation, the chimp cursed her under his breath. "Goddamn you!" He blurted, spinning on her, his eyes ablaze. His hands rose above his head in tight balls, his knuckles popping under the pressure. "That's NOT IT..." Recanted... 147

'I frighten her', his conscience warned... He sighed. 'My words are free in my head -- what I want to say to make you stay. But if I say them out loud, I am only comforting myself...'

"Phallen..." He fell to his knees before her. "I would have fallen in love with you regardless of my past..." He tilted his head. Looked up at her with child-like inquisitiveness. "You must trust me on that note." "I can't." She lamented, her eyes welling with tears. When she averted her eyes, Thade lost his composure. "LOOK AT ME." He demanded. Taking her chin, he lifted her face in time to see the tears cascade down her cheeks. "Promise me that you will not leave." The hopeless response did little to boost his morale. Phallen was going to bolt at the first opportunity. There was no future for them. Knowing this, the best thing for both of them was to leave -- to vanish for good, and she fought to hide that from him... "We'll see." She replied on a whisper.

THOSE POLITICIANS... So full of pompous bullshit... They had spoiled General Thade -- gave him everything he wanted. He was not going to allow them to back out on this "gratuity", now that it had manifested into an object of desire -- a passion -- an emotion so real that to live without it now would sanctify him as insane...

Wiping her tears, Thade smiled softly. "I do not pretend to be what I am not. I am hated by the human species. Distrusted by mine. I have betrayed my own people. But, with the good that I have left in my soul, I need to let you know, in pure honesty, I love you..." Coddling her frail emotions, he gave that strange upward nod of his, his mouth curving with a cautious smile so-as to conceal his fangs. Starting softly, he asked; "Do you remember that night we were sitting at your table... When you ran? I followed you, took you in my arms..." A raspy sigh escaped him as he closed his eyes dreamily. "There was no fear when I held you then." Brushing back her hair, he traced her jaw-line tenderly. "We were very much on our own out there. I could have..." He shook his head dismissively. "There was NO WAY I could have harmed you. To do so meant not living with myself. I have done many things in my life that were not right, and I have paid for it, but I would have rather died than to have hurt you in any way." Phallen fell into his deep green eyes, wanting to follow the fantasy all the way... "My beloved..." Seeped, her lips too dry to say more. She had given to him, shelter, compassion, safety, his VERY life... Taught him how to smile again; to feel the setting of the suns... What she had neglected to teach, though, was how to let go... "It's over..." Her voice broke gently, startling him. He shot a look as if on the verge of tears, himself -- searchin; his eyes glistening, unblinking. His mouth moved silently: 'No...'

He slumped back. Smirking at his own "Pipe-dream", Thade grinned fully when he declared: "You are not in love with me." "No..." Phallen cleared, grasping his beard firmly. "You are wrong. My adoration lies in you. I don't care about your past. I only care about you...I fear you... I fear for your future." His head tipped

back in an affectionate pause, smiling down his muzzle at her. Touching his forehead to hers, he gazed deeply. "Rest in my arms, my pet." Enfolding her, Thade nestled against her as he told; "I have been many things. Being "good" has never been one of them. Since you entered my life, though, there have been changes. Now, no one knows me. I know they think I am weak." He let go with a little laugh as he settled comfortably close. "But I'm not. I'm stronger than ever. You allowed me to reveal my innermost feelings. Among the many wonders, you are the most curious thing I've yet to come across." He drew closer, his lips brushing her cheek. "Trust me when I tell you I will never hurt you." Lying her back, Phallen trembled under his gentle persuasion as he hovered above her. He adored her awkward anxiety. She was willing -- just not quite ready.

"It is now we become one, Phallen." He breathed lusciously into her ear. His big hands delicately caressed her face. She loved to feel him touch her like that, and she closed her eyes dreamily. Her "Big, strong General" was a pussy-cat in her presence. "My appetite craves "Phallen." He purred, brushing her cheek with his. The horror on her face was priceless. She actually thought he wanted to eat her. Thade laughed out loud: "That will come later", his "Devil" incited. Putting all jest aside, Thade unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it off one arm at a time. "I crave your touch," He confessed, placing her hands on his chest. "Your kiss..." The embrace went deeper than ever before. This time, he did not pull away from her. He wanted that feeling to consume him all the way. And it pulled him in -- his mind spiralling euphorically. He inhaled her air, aroused sexually. This was what he fought off that night. Now, he did not have to and all of that pent up energy wanted to release its passion. "You do things to me." He disclosed, catching his breath. "I can't explain. It was the flame from your kiss that started the fire in my heart." His hands went to her bodice, pulled on the strings shakily. Now he was the nervous one... "I know,now, not to fear you, Thade." Her voice cooed -- her hands rested on his head -- fingers combed through his hair. He shook in anticipation. 'She submits to my advances! I am a wreck...I need to maintain...I want

her in the worst way...My beautiful human accepts me...' "I love you..." Emerged from him...

149

part VII

Bearing down on the dais, Acadia focused on his army.. "I want them BOTH...Most of all, I want that ape alive!" He was in no mood for deliberation. He wanted his sister back and Thade captured -- Period... To have the Ape-General -- the very one who had slaughtered his people seethed in him. It coursed with every beat of his heart as he envisioned snaring the General. What a pleasure it was going to be to pick him apart, to watch him squirm while his life was oh-so-slowly ilked. Acadia could taste the victory... The Trident Soldiers all cheered, raising their fists in power. A dangerous mind observed through cool brown eyes -- A maniacal male form of Phallen's. "The apes are always happy as long as they have us to push around; to do their dirty work. They PERSECUTE us! Phallen is a slave to them. Bring her back...Break her chains..." His nails dug into the worn wood with his last words; "I don't care how you go about capturing that Bastard, Thade, just don't kill him." A thick plait of jet-black hair hung over his shoulder like a Boa. Acadia's face glowed in the torch-light -- a beautiful, masculine alter-ego of Phallen... He, of hatred and revenge; She, of love and forgiveness... Two children of the same blood-line, seperated by diversity... He collected them all cooly, smiling. "Form your divisions." From among the many hundreds, a voice called; "What of Phallen? What if she is in harm's way?" Acadia smiled, his handsome face not even creasing. "I will deal with Phallen." Retorted curtly, his eyes void of expression. His intentions were deadly. Killing his own sister to get to Thade hardly bothered him. If she got between them, she would fall beside the ape. Staring past the many heads, the young warrior watched his village. It was a dusty little dwelling, but it was his. Dusty paths lead to adobe homes. Joshua trees, thorny and bare, jutted between the huts, their roots clawing along the trodden paths in search of a deeper passage to water, creating a surreal portrait of a primitive

life in the throes of repressive denial. Acadia's distinction between right and wrong had warped beneath the reign of the apes. He regarded them as mortal enemies, especially General Thade, and now, his own sister. He felt as if it were his duty to take the matter into his own hands and fell the "one" who had brought such devastation down on his people. "Be cautious of Phallen. She has lived among them and believes in what they believe... She will defend them." He turned away from his army as if embarrassed to say his next words. "She is guilty..." And he swung back, eyes gleaming. "...By association..."

* * *

Light filtered quietly through the gossamer canopy. Thade lit the candles, running some words past himself as he entered the bed-chamber, hoping that when he spoke them the right ones would come. Settling on the edge of the bed, he pulled the linens over his lover's shoulders, tucking her in securely, watching her as she slept. "This is where I want you to be." And he stared out past the room -- past his own selfish desires. There was nothing greater than what he felt at that moment. Some things, Thade understood, would never change, but as long as he held onto the possibility he sunk his teeth into it. To have taken her as he had was fully intentional in order to keep her. A pang of guilt tripped him nonetheless. Sleeping soundly, Phallen barely stirred when Thade kissed her warm cheek. She was safe and warm and loved by a most unusual life-form. Her "Knight"... A heavy-handed, sword wielding, short-fused son-of-a-bitch, surrendered his most precious commodity to her... His heart. A soft spoken simian baring all humility to her... Still, for anyone to cross him or his endeavors meant unleashing the lion... * * *

Thade paced way into the dark of night before fatigue set in. He fell in behind Phallen's warmth, one long arm cradling her. Eyelids heavy for sleep, he whispered, "We were meant to be." Drifting off, he felt Phallen's hand caress his forearm. * * *

The garden was freshly pruned. Flowers ranging from "bird of Paradise" to "Daffodils" lined a long aisle. Guests flowed, seated on either side. Dressed in full regala -- that which was only used for

ceremonial services -- gilded in pure gold from head to toe, underlined with white mail -- Thade paced. He checked his look in the mirror, examining the cut of his goatee, smoothing his hair... Attar tried to keep pace with his superior -- catching up only to be left behind when Thade spun the other way. 150

Placing his huge hands against the chimp's chest, he drove him back... "STOP ALREADY." Thade gripped Attar's arms. "Am I THAT bad?" Attar's expression was one of dull surprise. "Somewhat..." He chortled. Thade nodded in agreement. "Alright, then," and he gathered his composure. "I must maintain..." They nodded in unison... The Derkein Army stood in their divisions, all dressed in Ceremonial uniform. Spotless...Gleaming under the noon-day suns in perfect alignment. Eyes glued straight ahead, General Thade smiled. He could not believe what was happening. It was what he had been hoping for. Attar towered next to him. "Ready?" The Alto voice inquired. "yes..." Responded dizzily. "Sure...?" Thade shot a sideways glance. Omri stood where Attar had, grinning ear-to-ear. Thade smirked -- his grin spanning. "You little Bastard." Snorted affectionately. "Love her." Omri advised. With his up-ward nod, Thade adjusted his breastplate one last time.

The drum beat began. Stepping out, followed by Commander Attar and Corporal Omri, the Ape-General marked his pace by the rhythm of the drums, each division snapping to attention as he neared, all following suit in his passage to face the Dais...

"Do I look alright?" The house-humans appeared bewildered... "Beyond that." Neenah intoned, fluffing the flowered wreath surrounding Phallen's head. The female chimp smile endearingly. "You are most beautiful." Phallen blushed girlishly, ducking her chin. "Oh, come on now. My Omri thinks you're the most beautiful thing." The girl pulled away. "I ..." Neenah shooed it away with a wave. "I know him. I know his tastes. He means it in a good way, Phallen." The wreath tipped over Phallen's eye brows. Pushing it back into place she looked at Neenah. "I love Thade. I really do." "I know."

151

Life -- in all forms -- swarmed. Before he knew it, Thade was at the end of the aisle where he turned to await his bride -- eyes twinkling. 'I'm a wreck... I think I'm going to pass out...I need a stiff drink...I need her...HURRY...!' Swallowing hard, he heard his throat click dryly. "I don't feel so good." Thade revealed to Omri through the side of his mouth. Nudging the General, the Corporal responded, "It's okay. I felt the same way when I married Neenah." Gathering themselves, each used the other for a crutch... "Look..." Omri prompted. Thade squinted. There was movement just inside of the patio doors. An assembly gathered therein. His jaw tightened. 'Ohmygod...there she is...' The drum beat ceased. Thade peered sheepishly over his shoulder at the Priest... "That's my Beloved." The General sputtered. "Blessed be..." With a gentle motion, the Priest beckoned him... "Lessen your worries and yield to the coming..." Perplexed, Thade nodded hap-hazardly, turning back. His beautiful human, escorted by Senator Lantres, emerged -- more breathtaking than she had ever been -- adorned in silken ivory. Gold brocade woven into the gown caught the sun's radiance just enough. Beads matching the luminance of the threads dangled in a pattern over the top layer of her hair. Thade's heart pounded like the drums. His head was light... 'I doubt if Omri felt like this'. The drumbeat faded, replaced with the lilting sounds of woodwinds mimicking the songbirds. All turned to her. The whole planet took in a breath, it sounded, when they saw her. The angel of mercy appeared... Attar gasped in awe. He had never seen anything so wonderful. Thade quaked in his shoes. "My Pet..." uttered. Linked arm-in-arm Lantres presented Phallen to her groom. Meeting his Godson's eyes, the old ape winked. Taking the girl's hand, he squeezed it warmly before placing it in Thade's. The couple smiled to one another, then together, they turned to face the podium. Whose hand was sweating more, neither could tell while they clutched eachothers' for strength.

The music flittered to silence and everyone waited. "From two different paths, love has flourished..." The preist opened with an easy tone. "and today we unite them." He looked at Thade and

Phallen lovingly. "What is joined on this day, let no one put asunder..." "...Thadeus Paige..." Thade jumped as if jolted. He had not heard his full name for so long... The General snapped to attention. "Do you take Phallen to be your mate -- through sickness and in health -- for richer or poorer until death imparts your souls?" The General's hand had been steadily tightening on Phallen's before she had to unsuspectingly wrench free, rousing his answer. He nodded before realizing he needed to speak his vow, blurting; "I do" -- searching for a foothold -- thinking he was going to faint. Phallen took his hand in hers peering cautiously over, her quizzical expression asking: "are you alright?" Thade regained his poise. After all, he had never made such a commitment such as this. Especially to someone as special as Phallen... "Our Groom has asked if he could say a few words." Their priest informed. Thade licked his lips. He kneeled before his bride. All of his nervous tension seemed to dissipate... Reaching into a sewn-in pocket, Thade produced a gold band. Taking Phallen's left hand he spread her fingers and slid it on her ring finger, smiling at the fit... "With this ring I give you my eternal love... As my father, Kalib had when he presented it to Khet, my mother. It signifies my heart handed to you for safe keeping." He brought her hand to his lips gallantly. From beneath his brow, Thade made eye contact smiling discretely to his "pet". Her tears fell on his hand as he held hers and he tasted the salty moisture readily. "Don't cry, my pet." He softly beseeched, rising to kiss her cheek. "This is a good thing." Phallen nodded, trying hard to get her emotions in check, sobbing, "I know, my beloved, but this ring... Your Mother... I feel I don't deserve to wear it." Thade looked at her as if she were crazy.

152

"Just marry me, Phallen... Marry me." She nodded stiffly accepting his kiss. He rose slowly keeping constant eye contact, so wrapped up in her that he could not hear... "Phallen...?" The priest addressed cordially, not wanting to alarm. A tear-streaked face shot up in response. The Holy ape smiled knowingly, asking, "Do you take Thadeus to be your husband through sickness and in

health -- through richer or poorer until death imparts your souls?" "I do." She vowed, smiling openly. Before they knew it, the priest said; "By the powers vested in me, I now pronounce you Ape and Wife." The papyrus crinkled when he closed the scriptures. A wide smile spread across his muzzle ... "You may kiss the bride." Thade bent to Phallen already lost in her embrace, their lips touching, fueling the fire already started between them as he took her back. Suddenly someone screamed. Phallen shoved Thade, knocking him off of his feet... "TRAITOR...!" Shrieked. Pandemonium broke out among the guests, sending them rushing and leaping into the tree tops. Fighting for balance, Thade scoured the situation. Clenching his hands, something warm and sticky held him there and he looked to see... "Thade..." Phallen collapsed in his arms, a red splotch growing on the front of her gown. "No..." He groaned when she went down. His hands went to the scarlet spot -- felt the blunt tip of an arrow -- having nearly impaled her -- wounding her fatally... "Phallen...?!" With shaking hands she held his face -- her eyes pained... fading. "My Beloved..." She whispered -- smiling -- fleetingly... Gone... Thade began to shake. "Phallen?" His voice cracked. "PHALLEN...!" An hysterical scream ripped from his chest. Head flying up, a sound erupted from his chest like that never heard before... "N-n-o-o-o...!!!" The first to arrive, Omri fell next to Thade, his hands swimming -- unsure, really as to where to lay them -- on poor Phallen, or the shivering shoulders of his General. How could this be?! Thade was shaking his head; "I need to wake up, now." "Sir...?" And Omri leaned against the General's shoulder. Thade spun protectively. "GET AWAY!" His eyes were wild; pushing the Corporal back...

* * * 153-157

He must have been crying in his sleep... "It's alright." He sat up looking blindly about for the first few minutes. "Thade?" Her voice... Blinking the nightmare away, Thade focused on the shadowed face staring at him. He threw his arms around her laying her flat, breathing deep sighs of relief as he felt for the arrow. "You're alright." He thanked, squeezing her. "You're alive." Phallen

settled him -- held him through recovery from the Hell which quite possibly could occur. That was what shook him most. There was no face for the one who sent the deadly message. It could have been delivered from either species. Phallen pet his brow as he shivered, recalling the vivid picture of her blood on his hands. He could still smell it, dark and rich. "It was only a nightmare. It's only natural for you to think such a thing. It's your sub-conscious talking -- telling you in a way to maybe end us." Thade's brow rose in shock. How dare she say such a thing! She shrugged. "These things have a way of emerging. Think about it." In a flash he was upon it, grasping for straws. "We were meant to be." He clutched her arms drawing her face-to-face. "Why can't you see?" Phallen heard the conviction in his voice. With a sigh he turned away holding his head. "Thade, there's something I must do." There was a discomforting darkness growing. "I must make peace with my brother. If he finds us together he will kill you." She closed her eyes, trying to block the image when there was the unmistakable sound of muffled laughter. Thade tried to keep a straight face. "I'm serious. He will not stop..." He fell back, his mouth spread in a full grin as he hugged his chest. "STOP.. You're killing ME!" One grief-stricken look was enough to sober him and he gathered his senses once he realized just how deeply this troubled her. Thade wiped the smile from his face, sitting up. "Forgive me, my pet. I had no idea." "Then you understand?" "No." He shot. "I don't. You belong with me -- among my people where you are safe." "But it means war. I don't want that. It could be..." "YOU WILL NOT LEAVE HERE." His temper tantrum did not scare her. She understood that he only wanted to protect her. If she left the safety of the city she would be vulnerable, for he had a distinct feeling she had conceived. He sensed it -- seen it -- almost smelled her hormonal changes. There was no way he would let her out of his sights. She had become high-risk... To protest was fruitless sending Thade into a near-violent rage. His hand shot out barely missing her in his demand for silence. "I don't want to hear it." His brow rose suspiciously before he dropped down on the edge of the bed.

Sheepishly, Thade looked over his shoulder aware of how his manic reaction shocked Phallen. He felt small. "How can I explain my emotions?" He huskily asked. "The last thing I wish to instill in you is fear." He never turned around as he spoke. He dropped his head into his hands as if defeated. He felt like shit. "I don't know what to do with you to make you understand." Phallen moved to the edge next to him. "Please..." Thade's voice quaked. "Stay away from him..." His eyes wandered over her naked body as she sat beside him, only to come back to her face -- and the bruises on her cheek. "He struck you once. Though I throw my anger around like a spoiled child, I could never touch you in such a way." Stroking the marks gently with the back of his hand Thade shook his head sadly... "Your intentions are noble, but not safe." She was priceless. Closing his eyes, contentment befell. A second breath of life had been granted unto him and he took it gratefully, embracing his beautiful creature. He breathed her softness -- his query brushing her ear; "What are you?" Phallen fell into his nuzzle, finding his mouth with hers, kissing him. "Do not go to him." "If he threatens, I must." Thade held her. "No, you won't."

* * *

Standing in the dark, Lantress pulled on his robe. He could not sleep and rather than waking his wife by tossing and turning, to retreat to his study opted. A step sent the floorboards singing. "What troubles you?" She rolled over to her husband, voice thick with sleep. Lantres bent and kissed her warm forehead. "Go back to sleep dear. I'm sorry I woke you." Light from the front room filtered in when he slid out, the door gently tapping the jamb.

158-163

He felt so uneasy. "I have to tell him." 'Don't try to make yourself feel better. You know exactly why you cannot rest.' Lantres scowled at the papers on his desk. The very ones denying Thade sanction for Phallen. "This is it, then." the old ape sighed wearily. "The buck stops here. I have to do this." Due to his Godson's choice for a mate it was time to take Thade under his wing. "You are SO like your father."

* * *

He knew where they were -- an overnight stay at the estate, Lantres feared, surly meant intimacy. There would be no leaving that house untouched by the spirits which dwelled within those walls. No matter how unique the General's love was, she had a snowball's-chance-in-hell of making it out alive. Senator Lantres fell back into his chair. His head ached. To deliver the news meant delivering another blow to Thade's already bruised world; one he was so desperately trying to recover. Lantres' eyes wandered upon the papers when his lip curled, giving them a shove to watch as they arced and sailed -- trying to settle over his desk. "NO...!" He barked, flagging them away. "I cannot agree with this." Shuffling back to bed, Lantres felt his age. "Sleep well my children." He crept back into bed...

Derkein awoke with the dawn. Gorillas, chimps, and oranges hustled past one another bidding hasty "Good mornings" as they bee-lined for their businesses. Flags, unfurled for a new day, fluttered and snapped in the breeze. Doorways were unlocked allowing proprietors in to prepare for another day of trade. Bins of fruit and vegetables, textiles and bric-a-brac were brought out to the edge of the side-walks. The Potpourri Shop -- its keeper wheeling out a collection of wind-chimes -- tried to control the noise when the chimes clanged ill-harmoniously; clasping them in one long arm as she transported them outdoors. It was hot and humid even with the breeze. Windows opened seeking the cross-winds, canvas rolled at the main market granting access to the farmers -- their carts loaded with fresh produce -- their hearty calls announcing arrival. Dressed in a light blue suit, Lantres worked through the growing crowd of consumers nodding to the passer's-by. Those who had been following the news drilled him gently; "How are you, how is the General and that curious creature -- and is she still in the city...?" "Fine, fine. Yes, she is". He wished to announce that there would be a great celebration... Entering the produce section, Lantres stood. His thoughts were not on what to collect there. The normal

sunny disposition was clouded. "This is a good one." A bruised and wounded pomegranite was forced into his hand. Face set sternly he looked up. Ari had been observing him for some time. He smiled -- nodded as he examined the poor fruit before shaking his head. "Ari..." He mused, tossing it up for her to catch. Snatching the fruit from the air she put it back then embraced him warmly. "Good morning, Senator." Dressed in aqua terry, her hair pulled back in golden barretees, she glowed. "My Dear, you are a breath of fresh air." She grinned tightly. Having known the Senator all of her life, Ari knew something was not right in his world. Folding her arms she called his bluff; "Alright -- what's up?" Common cotton thread wove her life-style. Not the fact that she was the daughter of a Senator. Her slangy, straight-forward jargon made her a favorite confidant among the commoners because they knew her concerns involved equality. Lantres ducked from her scrutiny. "I have a task to complete which does not rest well in my soul."

164

Ari bobbed her head slowly, intuition telling her it had something to do with Thade. She did not bring up his name, only accepted it feeling a pang go off in her heart. "Do what you feel is right." She smiled. "I must go now." Lantres bowed -- his lips going pencil-thin. He fell into the crowd -- Destination: Serious Business...

* * *

There was no answer when he knocked. Upon trying the door it was found to be unlocked. "Thade...?" Lantres called, stepping in. Silence greeted. Quietly closing the door, The aged chimp faced the tomb-like foier. Ghosts from the past hovered about his shoulders and the pain from loss hit home. He took in a deep, shuddering breath. "I miss you, old friend." Wavered, water coming to his eyes as they fell on the most familiar. He missed Kalibs company -- talking to him -- the laughs they shared... Even the tragedies... Lantres sniffed, wiping at his nose. "If you're here, I need your strength." Standing, barely breathing, he waited for a

sign. Voices spun him to the stairs and he looked up expectantly. Quiet, and reserved tones hissed from under one of the doors. Somberly, he ascended the staircase, pulling himself up by the banister -- smooth and bare of its stain from the many hands it had aided. The steps popped and squeeled under his weight. All the time, his eyes were glued to the landing. It was dark at the top with only slivers of light sliding from beneath the three doors lining the hall. Hypnotized by that light, it took him back to when he had last climbed those stairs. A dismal time for many. The voices then, when he finally heard them, were sobs and cries for redemption. Now, though, they were angry. Thade's revolt came thundering -- breaking down the stairway bellowing something about how she was not about to leave Derkein. Old bones protested as Lantres hastened his steps. "Thade?!"... Phallen flung the door open. Insult on her face mixed with anxiety and concern. She was a ball of confusion as she held the doorknob. Squeezing her eyes shut she wanted to scream. Her eyes sprung open suddenly meeting Lantres'. Never having met this simian, Phallen shrunk from him, averting her eyes immediately. Her cheeks burned red-hot with fear. "Forgive me..." stammered; bowing from him. Lantres observed the reaction lightly as he smiled. "Phallen...?" Taking hold of her arms, he stood her straight. "You are she?" The girl looked sheepishly over her shoulder before nodding. Coming out a close second, Thade appeared hastily on her heels, coming to a screeching halt and wearing the same shocked expression as Phallen's upon finding Lantres standing just at the other side of the door... What had he heard? Did he know? "SENATOR...!!!" He cried. Reproach oozed from the Senator. "Is this how yo treat her?" He pried.

165-167

Thade dropped his gaze immediately under the Senator's obstinant stare. Realizing if she did not speak in defense of the General, he would fall to a barbarian's status, Phallen fought to find her voice. "No..." came on a whisper. And they both looked at her. The old ape watched their body language keenly before he turned his attention fully to Thade. "Well?" "No, Sir." was his

boyish reply. Turning back to the cowering Phallen, Lantres said, "Child, lift your head." As his words faded, she peered coyly from under long black lashes. In that instant, he saw. His heart was captured. Soft creases formed around his eyes as a smile broke through. There was no way his Godson could harm such an extraordinary creature. Not this one, anyway... Nodding to her, Lantres blinked hard. Phallen caught his abrupt reality-check and the sides of her mouth turned down. Storms grew in her eyes, dark and murky with the knowledge of why, now, he had come. He could not conceal it fast enough, though, when his eyes met Thade's. "We need to talk." was all he said.

* * *

Conviction... With every step, Lantres dreaded what had to be told: the denial of Phallen's sanctity. 'If they had only met her!'

* * *

The dining hall was dust laden and dark. Knowing right where things had been kept, Lantres retrieved a candelabra from atop a tall linen cabinet, reaching over Thade's head as he groped for a linen from behind the solid Mahogany doors. With a snap of the cloth he sailed it over the center of the oblong table glancing up at Phallen's steadfast stare. She felt like a fifth-wheel watching as they fetched glass-ware, a corckscrew, plates, and cutlery; all the while speaking in hushed tones. Once in a while a soft burst of laughter erupted followed by a sideways glance her way. 'Oh, this is JUST peachy!' she thought, a pure funk befalling like a cloak. 'Just come out and say it.' She sighed defetedly, shaking her head with a smile. 'The harbinger is here!' Already far ahead of the chase, Phallen started when she felt Thade's hand rest on her shoulder, waking her from the great escape. 168-170

He took her hand and raised it to his lips kissing it softly before resting it in his lap. Settling, with a groan, across from them Lantres clasped the bottle of wine in long simian fingers. Concentrating on getting the corkscrew straight, he could feel her eyes. She did not shy away when the old ape chanced to glance at

her. They locked on one another. She knew why he was there. And HE knew SHE knew. Lantres dropped his gaze to the pouring of the wine, the bottle tapping the rims of the glasses until her hand rested on his. Hypnotized by her unwavering stare Lantres let go with a whimper, setting the vessel on the table. Phallen smiled sadly patting his hand before withdrawing -- nodding what she already knew -- what Thade already knew... Glaring into the glass, she said flatly, "I know why you're here." The Senator's face turned ashen, looking like a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Stormy and dark, her eyes were unreadable. Her fists clenched and she gave a condescending sideways glance to Thade: 'You knew all along...' "Phallen's sanctity has been disallowed." croaked unwillingly from Lantres. Thade closed his eyes and seemed to teeter, a groan in his chest. "I'm so sorry." Phallen pushed from the table, disgusted by the whole scenario. "I knew it..." And she was gone. Thade's eyes flew open to the sound of the front door. "STOP HER!" He cried. His chair crashed to the floor in pursuit when long fingers took hold of his arm swinging him around.

"She is going to them!" Lantres held strong. "You can't stop her." Shaking him effortlessly, the aged ape still had it as Thade regained some of his rationality. Thade could not find the words to explain -- losing his temper. "You don't understand!" he screamed, wrenching free and backing away. Lantres eyed him thoughtfully. "Thade...?" "They will kill her, Godfather." and he began to sob. "Thade, what did you do?" "I...We..." "Oh, Son... What have you started?" Lantres massaged his bare temples. "This is terrible!" Thade shook his head. "No, it's not." "There will be war... bloodshed!" "I love her..." "Not good, Son." Lantres waved a warning finger. "She is with child." Lantres' face fell...

CHAPTER 6

"TAKE HIM ALIVE!"

He could not be far; and Corporal Omri paced anxiously. Phallen had just charged the gates with no regard for her own, or, it appeared, the apes' safety. Her face -- so hard. Her eyes icy.

Witnessing her furious departure, Attar felt a sharp twist in his side: "Typical human self-centeredness," he thought with a snort in disgust. "Good riddance and don't come back." He always knew there was reason to distrust her-- watching the stolen horse race from the city. "I'll hang you myself." He cursed, spitting. Concerned citizens gathered behind the settling dust. Where was she going -- this one who had settled their General's restless spirit?

'She played me like a fiddle.' Ice water coursed through his veins as he stormed past the guards -- swearing heavily all the way... Stomping into the stables, Thade stood motionless, his chest heaving, eyes narrow slits as he scoured his surroundings. "I am such a fool!" growled menacingly. Throwing his arms up, Thade muttered, "Face it," he yanked open a stall, completeing with a scowl, "this is thee shittiest day of your life." Saddling up, Thade prepared to go after Phallen. He was not angry with her, in particular. His angst had several avenues for which to travel. All he had to do was pick one and right now it tore down "Sanction Street". He wheeled the roan around just as Commander Attar came rushing. Thade shook his head in disbelief. "Don't even start... If it had not been for her..." Attar crossed his arms. "Yeah, yeah, I know: 'If it had not been for her you wouldn't be alive today'. But you know what? I was there... I came back for you, so don't give me that line of shit." Thade's brow rose in shock, his mouth hung open. "Let her go, Thade." The chimp, still stunned, slowly shook his head. "I love her, Attar." "But your future looks so..." Thade cut him off. "Promising?" he spat. The ex-General nodded along, then with a snort of laughter declared, "I could be back in the lap of luxury. The good life. Anything I desire handed to me." "Anything." Attar assured. Thade rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Her...?" "Well..." The chimp's anger rose and he could not bring himself to look at his friend. "My conscience has many scars," He sounded as if he were praying. "I am loathed by so many." Thade lowered his head. Stared at his hands. "Do you see me in here?" He pointed to his own eyes. Confusion swarmed the gorilla's. Leaning from the saddle, Thade dove into the

Commander's line of vision. "If I ask why you cannot look at me will you be able to give me an honest answer or will you simply sweep it under the rug?" "I can't stand to see you give everything up for...her." Thade's expression turned maniacal. Fangs bared, his gaze wandered dangerously away as he pondered the answer. "That is exactly the kind of response I DID NOT need." He jerked the reins hard right, detouring around Commander Attar. The black face creased tensely. "Shit..." was all he managed to mutter before bolting for his own horse. * * *

"That cock-sucker has lost his mind completely." "We'll keep that comment between us." Attar soberly replied. The late afternoon was upon them. It was as hot and sticky as the day was going to bring. Corporal Omri barely moved in the hemp hammock. Eyes closed, hands clasped behind his head, he felt the breeze -- cooled by the forest surrounding his home. "What do you want me to do?" He quod. "If we don't come back within a moderate time, bring troops." Omri rose, concerned. "Somethin up?" Attar sighed. Nodded. "You better believe it." "Phallen?" "Yes..." He reported flatly. "I love her." Omri sighed like a breath of fresh air. "Am I missing something? Come on, she is nothing but a thorn in Thade's side!" Omri rolled slightly and retrieved a tall glass. "A thorn, yes. But he likes to be the "prick." Attar smirked. "Only you, Omri..."

It took a few miles before picking up Phallen's trail. Flying through the forest, Thade leaned into the horse granting full berth for the beast to run free along the winding path... Twigs snapped. Branches whipped his feet and legs stingingly as nettle-vines tightened momentarily about his ankles -- their irritant fibers imbedding into his skin. There was no pain. He was blind with the desire of enjoying her again. Wanting his "Pet" back. Hooves pounded. Phallen chanced a peek over her shoulder catching glimpses of her pursuer between the thicket. Reins loose she gave the horse total control. Thade was gaining fast, winding in and out of the trees dangerously until he was almost next to her -- reaching

out, trying to grab the reins. Phallen slapped at his hands shaking her head angrily. "No! Go away!" With a last ditch effort the chimp lunged for the reins, this time catching one only to have it burn through his hands like hot iron. He released immediately, his palms burned and bleeding seeming to only add fuel to an angered flame. He grit his teeth; a low growl emitted. 173-174

He gave three short whistles... Phallen could not make the horse go as it fell into a canter allowing Thade to catch up. Wounded hands or not, he grabbed the reins hard and stopped the horse glaring across at the girl. "You are so DIFFICULT!" he scolded, nostrils flaring. Phallen slid from the animal's back and continued on foot all the while knowing she would never out-run him. Maybe she could lose him, though. That idea was shot when he landed directly in front of her. Phallen darted off in the opposite direction only to be trumped again. "Please...!" She begged, her hair falling around her as she backed away. Thade tipped his head and tried to comprehend her sudden displeasure toward him. No solutions came and he became extremely frustrated by her actions. "What...?" He asked, hands jutting forward for redemption. "What did I do?" Phallen held her head as she shook it. "Nothing. Just go back." "Not without you." His eyes gleamed at her then shifted side-to-side. "Phallen?" He took her by the arm and nudged her toward the horses. "Come back." She stared at him, hypnotized, momentarily before snapping out of it and sliding from his grasp. "No. YOU need to get out of here like now." He turned, his brow raised. "C'mon," he smirked. Phallen stepped back, her eyes flashing. They were no longer alone.

175 Then he caught it. Smells -- then sounds -- all around them it seemed. She glanced at Thade. He stared over her shoulder at something, then stiffened. From out of nowhere, a dozen or so men lunged. Pure rage glowed in his eyes as he leapt to the tree tops. This was a goddamned ambush! Out of the corner of his eye he saw her fend them off with a long, pointed branch which she used with proficiency, staving them back long enough to shoot a glance up. Though her spirit rocked they subdued her quickly, wrestling her

to the ground, snapping the javelin and turning it on her for submission -- the jagged point but a pulse away from spearing her straight through the throat. Thade could sense her fear. Leaping down, he landed on three of Phallen's persecutors, sending them to their bellies as he grabbed her from the ground. "Go...!" He urged. "Run!" Phallen stood, swaying dizzily from having the wind knocked out of her, staring blankly at the General. Confusion written across her brow. "What? What?" She shook her head. His words were muffled and she clung to him for support.' "You - you have to leave right now." she heard herself declare. Thade gawked. "I can't..." Curses spat from his lips when they were torn apart by two rather girth-ish men. Arms pulled behind his back, a rope was dropped around his neck with the end tied around his wrists. The more Thade fought the tighter the noose became until he simply stopped. Phallen fell from the shove, only to rise and scramble to Thade. She took the noose, crying, pulling it loose when from behind she was yanked to her feet. Grabbing a handful of hair, Phallen was shaken like a rag doll. Thade felt his blood boil. "You sonofabitch!" Acadia's storming glare shot out at Thade. Then he smiled knowing he had what the simian wanted. Erasmus came stumbling over and sneered at the ensnared ape. He slammed a foot hard into Thade: "Shut your mouth!" Thade blinked. With a snarling sort of grin, he watched the young man. "You're a brave little bastard now, aren't you?" He drew back to deliver a blow to the chimp's jaw when Acadia intercepted. "Let's not leave too many marks." Shoving Phallen down next to Thade, they both sat quietly, their eyes trailing the young warrior's every move as he paced nervously. "Leave her." Thade said. "O-h-h no." Acadia denied. "We couldn't do that. Not after all the trouble she has caused." He took Phallen by the arm and forced her to her feet. Holding her in front like a shield, Acadia manipulated her like a puppet. Forcing her to face Thade. Fear flashed in those soft brown eyes. Something he never wanted to see. Infuriated, Thade hissed; "You will pay with your life." Acadia forced her head back against his shoulder and gazed coldly down at her. "It's your choice,

Sister." He reminded mildly, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand. "You're a sick human, aren't you?" The ape enquired huskily. Acadia looked at him as if waiting for an order -- an apt, yet, unsure attention... Letting go with a guffaw, he shook his head with a smile, retorting, "I am not the sick one here." Thade let it slide. He was not in any position to argue. "Then let her go. You have me. Isn't that what you wanted?" "If I do that she will run back to your city." Thade grinned. Nodding. "Are you not a gambling man?" He raised his head and stared at Acadia, keeping him hypnotized as he worked the noose free enough to loosen his hands. But he barely was free when Acadia realized what was happening, snapping his fingers for the men to subdue the ape. "Pretty good try." Acadia told him. Still holding on to Phallen, he used her as a pawn. "Do you love her?" He queried before releasing her with as much force as he had used to raise her, sending her sprawling to the ground. He stepped bravely up to the ape. Towered over him. "Let him go." Acadia fancied a look at his dusted sister as she scrambled to defend Thade. "He has done nothing to you!" Acadia's brow arched. "Oh?"

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Thade could see the fire in Phallen's eyes and he knew what was going to happen and he relaxed and watched the fireworks. That unexpected blow that had caught him off guard crashed into that cock-sure brow of Acadia's. Splitting it. Only to come back with another which caught him square between the eyes -- stunning him before he could get a grasp, latching on like a viper and driving her to the ground with the twist of her arm. "BITCH...!" He spat as he drove her hand behind her back -- blood pouring from his split brow. "You are more trouble than you are worth." Phallen buckled and fell with a scream. Silence fell over the group and they all -- including Thade -- stared in shock at Acadia. Thade broke into a cold sweat. He stared coldly, hoping to catch Acadia's eye. But the warrior was too busy trying to justify his actions to see. Phallen lay on the ground holding her arm as she whimpered in pain, yet still defending her beloved. "I will marry Morrow. Just let him go."

Her tone wavered on the edge of the lie. But if it promised to free Thade from anymore persecution it was worth it. She just could not bring herself to look up at him as he turned suddenly -- outrage striking violently across his brow. The reaction elated Acadia. Watching the disintegration of trust, he added, "I take it my sister neglected to inform you of her betrothment?" His smile was cruel as he observed the discomfort. For a moment, he almost felt sorry for them, seeing the betrayed expression on the ape's face. The way he stopped fighting against the restraints... Giving up... Coming back to Thade, Phallen knelt. "You need to know..." He snarled. Eyes turned away... "I think I do." She untied him. "I think you do, too." Backing into her clan, Phallen watched Thade rise. She wanted to run to him. Sneaking a peek at her, Acadia gave a terse nod. He was satisfied. The "two" were finished. Their trust was gone... Sullen grumbles from the men broke the silence as they reluctantly untied Thade, slipping the strangling noose from his neck -- the General's eyes never straying from his "pet" as he stared in disbelief. She could not hold her eyes to his. Shame brought redness to her otherwise, pale cheeks as she hid beneath her falling hair. Shoulders slumped, her tears fell. He was loose. But he did nothing. "Well, "General"?" Acadia injected. Phallen raised her head and looked into his eyes. Begged him to see. A forlorn smile quivered on her lips. Thade straightened his clothing like a gentleman before looking up at his captors, avoiding Phallen's eyes at all cost. Acadia had the horse and planned on keeping her as he leapt upon the "Black". Thade snarled. His horse was being stolen and there was not a damned thing he could do about it at the moment except stand by and wave goodbye. Leaping upon the mare's back, the young warrior groped for Phallen's arm pulling her up behind him with no time for her to prepare -- his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her underarm. Her terrified expression shot out to Thade. Rising to his feet he caught it, only to turn away, condemning her for betraying him -- breaking her heart... "Let me say farewell to him." Sliding down from the horse Phallen felt the tears well. As she

neared him, Thade stepped back placing his foot in the stirrup. "Please..." begged, and she wanted him to look at her. Reaching up to him, the General wheeled his mount away suddenly. "Look at what you are..." His voice was thick with emotion revealing how he really cared. Her hand found his. She was warm, soft -- and he withdrew. "I don't know you." He solemnly proclaimed. He felt her slip away, touching his thigh. Letting her go was not in the cards as he caught her hand to gaze thoughtfully, studying her as if it were their first encounter -- tipping his head curiously. "I love you." She whispered. Letting her fingers slip, he smirked. "Sure you do." Deep Hazel eyes delved deeply; "I will not soon forget you, my pet." Phallen jumped back when he jerked the reins, wheeling the roan back, riding off. Leaving her. For what seemed like forever, Phallen watched after before returning to Acadia. She cast one last look north before accepting her brother's hand up. He watched her sulk, smiling triumphantly to himself. "Guess what?" And he grinned capriciously. "You are officially dumped!" Though he got his jollies, his men found no humor in what he caused. "You always have been the little bastard." Phallen stabbed.

He saw it... Felt the electricity when she touched him... "HELP ME..." screamed. Without a doubt, he would. How he hated himself for leaving her there! Why he did not sweep her up and flash out of sight... He had no answer. Hindsight was always 20/20. His neck burned from the rope. He did not know whether to laugh or cry, though his eyes stung. "I will come for you Phallen." He swore aloud.

PART II

Having given up, Phallen gave of her own free will to return to the Trident village, her future crumbling before her. She had not gotten through to Thade. He could not read between her words - - the petition for help... Her plea... "Your glorious leader..." Acadia's voice interrupted. "Turned tail and ran like a thief." "Whatever you say, Brother." she muttered. "But you're in for a big surprise." She looked down at her belly. Shivering, she knew life

was developing inside of her. A life which had to be protected. Acadia sneered over his shoulder. "He doesn't care about you." "It was what I asked of him, Brother." A long and exhaustive ride carried them over hills and far away to the village of Trident, leaving the men to chase after on foot through the trenches. Phallen was appalled. Shaking her head, she she declared, "There is nothing more than when I left!" She had always known just what to say to bleed him of his pragmatic ego. "You allow our people to live in squallar!" Indeed, there were no orchards, no weavers to loom fine linen for trade; and all appeared to still be living in shacks instead of sturdy dwellings. "You have accomplished nothing..."

"Perhaps if you would have stuck around you could have changed things?" Acadia half-inquired, half-asserted. "At least descent living quarters and some kind of trade bargaining." He jabbed her hard in the ribs with his elbow. "You have been brain-washed by those apes! They have drilled into you what they want from their humans -- unquestioned submission." Phallen laughed haughtily despite the pain in her side. "You're so full of shit." Acadia nodded with mock-agreement, grinning cynically all the while. "We will see how funny, ha ha things are when I have Thade by his balls." "In your dreams. Something has occurred and you are helpless to stop it." He was shaking with anger at this point. Phallen had him running scared by her prophesy. He felt the static. The kind that made one's hair stand up on one's neck. Yet he was too stubborn to admit. The piece which ran the ice water through his veins was what tickled his ear: "It will hurt..."

PART III

Indeed, the village was poor. Phallen felt responsible. If she would have stayed long ago, things would have been different. After the battle of Calima, free trade had been legalized between ape and human, and the livelihood of her people would have greatly improved. But she had left them. There was no war between she and the civilians, allotting her but one option; to remain neutral. There was no pay-off for her clan. Acadia never accepted the treaty, as she would have, and they were desolate, thanks to her, she felt. "Why

couldn't you have at least..." "Why can't you at least shut up!"
Phallen fell silent...

* * *

Thade charged the doors of the Senate House, boldly interrupting a hearing in progress. "It's all your fault!" He shouted, banging the doors open. "Why? Why couldn't you have just given -- maybe, just an inch?" Nothing screamed "Kidnapped" louder than his arrival. "Thade, you are out of order..." Nardo warned as he rose from his seat. "Sure I am. Indeed... I AM so beyond order I haven't a clue. Tell me, Senators. What exactly is "order"; what you rule to be?" Thick fingers scraped through hair as he tensed with rage. "Goddamn you and your fucking laws!" "Remove him from this room!" Thade clenched his fists. His lips pulled back revealing dangerous fangs. From deep within a wretched scream purged... The Council peered down at their curious casualty as he was incarcerated by two hefty gorilla bailiffs. Dragged away, he carried on: "They are going to KILL HER! Will that make you sleep any better? That you have ended her life?" Fighting against his arresters, Thade took in a shuddering breath, catching Senator Sandar's eye. "Ari knows, Sandar. If you would talk to her once in a while, you would, too." Sandar shook his head. Dropped his gaze. "Get him out of here." Thade was dragged from the courtroom. "You know what is true. You have no virtue in condemning me." Fighting all the way, Thade screamed his virtue: "This is wrong and you know it! YOU KNOW...!" Adjourning, the Senators retreated to the library muttering and murmuring all the way as they huddled in their clutch. Once behind the curtain, all hell broke loose... "I can't understand where he comes from!" Yahn exclaimed, seating himself nervously at the end of the table. "I don't have a clue as to where his senses have gone. For him to part ways with the human is best." Entering the chamber last, Lantres looked at them as they scurried for their seats. He felt like an outsider -- understanding how Thade must have been feeling... Outnumbered -- alienated from his own people... His aged face settled somberly. "Excuse me..." He broke in. Wind

sounds sailed in from the open windows, along with distant chimes and song flutes -- all echoing a time borrowed -- passed, or to come... How can you define what is best for him or how he feels?" Circling the table slowly, he continued. "He already believes we are all out to get him. Your quick decision to condemn him has not been weighed against the thoughts of the citizens of Derkein. Myself, along with them have met this human -- if she is a human at all, and she is no threat." Sandar scoffed. "Not yet. Let her sink her teeth into him!" "She had that chance today."

Lantres was now on the outside looking in steadily growing more irate as the questions only Thade had the right to answer were summed up and concluded. He cleared his throat, found his voice; welcoming the angst brought on by the unfair treatment his Godson was receiving. Copping the same type of attitude, Lantres smiled cynically. "Tell me, Sandar. Have you talked to your daughter lately?" "She is not involved in this." "No, but I think she knows our boy a little better than even we do." Sandar shrunk in his chair, a smug stubborn expression on his muzzle. "Phallen soothes him. She brings him peace. Has Ari ever settled him like that?" Lantres searched their faces. Seeking, but not finding one that gave in the slightest bit of compassion. "Can you NOT see these attributes? ARE YOU BLIND?" Nado remained mute, slouched down between his own shoulders as his beady eyes shifted from side-to-side, fingers clasped as they drummed restlessly atop the backs. Set firmly in protest the orangutan cared about nothing outside of the politics which concerned the welfare of his livelihood and the city of Derkein. "His spoils are not worth the risk to the well-being of the city." The orang argued with a whine. "Lock him up for a few days and he will soon be over her." Lantres' brow rose. "Oh really? Is that your solution? Maybe we should have done that to you when you left your wife and children for that..." "NOW NOW NOW! Let's not even go there." Sandar injected, his arms jutting out for a time-out. Lantres went to a neutral corner huffing and puffing all the way, nostrils flaring. "You want to sling mud again?"

He charged glaring over his shoulder -- arms crossed. "I have a lot. How much do you have?!" Sighing wearily, Senator Sandar gazed across to the young newcomer, Yahn, shaking his head. "We cannot jeopardize the safety of Derkein for the life of this ONE. Surly she will be fine once she falls back in with her own tribe?" "That is not where she belongs. Among them she is in danger." "Among her own? Impossible." Lantres threw his hands up. "You heard him. He was in hysterics. Have you ever known him to be in such dire straits?" Either shame or stubbornness caused the Counsilors to huddle closely. Their eyes peered from hooded brows... "There is no way..." Nado rectified stoically. "Thade cannot keep her." Sandar and Yahn, with their quasi-human features, shook their heads stiffly. That was all it took. Lantres rose suddenly, his chair crashing noisily into the wall. "You are all POMPOUS ASSES!" and he kicked the chair out of his way storming for the door, giving the curtain at the doorway such a yank back that it tore. "Goddamn them...!" Balling his fists, Lantres shook. "You'll see..."

PART III

Thade sat at the back of his cell and stared through the bars. He had never been in jail and did not know how to take it. So he simply sat. Thinking about what had occurred, a short burst of laughter erupted and he tried to control it only to bury his face and let it go. Staring up between his knees into the cell across from him he watched a drunken gorilla struggle to stand. It only made him want to laugh harder. 'Never contend with one who has nothing to lose', wandered thoughtfully across his riddled thoughts and Thade regained his composure immediately. Folding his hands over his knees, he bowed his head and ignored the bullshit... 'I am s-s-o-o stuck in here... All I want is out and I am gone...' Deep in thought, he did not hear the lock tumble back... "Your bail has been posted..." Following the burly bailiff, Thade counted the hairs left on the gorilla's balding head; the way he wobbled on gnarley, caloused feet... 'If I get that bad, somebody put me out of my misery...?' Emerging from the back, swearing under his breath, he met Lantres' eyes : one, expressing regret while the latter was

unsure why they even bothered in the first place... Thade stood hard, his chin jutting. "Why did you do this?" Lantres hum-hawed purposefully before coming to a halt before Thade. "The fools think they need no advice. Perhaps they need to listen to others." "I hate them." Thade snarled, dipping from his Godfather's sight. "Don't "hate" them, Son. Pity them." Still, his fury was aimed at those responsible for denying him his rite. Phallen had changed him so drastically. He felt himself humble before her though she was far from him by now. He had gotten used to her warmth... her touch...

Delirious over her... Out of his mind... "To be with her again..." Thade prayed, his smiling sadness wandering up to meet Lantres' sagacious face. "Oh you have it bad for her, don't you?" Thade rolled his eyes. "You only met her briefly. Wait until you get to know her..." "Go back to your quarters. Get some rest. Things will clear in the morning." "I can't sleep now. I couldn't sleep then! Help me!" Lantres took him by the shoulders and settled him. "Faith is telling a mountain to move and being shocked only if it doesn't." As they stepped out into the evening Lantres inhaled the air. "Go to sleep, Thady... Get some rest." Oh! He hated that name! Obediently, he submitted. "I will try."

"This is BULLSHIT!" Thade swore aloud as he kicked the door open. Chest heaving, he stood still in the hall listening to his own rapid breathing. Then he caught it. A scent in the air. Someone was in his room. The scoot of a chair and the sound of feet hitting the floor prompted the ex-General to be on his guard as he slipped silently into the dimly lit living area. "Yeah, I'd say it was bullshit too..." "Omri..." Thade breathed. "Why are you here?" The young chimp fell back into the chair he had occupied and stretched his long legs out. "I was there, "Thady"." Thade scowled and shook his head. "Don't call me that. I hate that name!" Claspng his hands behind his head, the Corporal swaggered in his chair. "It's a "pet" name, right?" "I want you to leave now." Omri waved him off. "Oh come on now! Can't you take a ribbing?" Thade spun and landed his hands on the arms of the chair staring the brash

youngster straight in the eye. "NO, Omri. I can't. Why are you torturing me?!" The lanky chimp smiled easily. "Really, I didn't come here to do that. I AM on your side. Sometimes we need a little relief, ya know, from the toils of life and all the fun stuff that trails along..." Thade pushed off and stalked across the room to his desk; "like going to jail?" "Yeah." "I have NEVER been in jail, OMRI! NEVER!" "There's a first time for everything." Thade rolled his eyes. Resting his hands on the desk he scoured the pile of worthless papyrus. A wan smile spread across his lips and he snickered. Omri had hit the nail on the head with that one. "You are right about that." Taking an incense from its holder Thade held the end in the lantern's fire until it caught, watching it burn until waving it out -- wafting the smoke... "I really don't want you here." "Well, let's just say I'm here to make sure you don't burn the place down." Thade placed the incense in its burner. "Yeah, well, things are different." "Then so are you." "So you have no worries." "Except what you will do." Thade grunted. "NO..." "Then you're not planning on setting your room on fire again?" Looking about, the senior chimp scoffed at him and at himself. "I think I have a little more rationality instilled now." Omri clasped his hands noisily. "I certainly hope so considering I am adjacent to you for the next six weeks!" Thade's brow rose. "HOW adjacent, Omri?" "Like right next to you, General Thady." "Shut the hell up with the "THADY" shit already!" Omri nodded. "Okay. But you have to promise me where that came from." "Anything, just leave me alone." Omri rose from his seat and strode across the room to the hall before turning back. "Sir...?" Thade's haunted eyes rolled up. "Don't hurt yourself?" He shook his head -- never really making eye-contact. "I won't..." With that, Omri sauntered for the door only to turn back; "I'm right there if you need..." Thade waved him on not looking up as he read some of the poetry he had scribbled... The door closed and locked... All thoughts ajumble, Thade snarled hungrily for answers -- tearing the dusted and torn clothing from his own back -- wanting nothing more than to be back with Phallen in her tree-abode... To be where she wanted

to be... Inaudible words sought restitution as he spun to the pristine armor hanging -- untouched -- unworn...

184-186

His eyes grew dark and murky as a lethal purr-of-a-growl stirred in his chest... It fit so loosely -- draping lazily over his shoulders... Pulling the girders tighter: breast-plate nearly touching back, Thade gnashed his teeth disapprovingly. "I have grown so THIN...!" Until then, he had had no idea how hard the times had fallen on him. Looking in the mirror, there was no kindness reflecting... 'You are so wretched without her...!' He took a double-take at himself. The mirror did not lie. A beast stared back. The empty stare shook his spirit. Tilting his head, Thade peered closer. "Where is my soul?" His eyes narrowed, grew hateful to the image before him as he realized it was himself he faced. "As long as there is a breath in me, I will never stop loving you. I will never be free until you are back with me." 'Don't let me fall...' his frightened psyche sought. He closed his eyes tightly in prayer. 'This "one" who carries my seed...' 'A human -- like my own mother was...' "NOT to die!" and he swung from the mirror breathlessly as questions badgered... He shook his head adamantly. "No... Not with us." concluded undoubtedly.

PART V

Alone...

He knew the feeling of abandon and it was lonely. Lost...

Walking the corridor, he remembered the echo of his lone foot steps... "I must achieve this." Numb from the waist - up, Thade made the new armor fit as he made his way out into the rain -- tugging and pulling it into place all the way... To just escape -- never to return was intended and he wanted to indulge, heavily, in the opium dens sufficating the lower mountain side... A fix... Something he had dismissed from his life, long ago, solicited warrant... Staggering out into the pouring rain, Thade met with an entourage of volunteers standing two or three hundred strong. All standing strong, some of the faces were familiar where others were a blur in memory. Still, they all stood there for him...

Corporal Omri stepped forward from among the many -- a smile on his face as he spread his arms and bowed. "We are here to serve you..." Thade gave the scene a sideways glance. "You're kidding, right?" Looking as if crushed, Omri shook his head slowly before peering stealthily over his shoulder. "Does this look like a joke? C'mon, General, it's miserable out here!" In the distance, lightning arced across the sky making night day for seconds at a time while thunder rolled overhead. 'What has happened to me? Why am I so weak? I seek, what I know in my heart, is wrong. I can't even find the right thoughts to express my feelings.' His eyes sailed over the heads counting faces -- shaking his head. "I can't believe this. Why are they here?" Frustration was swiftly short-circuiting the chimp's rationality and he was ready to tell them to just go home when Omri gestured to the mass for patience. Seeing the Corporal make his way to the top of the steps Thade waved him off: "NO!" He froze half way. "Sir?" As if in slow-motion Thade peered across to the young chimp who wanted, so badly, for him to believe... He hung his head...The rain fell on him... "Thade...?" "I don't know, anymore." mumbled. Omri finished his ascent, finding his own humility along the way. "Your strength remains. Everyone believes you did what you had to do then, and that it was for good reason...And it was! Don't go losin' your shit now. There's a "someone" waiting for her knight to show up and I think it's you!" Placing a hand on the ape's shoulder, Omri laughed; "I can't change the past let alone the future. Why don't we just go along together?" Thade looked the Corporal square in the eye. "It's a jagged little pill." "We'll split it." Swaying up next to Omri, Thade asked, "Where is Attar? I don't see him." "He doesn't trust Phallen." "Very well," he replied solemnly. "I cannot change his mind." He could not control his friend's decisions: to stay away -- turning his back. "It's alright." But it hurt him deeply.

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"No it's not, but I understand." Omri sympathized. Coming close enough to hear Thade's pounding heart, he admitted, "I adore your Phallen." Casting an inclusive eye over the mass, Thade's

expression was mute. "Let us...!" "WAIT...!" The thundering voice sliced through the entourage. Awesome shoulders pressed through the collection of bodies with stone-cold gravity. "I cannot allow you to carry out this mission alone." Hands extended -- they gripped tightly. The gorilla felt a change, shuddering when Thade clasped his forearm. He gasped in spite of himself. "Something wonderful is going to happen. It will bring completion." Dipping from the chimp's intense stare, Attar frowned attempting to seize what it was that gnawed at his soul. "I am a part of this whether I choose to be or not." And he peered from beneath his thick black brow. "It cannot be stopped." Attar shook his head, searched his own words -- what he had said and why he had said them, and from where this revelation manifested. Thade puzzled over him, an almost frightened look on his face. "What are you talking about?" stammered. Attar slumped between his own shoulders... "Virtue..." His voice rumbled. Thade let go with a laugh. "What?!" He shook his head. There was no such thing for his case and he knew it. "No...", Thade rescinded sharply. "and you can tell everyone I said 'kiss my ass'." The way the Commander looked at him made the chimp's balls shrivel... "This is it..." Attar revealed with a nod. "WHAT is it...?" The gorilla's lip quivered. His eyes burned with tears. "The end..." The words echoed in Thade's ears as he closed his eyes. Philosophical, as well as spiritual insight -- and where he now fit in all of it -- opened wide. Thade caught his breath in a gulp as it all slammed- full force into his very existence. "I have done you all such injustice..." The repentance sent Omri into a search as he clutched Thade's arm... "You can't do that!" Thade pulled away and shook his head adamantly. Stepping out from beneath the canopy, the rain fell freely upon his shoulders. "You stand as brothers..." They may have been holding their breath -- it was so still... The army threw back their shoulders, standing proudly. Thade dropped his head. He could not look them in their eyes. Omri and Attar realized how weak he felt and stepped in. "You have to be strong now. You have more balls than this whole city! Let's not be a neuter now?!" The Corporal

boosted. Thade looked up. "Are you on drugs?" "No." "Wanna be?" Slack-jawed, Omri stared at the ex-General. Thade smiled cynically. "Only kidding..." "This is serious business here!" the Corporal contended. "Do you have the balls to defend your livelihood or not?" Thade threw his hands out and sought the so-called electricity.. "Let me have it! I don't want it but it seems everyone else does. So lay it on me!" Stepping out into the storm he wanted the power to strike him. And something did. Omri looked up to witness something only heard about from the priests -- disbelieving what was happening before his very eyes... A spiritual awakening. Leaning into Attar's shoulder the Corporal queried; "What just happened?" No answer came from the slack-jawed Commander as he, too, stared at Thade. "What has befallen me?" A frantic tremble-of-a-voice questioned. Shaking hands shot out for stability seizing hold of both Omri and Attar, seeking solace in their startled faces, only to find dumb-founded expressions. Fear was not a part of Thade's vocabulary. This, though, was something he felt very afraid of. He swallowed hard. His glazed eyes gave no sign of sanction from what had just been munificently granted him. All he could think was, 'I don't want this!', each time the surge impaled him. He began to sway, eyes rolled back in his head, and simply tipped backward. "CATCH HIM!" In an effort to right himself, Thade reached back to nothing. He was shaking when Omri and Attar took him by the arms. The surge coursed through them also, the static creeping -- standing hair on end. "I don't think I like this." Thade consoled jitterly. "You have been chosen." Attar summoned. The chimp let go with a laugh. "I, of all apes, am not "The Chosen." he repealed curtly. "I am no "Lawgiver", nor will I ever be."

188-190

Thade's remark was taken personally by the Commander who still held a deep-seeded belief that a Higher Power ultimately reigned. "You, above all, have seen so much. You have endured -- dared to be what no ape had the courage to be..." Focusing on the General, Attar forced his impression; "You ARE the Chosen One..."

Thade's impulsive nature kicked into over-drive making him careless. Dangerous, once again. "Phallen is my only concern and I will not forsake her." The gorilla sulked. Dealing with his comrade and his dismissal of empowerment placed a strain on his feelings. Nonetheless, a calm reply was the only way to quell the animosity. "Very well. Together we will liberate your woman." Omri nodded. "Anger serves no purpose other than to make everyone miserable." Thade smile victoriously to himself. They were all jumping from the frying pan into the fire to reunite he and his extraordinary lover. To keep the peace he knew he had to move carefully so-as-not to upset the balance gelling them in his favor. Patience was not one of his strong points and he would have just as swiftly leapt into a lone battle if not for the tacet disposition of his peers. They read him. Knew how upset his world was. Being frugal was the name of this game, and whether or not Thade wanted to wait it out, the crossing of this river was going to take more than the trust of a thoroughbred.

The skies had clouded before, preparing for a storm, but this cloud-cover moved far too quickly, bringing haunting thunder that reverberated off of the hills with hollow, cracked distortion followed by a threatening light show seeming to arise from the very ground up to the gathering greyness... A crawling sense of condemnation descended upon the elders when the skies suddenly turned black. Acadia charged into the village as if leading the storm - hostage in tow. Taking a deep breath, as if held all the way, he jerked hard on the reins of the roan once owned by Thade. Bringing up the rear the rest of the barrage scrambled through the gates stumbling to a halt as the savants of the village gathered in number - halting them all in their tracks. Breathless and qualmed, one of the elders pressed forth. "Something is occurring as we speak...In the heavens." His arthritic finger jutted skyward while eyeing Acadia suspiciously. Alighting, the brash young man wore a smug, cynical expression of justice-served, surreptitiously glancing over his shoulder at the old man. Grabbing the warrior's arm out of frustration, the elder

charged; "Did you not feel it?!" "Leave me, Soothsayer!" Acadia reproached, jerking free. Pulling Phallen down with no regard for her safety, his head spun back, scowling; "I don't have time for your fortune-telling." Phallen looked up wearily. Sadly. And the elders saw. The pure absence of animosity. Only surrender. Still, there was a spark. A promise in her eyes of upcomance. Taking her by the arm Acadia pulled her from the dreamy fantasy, waking her to the bitter truth of what she had done. "This is wrong!" Called retribution as the savants dogged after. "Let her go back. She is no longer..." With a stormy grind of his teeth Acadia whipped around to face them for the last time. "LEAVE NOW!" He hated petty belief. The old fossils - following the stars, counting days on a "calendar" - arriving to a conclusion that a new beginning was nigh; entrusted to, of all things, an ape. Putting the icing on the cake was that this power apparently landed in Thade's hands. Acadia hated them. They were idiots. "She is a part of this scheme of things. To keep her here will surly bring the harbinger of ill fortune upon us all!" Their proclamations did not discourage him as he continued along the road. Waving them off, he snapped, "damn us all then!"

Darkness crept over the land behind the menacing thunder heads. The day had slipped away. Nothing had been accomplished; not in Thade's eyes, anyway. Sitting at a table in the far corner of the Officer's Canteen, Thade, Attar, and Omri huddled discussing how this was going to go - a smooth uncomplicated recovery. The General fell back in his chair with a sigh. He was clearly upset and anything could set him off. A look - even a thought along Negativity Road would have been bad news. This was not a good time to annoy him. Phallen was something he wanted now. His skin crawled. Growing more restless by the minute, Thade wanted to do this right now; to get her away from Acadia and back in his protective embrace. He scanned the bar. The smell of smoke and alcohol in the air stung his nose and he squinted through the fog at the candle-lit shadows of the other officers reclined in booths, accompanied by their courtesans - arms draped loosely around

shoulders with uninhibited abandon. Bursts of laughter intruded on his dream... Pins and needles... Tingling from emotional distress Thade began to shake; his hair stood on end. 'What do they want me to do, forget her? Just walk away?' Over and over the questions purged. Always the same ones only phrased differently. He caressed the tall glass sitting before him; the curve in the middle like a waist-line - where his fingers locked on. His stomach churned. A most foul expression fell over his face while staring into the burgundy-colored liquid like a scryer, releasing an unnerving evil. The glass burst and they all jumped as it sprayed - the contents flowing over the table top. Thade drew his hands back, blood dripping - blending with the alcohol now heading for his lap as confusion replaced the divergent trance he had been under. He leapt over the back of his seat just as the fluid sailed over the edge of the table holding his injured hands in a protective manner. "DAMN...!" came a nearby exclamation from person's unknown. Thade turned in the direction it came from, his glare black and ominous. "You alright?" Attar asked, coming round to offer help. "Yes..." Thade replied, digusted with himself. "No..." Omri took Thade's wrists and turned the bloody hands palms up. Shards of glass jutted from his hands. "Fuck no you're not alright." Thade jerked away. "It's superficial." He retorted flatly. Meanwhile, a familiar haunt made their way across the bar with clean towels. All of the fuss focused on Thade's mishap delayed their attention, and the face emerged from the shadows. "I'm fine. Let it go. It's nothing." Looking up as if for an escape from their good intentions, he caught sight of the approaching figure, sighing heavily through an emerging smile. 'She still works here.' : Josee; his beautiful chimp courtesan. A deluge of memories flooded his mind. When he had been so in love with Ari, Josee, looking so like his betrothed, was always there when she was not - patching the holes in his heart that Ari always seemed to pierce by her nonconformity to the laws -- having him running to her rescue every time she was arrested for interfering with the capture of

humans. Having released them and leading them back to the jungle rubbed a serious amount of salt in his many wounds inflicted by her.

He could not speak when she took his bleeding hands. "I'm alright, really." He stammered. But she shook her head, tisking. Long nails gently picked the shards from his palms. "Look what you've done to yourself." She chastised delicately. Having picked all the glass out, Josee placed a folded towel in his left hand, clasped the other on top then wrapped another towel around them. "That will hold you for a while." She quipped, jostling her head, noting he was bound and pretty much helpless for the time being. Any ability for rational judgement was clearly wiped out as he gazed down on her, his eyes gleaming with the knowledge that she would always be there to catch him when he fell -- a sympathetic ear waiting to listen to anything he had to say until his anger turned into such powerful sexual aggression she could hardly control him when he unleashed upon her. Omri smirked - shook his head. "I see the Concubines are still here." There was trouble in all of her glory. He wanted to step in and divert what was obviously developing. Josee was playing on Thade's emotions, casting a potent spell over him. Recognizing the lure, Omri rose to intercept -- to take the General and leave before it was too late. He felt a large hand fall on his forearm: "Leave him..." Attar advised. The young chimp stared in disbelief. "You can't be serious, sir. C'mon! You know he's not in his right mind." Attar just looked at him and shook his head. "This is bullshit." Fuming, the Corporal watched helplessly as the seduction began. How could he do that to Phallen?
193-195

Thade released from the towels, letting them drop to the floor, not losing eye contact with Josee. Their past rushed on them when he took her in his arms.

"They have a history." Attar instilled, smiling lightly. "I'm sure they do. He would not forfeit his future, though. If Phallen ever gets wind of this..." The Commander threw him a warning look: "She won't." The sound of his voice told Omri he did not want Phallen to return. In fact, Attar was anti-Phallen from the word - Go.

He did not trust her. She was too displaced to be up to anything except no good. "If the cards fall in Thade's favor, she will be returned. Otherwise she will remain where she is whether or not she wants to be there." Omri looked like he wanted to puke. "Do you know how absurd you sound?!" Attar's head wobbled. "Oh well..." " 'If the cards fall...' This is not a game of chance! Look at him!" Omri fell defiantly back in his chair, arms crossed tightly across his chest. The gorilla shrugged, his gaze sauntering out to find Thade and Josee. The absence of emotion in Thade's eyes awoke the gorilla, yet to admit he saw it was to never surface. There was pure lust reeking from the way the General held her, unaware that he was watched by almost every individual in the place. Even the sound of the band regrouping did not break the gradation. The band started with a lazy, swaying rhythm, calling couples to the dance floor, encouraging intimacy as bodies touched -- holding onto one another closely. Falling under the persuasion of the beat, Josee lead Thade through the swaying bodies to the center. She wrapped her arms around him and drew him close. The figure, whom he looked up to, slipped away, and a great sadness befell the Corporal. All of the immediacy which once surrounded the moment faded to black. He felt stupid sitting there watching the threads unravel. Especially since he knew how Thade was going to feel in the morning... Like shit. Noticing the harried expression Omri wore, Attar consoled, "He needs her right now." The chimp shook his head dismissing the fervent attempt to justify what was developing. "Like a hole in the head..." He rescinded coldly.

Josee combed her fingers through his hair. Stared dreamily into his far away eyes. "I missed you." She confessed, looming closer to his lips as her fingers trailed to the rich embroidery of his tunic, tracing the outline of its design over his chest. Glass-beaded braids framed her face - igniting with a rainbow of color each time they shifted. Opium oils wafted into Thade's nostrils and he traveled to its soft request, his heart aching when he dove into her throat after the source. The beautiful Courtesan held him

captive. All he appeared to desire was her. Tasting her earlobe, his hands slipped under her shirt. 196

There was no soft warm skin responding to his touch. But it did not matter now. Totally aware of what he was doing, he was unable to stop himself from following the natural instinct in which she provoked. Thade was overwhelmed by the seduction. "Josee..." He groaned. "You know me too well." Her smile warmed and excited him. "Kiss me." She intoned. "Kiss me like you used to." And he did -- long and hard, taking her back in a swoop.

* * *

Phallen cried in her tormented sleep...

* * *

"Now there's somethin you don't see every day." Omri slammed his glass to the table. "I can't believe this!" To see Thade make a spectacle of himself was the straw breaking the camel's back. "He has completely lost it." "Relax..." Attar interred with a glint of irony. Omri shoved his chair back with a screech. "No, sir, I won't. If I were single I would take Phallen for myself! She is far too precious for his barbery!" He leered at the dance floor... "Begging your pardon, but I'm out of here." In his departure, Omri bumped the table carelessly, sending the glasses tilting precariously - spilling over their rims before rocking back to their bases. All he wanted to do right now was apologize to Phallen for restoring a so-called desire. He felt terrible for leading Thade to her. Omri was no humanist, but she had struck a chord in him dismissing the myth that all humans were savages -- if she were human at all. The red and black decor was a blur as he bee-lined for the front door, passing through dangling beads, dodging swags burning with thick wax; swatting at them like flies -- bothered deeply by what had transpired. He knew it was not the breeze greeting him as he neared the exit; his hair standing on end. Someone was riding up swiftly behind...

197-198

Defenses on high, Omri spun suddenly, his hand snapping out, snatching hold on the throat of his stalker, able, with one move,

to snap their neck like a twig. He was blind with fury. Unresponsive, at first, to recognize who it was he held in the deadly grip. "How quickly one forgets..." He coldly mused, releasing but not before delivering a dangerous squeeze. Thade scrutinized him thoughtfully, his hand going to his throat for inspection. "I have not forgotten her." He defended. Dubiously, he glanced back into the smoky canteen, trying hard to decide. "Josee is here...She is touchable...And willing." "Nice reasoning, sir." Omri replied blandly. "What Phallen doesn't know won't hurt her." "That's a fine fucking way to think! Maybe we should just call the whole thing off! You are TRITE! There is a change in store, but I no longer believe it involves you!" Searing into the noisy canteen, Omri nodded in its direction; "That is more of what you deserve." As Thade turned to go, he heard Omri's biting words: "You are too shallow to know how to love." He yanked the door open just in time to see Josee flounce into the lap of a burly gorilla, her arms lolling around his neck as she kissed him. It hit him like a ton of bricks. "I have shamed her." He admitted, closing his eyes. The blow physically moved him and he swayed hazardously to one side as his face grew murky. Omri realized that Thade's conscience had stepped in, striking the mother lode, humbling the ape. "Get me the hell out of here."

199 "You know I'm a prick, yet you bail me out every time." Clenching his fists, Thade's hands began to bleed again. They bled for Phallen. For his bull-shit ways. Omri went to assist but the General stopped him. "Let it be. It is nothing compared to how I am feeling inside." A puzzled look crept across his face, and he asked, "how much had I drank?" "I think it was a combination of the smoke and the opium." Thade grinned capriciously. Oh yes, the Opium... Stumbling out into the street, he could not recall the last time he had been this intoxicated. Every torch-light, each flash of lightning through the canopy was like fireworks as he fought to regain his balance. Omri sailed after, amused by the General as he muddled through his euphoria. This was an event he would not get a second chance to witness and he laughed to himself. Thade

spun and faced the Corporal. "Ya know..." His head rose lazily up the tall, thin figure. "I..." Drunkenly, Thade searched his blurry thoughts... "thank you." asserted after much hesitation. "It's okay." Taking the inebriated soldier by the arm, Omri lead him toward their horses. As he guided Thade to the hitching post the General stopped abruptly, turning to Omri. "Please...don't tell her what I have done?" There was such clarity Omri found it difficult to surmise just how soused Thade really was. Peering into those Jade eyes, they were glazed and wandering. Thade was not home. However, the plea had come from his heart. "You have my word, sir." The young chimp understood that if Phallen ever found out, it would break her heart, for she trusted her new friend completely.

200

Coming back to the then and now, he realized Thade was not beside him. Spinning, Omri painfully observed him try, in vain, to set his foot in the stirrup - unsuccessfully - after several attempts. "I'm having a helluva time here." The simian stammered, turning fluidly to face his comrade. "Perhaps we should walk." Omri suggested. He took him by the arm, steadying him when he swayed. He saved his General from any more undue embarrassment other than what he had already obtained. "I can't recall ever seeing you like this." Omri voiced, bracing Thade against a post as he untethered the horses. Smiling broadly, the older ape proclaimed, "The next time will be at my wedding." Omri smirked. "To who, Josee?" Guiding the horses around, Thade's hand flew out, pressing into Omri's chest. "That really bit..." The Corporal shrugged as he removed the hand gingerly. "Truth hurts." Shaking his head, he asked, "how else could I have put it?" Thade shot a glaring eye Omri's way before dropping his head. "No other way..." * * *

The swagger of drunkenness was recognized all too vividly when the two serpentine through the avenues of the compound. Even the hostler seemed to grimace as he took the horses, his expression, sympathetic as to how, in the morning, their heads were going to pound.

* * *

Omri flung the door open, holding the General up with one arm while he fought to remove the key with his free hand. It was obvious that the older ape did not hold his liquor well when the Corporal fell over Thade's feet as he made his way across the room to the day-bed. Letting him drop, Thade reacted defensively - claspng hold, believing that he was falling - taking the Corporal down with him. Omri worked his arm from under the dead weight. Catching his breath, he watched the sleeping form. Thade was out. "Sleep it off." He slipped quietly from the room, locking the door behind him.

Omri went home. His wife, whom he loved dearly, lay sleeping on the sofa. Apparently waiting up only to lose the battle... "I love you." He whispered in her ear.

"I am losing my mind!"

Several days had already passed since Phallen's abduction and Thade was growing ever more irritable by the seemingly idle approach being taken by those supposedly there to assist!

His impatience often sent him into a rage, screaming and yelling about wasted time as he tore at tapestries. Shredding them to pieces.

Though the hangover was in the past, the headache remained. Fuel added in the form of withdrawal. Not from the spirits consumed, but from his constant separation from the only thing linking him to his own peace of mind. The whole scenario left him tormented and displeased.

However, once he had vented the frustrations an abrupt apology seemed to always follow.

His face was drawn. Gloom pierced. Controlling his emotions was becoming more complicated. To deign to speak to anyone grew increasingly unworkable as he withdrew deeper. Without her, what was left?

It was up to Attar and Omri to define Thade's rantings. "She is his strength," Omri explained. "Without her he has no reason to try

to control himself. And he fears for her, which keeps him on edge.
Please be patient with him"

With humbled acceptance the troops fell away, understanding a little better.

Safely behind a locked door, Thade knelt. "Please..." he prayed clasping his hands tightly together. "If you exist at all... Protect her."

No one saw as his tears fell...

* * *

Still under-weight, Thade's armor fit loosely. Nonetheless, he held himself proudly, received with quiet reverence once he appeared before his army. The hall was filled to capacity. Shoulder-to-shoulder, an understanding flowed through them all... good and evil dwelled in all things. Taking his position, the General bowed his head. "So many of you..." he noticed humbly. Not a shuffle, nor a breath came when he said; "forgive me..." Puzzled looks were exchanged, though. What had he done to need forgiveness? Thade had been through enough hell. Falling into their division, soldiers pulled themselves tightly into uniform line. Inspecting them, Thade passed sombrelly through. He heard their whispers: "the Chosen... the Promised One..." It hissed through them. He wanted to scream. He WAS NOT the God they wanted. "I can't promise you anything." The General started. "Just be ready."

* * *

He made his selections. The majority consisting of brash, hardened gorillas, and wily chimps -- agile and limber, adapted to climbing high into the canopy. The older were stationed as sentries. Guards stationed at the limits of the mountain base and along the flats. Regrouping with Omri, Thade threw Attar a disdainful look. "Where have you been?" "Busy preparing." bassed out calmly. "I see." answered skeptically. So much was resting on his shoulders. There was so far to go. Swaying slightly, Thade turned suddenly to the Commander. "Prepare them. Do not send the elders..." "I know..." the gorilla acknowledged gently. The General caught Omri's eye before turning brusquely -

disappearing through the arched doorway - leaving the entourage. Totally beside himself, Thade felt weak. There was no cure for his ailment. Freeing his "Pet" was not going to save her life. Her very existence was going to cease...

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The prophesy gnawed at his mind until his head pounded. To move his eyes, mis-fires sent him almost to his knees. How he made it to his room... he had no idea. Falling into the darkness, a whimper escaped as he lay down, closing off all thought in hope that the pain would soon end. "Not now. Just make it stop." he was almost crying. Only Dr. Mahq was aware of his migraines, and the cure lay in a mixture of botanicals he prepared. There was no way of reaching the doctor now. Blackness and silence barely touched base, but there was nothing else he could do. Thade was held in its grip. Sleep was not to come to him this night...

PART II

Tension - like that before lightning struck - surrounded the village of Trident. Something was coming. Acadia should have never meddled in Phallen's affairs. To have left her be, as the wise men had advised, would have been advantageous in avoiding that which was now destined to be released. The women and children were taken out of the village. Those who remained were given little explanation, except that a "great storm" was about to unleash. They knew. Phallen had freed the ape-General. And he was so smitten by her - his passion running so much higher than expected, he was coming for her. She had been torn from his world... Bad move on Acadia's part. Now he was coming to claim what was his along with hostility and a challenge. Thade never backed down from anything without a fight. So, to take the object of his affections was strictly taboo. Acadia; having the tenacity to try Thade's Hellish temper, did just that; dragging Phallen back against her will, creating the rift. And she waited...

It would not be any time soon before she saw her beloved, and she missed him. Possessing the power to soothe the "beast" with only the touch of her hand, she reached out, mentally, stroking his

cheek. Smoothing the silver goatee, imagining his caress as he pressed his lips to her palm --

214-215

How he watched her watch the setting sun, and hear how it sounded; the stillness satisfying him, planting the seed of tranquility by simply knowing someone cared about him. His last words: "I will never forget you", faded after the days turned to weeks. Trapped and alone, Phallen felt Thade had... "Phallen...!" Her eyes sprang open to a Chesire Cat smile, face-to-face with her old flame, Moro. His blue-suede eyes captured her attention more than anything. She fought for ground, eyes trailing the long blonde locks down to the muscular bronzed arms resting on either side of her. He was a nice piece of eye-candy, but she knew how materialistic he was now, after being away for so long... A smile tinted her lips... "I see you're still a bootlicker." The broad smile immediatly turned downward. Acadia swaggered past casting a warning look to Phallen. "I see Sister has forgotten her manners." Phallen grinned mockingly back. "I see Brother still thinks his shit doesn't stink." Striding past, she and Moro's eyes trailed the haughty gait Acadia displayed on his way to the wooden cask. His dark return, cold, as he reached knowingly for a stein dangling above his head. "Settle down you brazened prick." Moro defended. Turning back to her, the loneliness cast was as deep as the forest. With a taught shake of his head, Moro squatted into a chair directly across from her feeling her eyes follow. Her ghostly stare begging release... 'It can all stop here if you let me go...' Sauntering between them, Acadia's eyes wandered to Phallen. Flouncing into an overstuffed chair included in the horse-shoe, he observed her thoughtfully, his head dipped, peering over the lip of his stein.

216 "Don't be decieved, Moro. She wants to live among the apes." Phallen's brow rose. "In fact, our beloved Phallen is in love with General Thade!" he raged. The girl shrugged. "Please excuse my brother. His happiness revolves around making others miserable..." Her lip curled cynically back at him.

"Isn't that right?" Acadia went at her as if to strike when Moro jumped from his seat. He let go hard across Phallen's cheek... "You drive me insane!" Acadia spat. "Why must you be so different?!" She had had enough of his abuse and was on her feet before she knew it -- shoving him back into Moro, who had stood in her defense. Through clenched teeth, his breath surged, his hands reaching for her neck -- eyes glazed... By this time, Moro stepped in between. "Take it easy, you." Both, Acadia and Phallen's heads whipped around, their eyes furious. Acadia's glare promised she would be dead before long... His hands curled into fists... Broader fingers clamped atop... "I said, "take it easy"..."

A lone torchier toppled. Crashed snuffing itself in its own oil. Acadia's eyes bulged in disbelief. His mouth moved, yet there were no words... Phallen fell silent. Moro had stuck up for her! Biting her lip, she tasted blood. "It doesn't matter what he does anymore." she dismissed sharply, touching her own cheek. Thade was coming. His wrath was coming. Hitting a female was not in his rule-book -- be it human or ape. Being HIS human, though was going to blind him with rage. Any male daring raise a hand to a female deserved to get their ass kicked... The girl smiled knowingly. "He will never change my mind." Acadia gestured wildly. "SEE?! She doesn't stop. So caught up in the "Ape's culture" she can't see their blood-thirsty intentions." Jabbing a thin finger into his chest, she stabbed, "YOU make them that way. YOU CAUSE THEM TO REACT WITH VIOLENCE!" With each word her finger poked harder.

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He seized her hand. Pulled her up close and personal. "If you had not released him there would be no reason to attack." Acadia retorted before he shoved her back into the chair. Sounding as if on the verge of tears, Acadia begged, "Why did you release him?" She refused to answer - staring at the floor. Steadfast. "you can watch him die..." Phallen closed her eyes, flinching slightly from the vow, keeping her emotions hidden. "Coward..." The words came calmly. Precisely. "You are afraid of Thade. He is strong where

you are weak." Her lovely face awoke to his, determined. Hardened. "Face it, Brother. Your days are numbered." Acadia stalked across the rattan-carpeted floor, curses flying in all directions. Wheeling around he charged, pulling a large bowie from his belt. "You are a traitor!" Grabbing him by the wrist, Moro twisted it back bringing Acadia up against him. "Leave her!" It was a warning. He understood what was to come as he wrenched the knife free. Phallen pressed into the chair. Her eyes wide with terror. 'He was going to kill me! My own brother!' Acadia tore loose and spun, narrowing in on the blonde. "You're taking her side." He declared in disbelief. "Your way is not the right way, Acadia." "NOT the right way!" mocked, and he went for the bowie Moro now held out of reach. Unable to retrieve it Acadia snorted, "You are taking her side!" Phallen's eyes stung with indignation. A feeling she did not want to entertain no matter who the perpetrator happened to be. Jutting into her face all of a sudden, Acadia demanded; "What do you REALLY want, Phallen?!" his spittle spraying her. "To be with him..."

The rhythm of the war-drums resounded around the compound - solemn and repetitive with an occasional jingle from a cymbal or bell. It was the last evening before they set out and all were psyched and ready. Staring off into the velvet sunset Thade heard nothing. His thoughts ran deep and still. Too still. The past few days had proved trying. The comfort of having Phallen next to him for so long, only to have her ripped from him, conjured an alien pain. His feelings, so fervent, beat in his chest. She all he could think about. All he cared about. She was his life. His love, and if he had to lay down his life for her he was prepared to do just that. 'She accepted me for what I was.' Crunched high on the mountain side, Thade sighed deeply, the warm humid air filling his lungs. He looked at his hands. Big threatening fingers taunted to touch. "Her love grew from nothing I had done." and he jumped from his own voice. The shiver determined he could not deny that he loved her. "Why?" The forest below seemed to come alive as if atuned.

If it knew, the song it broke into was not revealing its secret when the night erupted into a symphony of sound. The joy he and his beautiful human were to be rewarded with. A calm came over him soon replaced by a looming premonition that Phallen was in danger. The impending threat shattered his zone. To lose everything. Attempting to block the thought was futile: The room was softly lit. He thought he was tough but in the back of his mind lurked the warning; "I think I'm in trouble"... A single lamp flickered in the chamber. Phallen lay across the bed when he approached, a mixture of want and denial churning within. Fear electrified Thade's curiosity when he looked down, gently touching his fingertips to hers, closing his eyes. For some reason it felt right. Tender, soft skin, used to the muted light of the forest, quivered beneath his big hands. A human. Gazing down on her, he accepted her into his world. He saw she was beyond the usual, and loved her. He pulled himself up, leering down with a mouth full of fangs letting go of the arms that wrapped around him. Their body's bound together and he fell into her rapture. At first she denied his advances.

Afraid. His passion had risen far too highly to simply shut it down.

"I will never hurt you, my pet..." The valley was inviting as he gently probed, moving down to taste the wine sampled from his fingers. It was well and good to he and his mistress when he went down on her, taking her to heights never enjoyed... Finding her, to take her over and over, Thade wanted to enter. He let out a low, guttural groan before ascending. "Let me make love to you." Phallen's cheeks were crimson from arousal when she felt his erection against her. Her head swam. Gentle at first, he purged gently, moving slowly, lost in euphoria. "She is virgin..." and he shivered. The last thing he remembered was her breath on his face when she crested... how he came with her, knowing what was happening inside of her. He peered down on her with a sigh. He hoped no one had heard them...

"She's pregnant..." As a result, from their liason...indeed, she was. Thade prayed her captors' not inherit the knowledge, for if they did the child held a snowballs' chance in Hell of surviving.

Acadia, being so hellbent, would beat Phallen until she miscarried... Or worse...

219 Darkness clouded the pleasant memory, crashing in on him with rude intrusion: "Here I am...Your worst nightmare...Your migraine...Remember me?" Thade spun and stormed back to his comrades feeling so alone. It could not be more of a mess. It was time to wake up. The stress played across his face once he came into the light of the torches. Omri caught it -- quickly joining the ex-General's bandy gait. "It hurts you." Those three words quaked in Thade's heart, finding it nearly impossible to conceal the rage. "Well..." He choked. "I understand." Thade peered curiously at the lanky chimp, his brow arched. "Do you really?" He charged, patience thinned for want of something he had been denied. Stripped from him. At a loss for words, the Corporal shook his head. "I didn't think so." Thade's sharp tongue summed before striding ahead. "To be endowed with great power comes great responsibility." The chimp froze in his steps. Turned slowly back to him. "Who told you to say that?" "Is it not the truth, Sir?" Thade waved him off. Waved everything off. "I don't want this, Omri! I don't want the "responsibility". I just want her back." The young ape jogged to catch up. "I love your fair maiden also, yet my adoration lies in her fight for independance. To be with whoever she believes is worthy. Obviously, she cherishes you -- enough to give up her freedom to save your hide." Torchlight flickered in Thade's eyes - silvery-shiny and cold. How dare this fool call him out on his feelings! He was so right, though. And the General warred over the intention. "Leave it alone." he grumbled. As he walked away, Omri called, "you know it. I feel it. I KNOW you do too!" Thade made a soft, sort of coughing sound. His fingers curled into fists. "You caught me off guard once, Corporal..." he seethed. Omri held his ground. His youth, in this situation, was not going to help. The challenge had been brought and Thade charged knocking him off balance. In a cloud of dust they both went down, kicking and gouging. Pinning the youngster to the ground, Thade's chest heaved -- his head pounding... Sitting on the lad's chest, he

snarled into the face of his adversary. "Why must you test me?!" He could have killed him right then and there. Omri's throat locked up and he shook his head. Thade stared down his muzzle grinning an evil smile. "No more, my friend. Not now." warned. A dozen or so soldiers, by that time, came buzzing over, swept up by the sudden tussle -- prepared for the worst as they congregated on the site. Thade threw his leg over and stood, offering a hand to his comrade. Omri clasped on and pulled himself to his feet -- locking on to the General's steady gaze. "It's alright." the young chimp assured. It was not. The group gathering had seen Thade attack Omri. Falling back, Thade seemed to cower. He wanted to bolt... They came toward him, shackles at the ready. "Don't." Omri requested with a shake of his head. "What...?" stuttered from a huge gorilla, flabbergasted, to say the least, by what he had witnessed first-hand. "It's cool." "But..." "I said let it go." Omri saw the panic in Thade's eyes. Understood, now. Stubbornly, the group backed off, their eyes watching Thade when he approached the Corporal almost timidly. "A disciplined squad, aren't they?" he queried lightly as he neared. "I'm so sorry." Thade shook his head. "Why? You did nothing wrong." Passing the Corporal, he felt beaten. There was no answer to how his heart beat. "I am going to bed." mumbled. Watching, Omri could not stop his words; "You will benefit from your emotions, General." He quaked. Stepped out of line - a few. Turning on his heel, Thade denoted, "Let's hope so."

The one piece of hell he wished to retain... It drove him mad...

To go back to that dark quad filled Thade with a quivering rebellion... Bumps and abrasions seemed to emerge. He felt old and tired. There was no way, it seemed, he was going to keep up anymore. 'Give me strength,' prayed. * * *

Falling into the seat behind his desk, Thade waited for the knock. It would come. It would tell. 'There is no doubt and they know it'. Lolling back, he passed out.

* * *

A cloaked figure stole through the streets. On a dastardly mission no doubt. Scurrying up the steps to Senator Sandar's home the door opened and he slipped in. "I have it." Nardo tossed his garment onto a nearby chair and quickly crossed the softly lit room. "We can stop this now." He revealed. Sandar stroked at his pure white beard, eyeing the orang thoughtfully. "What's up your sleeve?" "A letter. A letter from Lantres expressing how Phallen plans to kill Thade herself." "Please!" "It will work. Thade hangs on his every word." The aged chimp turned slowly in his chair, thinking it over. "It's too risky." The orangutan pouted, bloating his features almost grotesquely. "What's left to risk? We must save him from himself. It's no longer up to him. He's lost his mind. Thade is crazy." Sandar's brow creased painfully knowing that what Nardo professed was legitimate. Still, to deceive the General in such a way did not rest easily within his heart. He shook his head sadly before looking up. "Do it."

* * *

Too many to count and riding six abreast through the gates of Derkein, the wily chimps stole far ahead clambering silently into the highest part of the canopy. Priests lined the street chanting prayers and draping talismans around the necks of the troops as they passed. It was a dark dismal night and everyone felt the chill. This was going to change everything. An ill wind blew for one of the species and it wasn't telling for which. Thade, Attar, and Omri were adressed personally by the high priest, his face hidden behind a red veil. "Blessed are the righteous for they will see heaven." He made a gesture of holiness over the trio before bowing slightly. Racing toward the procession a messenger stopped short. He didn't expect such a turn out as he looked for quick entry to the curbside.

The gates closed behind the last six soldiers. "WAIT! I have an urgent message for General Thade." Shouldering his way to the front he came face-to-chest with a silverback. "I will take the message." The little bonobo chimp timidly handed it up to him. "He must receive it now." Grunting, the gorilla seemed to nod, then turned and stalked across the street to another silverback

where a short conversation took place. Handing the parchment over, one went back into the city while the other saddled up. It was done. A little late, yet better late than never.

222 PART III THE MESSAGE

"They are coming!" Acadia let go with a shrill whistle and his men flooded the forest in every direction, weapons gripped tightly in their fists. "You know what to do." he called. "Seperate Thade from his band. Kill them if you have to. Kill the chimps...They are in the canopy. But I want Thade alive. There are many but they are confused easily. It is going just as we planned." A mere four-hundred against at least six-hundred-fifty was an ill-balanced number. If the humans followed their strategy though, it would work. The element of surprise never failed. Acadia watched as his men disappeared. Blending in. Vanishing into the thick fog and foliage without a sound. Smiling, he nodded to himself. He would be a hero among his people after all was said and done. His spear would carry the head of their persecutor for all to see...

"Coward..." whispered close to his ear. Acadia spun expecting Phallen to be somewhere close behind but no one was there. He shook the words out of his head, dismissing the whole thing as just a trick of the breeze. Besides, she was locked up back at the village. There was no way she could have been near. Stillness wrapped around him like a cloak. He broke into a run back to the village...

* * *

Thade sniffed the air. He knew that odor. "Turn back..." he ordered. Attar turned to him. "What?" Thade stared into him. He knew what was coming -- his own fear of the inevitable plain. "Get out of here! Retreat!" His demons were coming. Never running from anything, Thade released the others from the hell about to be unleashed. He could not hide. "I will not leave you!" The words collected in his head, yet Thade could not translate their meaning quick enough. He turned, as if in slow motion when a whistling sound sung through the air. Taking hold of the Commander's arm, he focused upon the beady, black eyes. "It is destined!" and he nodded with that odd upward tersness. "There is

no time!" Stones, launched from wrist-rockets with the velocity of a bullet from a gun, narrowly missed them as it flew between. "We will kill them all!" Attar thundered, his steed rearing nervously when more stones bombarded. Thade felt his stomach turn, realizing his friend was not going to listen. The gorilla ripped from his grasp spinning his horse around with a mighty roar sending soldiers in slashing with machetes and claiborns. Busting skulls with maces and gauntlets. Rising to the opportunity to instill some pain, Thade fell into the battle. Wheeling his horse around he felt the warm stickiness of blood splash across his face. Disgust flamed as he wiped it from his face, smearing it like war paint, a deep growl emanating slowly up from his chest. Before his mind could register, he had his sword, swinging it feverishly in wide arcs, meeting with the arm of his assailant, severing it from the shoulder felling the man as his blood pulsed over them both.

223-224 Bolos sliced through the air smashing into the Derkein Army without prejudice, sending them reeling -- some conscious as they tumbled from their mounts; others, stone-cold dead from a fatal blow. Attar and Omri took to Thade's sides guarding him from the onslaught which seemed to come from nowhere...everywhere. Where were the chimps?! They were supposed to be forwarning them. "Stay behind me!" Attar thundered, batting at an incoming projectile. "They are aimed at you!" His words were hastened as he came about, his mighty hand balled into a concrete fist crashing into the face of one of Thade's antagonists, sending their nasal bridge straight into their brain -- killing them instantly. "It's too late." Attar heard Thade's rebuttal and quickly turned to question, but found Thade to be quite some distance away already... Omri was the first to be taken out of the BIG picture. Realizing that they were purposefully being seperated, his efforts to relay this was thwarted. Presicion... A blow from a stone, colliding between his eyes, sent the Corporal heels-over-head off the back of his horse. He never knew what hit him... Witnessing Omri's fall, Attar jerked hard on the reins turning his mount back in the direction he had last seen Thade. As

he did so something broke through the tree top falling before him. Snapping just short of the ground. His mouth gaped in shock as the chimp soldier writhed and seized, to fall still -- hanging limply by the neck. Shock prevented him from sudden reaction upon hearing an all-too-familiar sound as it resounded in his ears, turning in its direction in time for the bolos to wrap itself dangerously around his thick neck several times before the weights connected with his head sending him reeling straight to the ground in a heavy, dusty thud.

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Thade's head spun. He was alone, now. Wheeling his horse from left to right, it was a struggle to stay in front of the incoming enemy. His patience was thread-bare as he swiped at the few daring enough to step close. "COME ON," he snarled, swinging his sword in a dangerously playful way. "Do any of you know how to fight?" He heard it coming. Quick-silver reflexes maneuvered him from the bolos deadly aim just in time. Returning his sword to its sheath with one hand while retrieving his own bolos with the other, Thade took aim as he slowly began to swing the weapon over his head -- eyes locked upon his adversary with deadly promise. Velocity increased and the weights soon whistled around his head before releasing with perfect accuracy, splitting their skull wide open from the nose up. With a snort of satisfaction Thade went back for his claiborn, an evil, tight grin creeping across his lips. "You will lose..." he muttered, sliding down against the thick neck of his mount, observing the options available to him. An attack from above was not something anticipated when a net fell over him followed by several bodies, wrestling and pounding on Thade with all of their might. Pulled from his horse, he went down kicking and screaming. The men tried in vain to seize his sword through the net, receiving as many gouges and lacerations Thade could deliver. Barely able to restrain the enraged ape, one rather portly individual sat hard on his chest. Enough pressure and he would soon desist or pass out. Adding a few punches to the head urged semi-consciousness. Thade felt like he was suffocating. Each breath out

denying a breath in. A circle of human faces hung over he and the fat man sitting on him and they began to laugh as the man wrapped his hands around Thade's neck slowly increasing pressure until he choked. "Kill him. Get it over with." the chanted as they took turns kicking or spitting on him. Breaking through the circle, Erasmus' face lit up. "Release him! Acadia wants him alive!" he cried. The man squeezed tighter, cutting off any air in his last attempt to strangle the life out of the General until a hard-soled boot clocked him across the side of his face. Erasmus glared at the fat man as he struggled to stand, shoving him back down on his fat ass. "I gave you a direct order!" The circle backed away revealing a netted, disoriented ape-general, now bloody and beaten -- gasping for air...captured...

* * *

There came an urgent knock and Acadia leapt for the door. Phallen listened hard to the hisses and lisps of the message being relaid, hearing her own name muffle across. She saw her brother's face light up with a smile as he nodded. Closing the door, he turned with that wry smile. "He's captured." Bending to her as if to royalty, Acadia crossed his arms, a Chesire smile painted across his lips. "Did you catch that?" Phallen jerked her gaze away sickened by his appalling self-rightuousness. Shaking her head, she muttered, "I don't hear you anymore." He grabbed her chin. Forced her to look him in the eye. "You will not turn away as quickly from Thade as you do from your own blood. We'll see when I have him fettered before you!"

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"Guards...!" Two of his henchmen entered immediately, on on either side of the door, their muscular arms crossed over their chest. Reaching for her arm Phallen broke free and tried to run. He caught her up and pulled her in. "You're not going anywhere." She spat in his face. "I have no pity for what will happen to you." seethed. "Get her out of me sight!" Pushing her into the arms of the guards, Acadia staggered back, licking the

wounds inflicted from her vehement stoning. Fuming silently, he kept his back to them until they were gone.

They may have had him, but they still feared him. Roughly handled and swiftly restrained, Thade was carted off like an animal - tied to a rail hand and foot -- his army scattered about like the chess-board pieces of an angered player -- swept away at a game thought won, displacing their General...

Awakened by the commotion, Phallen realized Acadia's words rang of the truth. To have taken her beloved their methods had to have been malicious and devastating. Moreso, than Thades. They had hurt him in the process. How else could they have subdued him? What of Attar and Omri? Surly, they had accompanied him. They would never allow Thade to venture alone. Phallen prayed they were alright...

"Take my hand..." She opened her eyes. Thade was reaching down from his horse, a soft smile on his lips. Taking his hand he pulled her up behind him and guided her arms around his waist. The second sun was setting behind purple clouds as they galloped off, far from Trident,

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even further from Derkein. "We are not going back. We are destined. Nothing can change my mind." Pulling the reins, the steed came to a halt and Thade alit, taking Phallen down. "I love you." His long arms enwrapped her securely. Pulled her next to him. "Tell me you love me, my pet?" Dreamy eyes gazed up into his softening the hardened gleam of distrust, her fingers stroking his silver goatee, tracing his lips. "I have always loved you." His smile waivered. Squeezing her tighter, feeling her soft skin beneath his big hands raven hair flowed over his arms sending a rush up his spine. "Hold onto me, Phallen. Never let go." Lifting her chin, Thade bent to the full lips and kissed her tenderly, whispering upon them, "we are forever..." "Forever." she conferred breathily.

THOOMB...THOOMB...THOOMB...!!!

The ground shook beneath her feet as she opened her eyes. The pounding of the stakes. Squinting, she focused upon what was

being erected before her -- the posts driven further into the hardened soil -- further into her soul. Slowly, but steadily, Phallen became aware of what was happening -- awakening from her dream. Sweat stung her eyes and her jet hair hung in wet strings, clinging to her face and neck. Shaking her head did little to release the locks as she came to terms with what was a dream and what was reality. Unfortunately, the hammering was real. They had him! her mind shot. They REALLY had HIM! Phallen hung her head in remorse. She did not care anymore. There was no chance for them, now. She would die with Thade; unafraid. But she was afraid... What about our child? Tears would not come. She was far too dehydrated. "Do not fear this..." The girl squinted against the glare of the blazing fire-pit, finding only the skeletal silhouette of an old man blocking the blinding light. "Wha...?" Brushing the hair back from her face, his sagacious eyes found hers. "We do not fear Thade as Acadia does. Be strong... He will need your strength." His leathery hand caressed her wounded cheek and he nodded, filling Phallen's heart with hope. Tragedy had been replaced with promise. In that instant, she did weep. "He heard me. He IS coming for me." The wrinkled face of the old man creased with an even deeper line from a smile spanning from ear to ear before hobbling off between a row of houses. "Do you hear me? HE IS COMING!" "Shut up!" resounded from beyond the fire.

Her shoulders felt hot and tight. She began to redden...burning under the suns' direct rays for-which she was unaccustomed. Moonlit evenings were her luminence. She was a forest dweller, rarely venturing into the full light. Her solo journey to Calima had been well planned...

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Hearsay of the great battle which occurred there attracted her curiosity to find a hidden artifact to add to her cabinet of unusual finds. She wanted...No...HAD to see this place... Clothed from head to toe in white gossamer, the suns' had little

effect, for the cloth not only breathed, it kept her skin cool and dry.

A dot of white in a desolate field of sand... Bodies, mummifying in the arid sands, scattered about like a child's toys, momentarily appeared as the winds whipped carelessly into her, only to be devoured once again, as she made her way to the icon. Twisted metal towered above her, jutting hundreds of feet into the grey sky. Staring up at the monolith, she felt small. Insignificant. Standing in its shadow -- a small speck of life; deeply affected by the sheer enormity, alone. Breathe. Just breathe... It was awesome...this symbol...this image.

Though intimidated by the anomaly, Phallen entered the cavernous belly of the sleeping giant, stepping lightly along the descension, following it deeper into the ground, cold, now, surrounded by steel and dangling wires. There seemed no other way down except to jump when a good five-foot drop-off stopped her from the treasures below. It was further than she had calculated, landing hard, her legs failing, sending her sprawling in the sand. Having knocked the wind out of her, Phallen rolled onto her back. Regaining her bearings, she glanced around at her alien surroundings -- the objects -- at things never dreamed. Scrawlings on the walls -- foreign in the languages she had mastered -- stood boldly out. One word she did recognize struck a chord and she rose to touch it... CA-LI-MA... Running her fingers over the embossment she withdrew as if shocked. "Calima..." she spoke aloud, hearing the word and reeling as if she had committed some form of blasphemy. I shouldn't be in here. This is sacred. Too scared to run, she backed from the words robotically, her hands wringing -- echoes ringing in her ears... Then she caught it. From the corner of her eye. Something moved. Slowly. Unexpectedly from behind the glass barrier. She stepped cautiously up to the glass and peered through the smudged partition. She was not alone. Artificial light beamed from the ceiling and the control board flashed a multitude of colors --

dysfunctional now in its shot and broken state. "What is that?" she said aloud, squinting up against the glass.

229-231 She wiped at the glass but the dust and what appeared to be blood, was on the inside. Pressing her forehead against it still offered no clear view. SLAM...!!!

Phallen leapt back with a yelp. Something or someONE crashed full force into the barrier. Then there was nothing. Scaring her to death, Phallen fell against the outer wall and caught her breath, her fingers going nervously to her throat. Gathering her wits, she leaned against the wall for several minutes before pushing away, her hand hitting the activator. A scream escaped as it slid upward with a grind, opening the room to her. Backing away, prepared to bolt, curiosity got the better of her and she craned her neck around the corner, renouncing her fear, wanting to know what was so precious to have to keep it behind locked doors. Barely visible behind the falling dust, a figure lay on the floor, half-alive. Trapped... "What the...?" She could not finish, agast to discover another living creature encaged -- not "preserved". With an emphatic sigh Phallen knelt next to them taking her water. He was fading in and out of consciouness as she rested his body against hers, feeding the water slowly. He could not swallow. Choking when it hit his throat. "Easy," she consoled, stroking his hair back. "Take it slow." His head was hot. He burned with fever. The words fumbling from his mouth were incoherent, stammering of the star which fell from the sky. Okay..., none of this made any sense to her and obviously he was not in any shape to explain. Getting the ape-soldier out of there and back to the safety of her tree-abode was all she could think about. Leaving him there was out of the question. Her conscience could not live with a death she could have prevented. And he was certain to succomb to his injuries if she did not take him with her. 232

He would never be able to recall the trip. A head shorter than he, Phallen had held him on his feet, walking him out along an alternate route for the surface. When the suns hit him he collapsed, burying his face in his hands. "I am blind! I cannot make this

journey!" "Yes you can. Close your eyes and I'll guide you. Trust me." Helping the ape to his feet, her arms wrapped securely around his thin waist. Phallen shrouded his sensitive eyes with a piece of her skirt, and, as promised, led him from his tomb. Exhausted and burning, he fell to the ground -- to sleep. Sometimes, briefly while other times for hours. Phallen thought for sure they were going to die out there in the desert among the casualties of war. "Where are we going?" croaked pathetically from his parched throat. "To a safe place." His hand groped blindly in the air and she caught it in her small, unthreatening grasp - cool and fragile. He rose to the strength there. It seemed as if he had a moment of clarity -- had found his bearings. He tore the cloth from his eyes and looked into hers before fading out; a temporary redemption of his senses... It was the perfect time for a thunder storm, but looking at the sky, well, it was as blue and cloudless as it could be. Hot winds drifted the sands over him threatening to take him for its own. Holding him up Phallen forced him to take steps that his feet refused. "We're almost to the forest. Don't stop now!" He hung, drunkenly, over her shoulders, clinging to what little life was left in him. Climbing the last dune had taxed him and he fell taking her down with him. At least they were out of the suns' scorching glare.

But he could walk no farther.

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He was almost crying. "Leave me. Save yourself." and he let his head fall back into the sand. Phallen had been scanning the horizon when she heard his weakened plea. Giving him some water, she cradled him in her arms. "Sleep..." she said, wanting to drink yet knowing how much more he needed it. "I will be right here." Looking up into her shrouded features, he asked guiltily, "You will not leave me?" Phallen shook her head, touched his silver goatee. "No. I won't." His brow creased deeply and he nodded with bewilderment. His chin sunk to his chest and he was out, deep in a fever-induced slumber. What had taken her hours to reach, took two days to retreat from. Having held him on his feet when he could not alone, she dragged him through the forest on a make-shift

stretcher of branches and broad leaves until she fell from exhaustion -- unable to take another blistering step.

Upon reaching her door, Phallen let him down as gently as possible and fell to her own knees and wept. She had made it! Her arms ached. Feeling them really start to burn for the first time as she hefted the soldier up on his feet one last time, turning the key and pushing the door open with both of their bodies. "I made it...!" squealed almost hysterically, hardly believing her own words or eyes when her home welcomed her in. Sweat dripped from every pore as she physically dragged him toward the back to the awaiting bedroom. Dropping him to the bed, she fell with him, her energy totally spent, knowing she was safe and did not have to fight for life any longer...disabled, now, to do so if she had to now that she had surrendered. There they slept. Motionless. His arm still wrapped around her shoulders.

* * * "Phallen...?" Straining against the glare, her eyes were slits as she shook the fuzziness away. With a start, Phallen seized upon the picture developing. Before her, shackled and beaten, was her beloved Thade. His neck was rimmed with bloody bruises. Blood ran down the side of his face.

234

She began to sob at the sight of his injuries. Indeed, they had used brute force to control him. His face was bruised and swollen on one side from the horrific pounding he had taken. She dropped her head; tears falling to the ground in dusty return. His head felt as if it had been split like a melon when he tried to shake it. "Be strong my Pet." he called. His skull pounded from every movement as he surveyed their surroundings. No one seemed to pay them much attention now that the two were where they wanted them to be. Thade saw a dirty, poor human village. Glancing at Phallen, he understood why she had left. There were no trees bearing fruit, no solid-structure buildings, and no real guidance toward a lucrative future. It was a hole. He focused on Phallen. She was definitely in distress and he wondered if he had been in that same frame of mind when she had taken him from his tomb.

"Forgive me..." Her words were barely audible before she fell against her restraints. "Don't blame yourself," Thade went to console. "you suffer along with me. Something no one has ever done." Great sobs poured from her, unable to hide the remorse for what she had caused, replaced by hoarse coughs, her throat so dry that just to take a breath was like inhaling flames. Thade was helpless. Watching her struggle to breathe, panic rose. Was there no one to help her?! Straining against his restraints, he could not release as he watched her choke, thinking that this was going to be her last breath. "Somebody help her!" he screamed, pulling desperately on the ropes. From nowhere an elderly man appeared from around a nearby hut. In his hands he carried an urn and cup, and he bent to her. The ape's face, tortured and beaten, suddenly changed as he watched this ancient human administer the healing fluids, offering sips, as she must have done for Thade in the desert, not so long ago. This man shall be spared... Though she choked on the moisture, Phallen was recovering, bringing her back, reviving her. And her head rose, the deep, brown eyes locking on Thade madly. For a split second, the General questioned his feelings for her, sparked by the animalistic expression Phallen presented latching on to air once more.

235

This was not natural for her. Surly, when she had discovered him, his state of mind was far from graceful, and he realized that to judge her was unjust -- and that he adored her; his tiny human. Her petite frame. Her height; barely coming to his shoulders. Yet the strength she embodied... She held a spirit. Thade could not deny it. And he tried. He swore how he had tried! She captivated him and he could not reject her. He loved her. "She is everything in my world..." he told himself, nodding. If they lived or died, Thade vowed their eternity was forever together. Her breath on him brought solace to a befouled existence. Dabbing at the trickle of saliva running down Phallen's chin, the old man turned and eyed the ape: Surly, he needs water... Ready with his cup, the old man gimped across to Thade, placing the cup to the ape's lips.

Barely wetting his lips, a voice shouted freezing the old human -- his gaze tragic. Apologetic. The chimp gave his familiar upward nod then jerked his head to the side indicating for the man to leave...it was okay. Uncertainty warred over the sage's brow. "Go..." the General ordered as gently as possible. "It's okay." Yes, Thade determined. He will be spared...

"I love you, my Pet." His stare was as intense as his words, and as Phallen found the courage to look back she could not believe, after all he had been through because of her, he still spoke his adoration. "You accepted me in my deepest need. Touched me when I repented. Nothing will change how much you mean to me. You are my strength. You will save my life tonight. We will be together again in our paradise." His eyes danced in the fire light drawing her in like a moth to a flame.

236

"How sweet..." The bitter complement came from the shadows. Flanked by Pieter and Erasmus, Acadia materialized from the shadows. Hooking his eyes into the black-haired man, Thade released a murky growl roiling from the deep-seeded hatred growing for the human bastard. Acadia strode past the enraged ape with no regard, heading for Phallen's ragged figure. Brushing back her hair all-too-tenderly, she shivered, watching his movements modestly. Wishing Thade would not display his rage, Phallen tasted her own fear as it rose, acidly, into her mouth, for she knew Acadia would use that fear against them. Catching Thade's displeasure, he turned slightly, looking over his own shoulder with dull surprise. "I do believe he's upset," and he turned speedily back to his sister, hissing, "about something." "You are a low..." Acadia came across with a wicked back-hand, silencing the slanderous response.. Phallen swayed from the blow, momentarily dazed before coming around to meet his gaze with a stone-cold promise of revenge... She spat in his face. All activity ceased. No one breathed. Even Thade fell silent -- shocked by the boldness.

Acadia brought his hand to his face with deadly calmness, wiping at the insult running down his cheek. "O-h-h-h, aren't WE

quite the sympathizer?" queried beneath his breath. With that, he crashed down upon her head with one tremendous blow: "TRAITOR!" Thade lunged against his restraints. That very same word, from his nightmare, screamed the same way, sent him over the edge. This was the one who was going to take her from him. Acadia was going to kill her!

"DON'T TOUCH HER!" Thade roared. Acadia happened a slack glance his way, knowing the ape was helpless. The snap of his fingers was all he did to prompt the twin, Pieter from his solemn stance, retrieving, from the fire pit a device all-too-familiar to Thade.

Thade strained around, trying to see just what was coming, catching the glow in the young mans grip as he sauntered up from behind, a jagged edged knife at the ready in his other hand. Maneuvering the blade with deadly accuracy, he severed the tethers holding Thade's armor jerking it from his body before slicing carelessly into the mail, pulling it down to the ape's waist to expose his torso. Seeing the iron, Thade's head whipped back to Acadia, his eyes blazing. "OH, YOU WILL PAY!!" The black-haired man grinned triumphantly, giving the go-ahead with a terse nod. The iron was thrust against Thade's shoulderblade, burning the hair away...cooking the flesh. The ape never flinched. No scream of agony. Acadia pouted in disappointment. Thade narrowed in on his prey. A cold unceasing -- unblinking fury overriding the intense burning -- seeing that flicker of fear on the human's face. Thade smiled. 'Good...I have your undivided attention...' he gloated. Pieter pulled the hot iron away leaving a deep raw brand in its wake. Thade drew a ragged breath, sickened by the feeling as his own flesh pulled away like melted plastic, snapping back, hot and sticky. "Is that all you have?!"

Acadia looked at the General as if he had lost his mind, meeting his furiously wicked skull-grin. This ape was enraged and dangerous. 238

Acadia's cock-sure grin fell. He had expected a more dramatic response. "You are stronger than I assumed." Thade's anger spooked him... "More than you will ever know." the General coolly

replied. A terror shuddered through the brazened warrior, shaking him physically. "You are so dead..." The fist met Thade's chin. Spinning, Acadia hid the pain throbbing in his hand as he shook it from his fist. Thade shook himself, fighting to remain conscious; his head throbbing with migraine velocity. Still, he managed a smirk if only to belittle the little bastard. "It would be in your favor to let us go." Waving a wary finger, Acadia saw the bruises on his own knuckles. "That's not going to happen." Closing his eyes for only a few seconds, Thade awoke to the feigned warmth of a loving sibling as Acadia lifted Phallen's chin. Out cold, he patted her reddened cheek... "Phallen...?" Acadia lulled. Vacant eyes opened to a an unrecognizable face, her head lolling recklessly. "F-f-uck y-y-ou, y-ou l-l-itt-le b-bas-tard!" Acadia's creaseless face puckered. "It's time to to take care of business." She realized what her brother meant -- vindictive emptiness shining deadly-cold. "Say your prayers..." "No..." She begged. "This is not how it's supposed to end." His head rose with a nod. "Come on, Phallen. It's the only method for such a savage as your General has proven himself to be..."

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Her tragic expression darted past Acadia, searching Thade's face for answers. He had his sights set just above her shoulder, though, his head cocked to one side as he listened to the forest just outside the confines of the shit-village. Sensing her desperate leer, he stole her fear with the rise of his brow, his deep green eyes gleaming with the knowledge of redemption -- sending it across with that strange upward nod so uniquely his. He could hear them moving silently. Observing everything... His troops were everywhere... "My Beloved...?!" Phallen appealed. "O-o-h-h-h...!!!" and Acadia spun from her begging eyes. "Why do you defend him?!" He whirled furiously, too upset to look at her any longer. Watching the whole cat-and-mouse game bored the hell out of Erasmus who waited next to his twin, arms folded across their chests. "Can we kill him now?" Pieter chimed. "No!" screamed Acadia. He stalked Erasmus, a devilish glint in his eyes. "Give me

your knife." and he lurked over his own shoulder at Thade. "I will kill him myself, I told you." Unfastening the lethal blade, he held it out, the talon-like teeth catching the flames. Relaying its deadly intention. Raising it to eye-level, Acadia appeared mesmerized with the polished steel flashing as he turned it; casting an evil eye on Thade. "Please...?" Phallen choked. He turned on her like a viper pressing the jagged edge to her throat. "Would you like to go first?" he snarled, out-of-his-mind wild. The dagger bit into her skin as he pressed closer -- daring her to utter another word. "N-n-o..." stammered. "Don't do this." Pressed against the fence Phallen's back raked across the roughness in an attempt to escape the knife. Shaking her head stiffly, the terrified message ran rampant over her sweat stained face. She felt the tinge of the jags pluck against her throat as Acadia dove into her line of vision, blocking Thade. "I want to. You did this to yourself." Thade's hair stood on end, watching helplessly, as Acadia tortured his Phallen. He began to pant -- spittle flying from his lips as he shook uncontrollably. "LEAVE HER!!!" Acadia was waiting for that response, and he turned, the hatred toward one another burning white hot. Dragging the dagger carelessly away its teeth drew across Phallen's collarbone, splitting her open all too instantly. Closing her eyes did not erase the nightmare as she felt the cut painlessly, yet knowing it ran deeply. Her lips moved in silent prayer, for there was to be no escape. Awaiting his attack, Phallen opened her eyes, but Acadia had moved on to his other victim, towering over the beaten general, exhibiting his dexterity by tossing the knife end-over-end, over his shoulder, and around his waist, catching it, each time, by the hilt. Raising it up between he and Thade, Acadia waved it ominously before slicing across Thade's chest -- severing his right nipple. Phallen screamed in horror. Acadia cast a savage warning her way fading her cry to a whimper -- a crude smile curving the sides of his mouth. Placing the point directly over Thade's heart, Acadia drew back. "Do it." Thade taunted, staring the warrior straight to his soul. "Do it, dammit!" His steady, lucid glare penetrated straight through Acadia sending a clear message

that even though he stared death in the face he was not about to back down. It shook the the young man and he faltered slightly before lowering his weapon. "I know you'd kill me right now if you could." Acadia smirked, disguising his shaken security. Blood flowed from the puncture. Thade observed his wounds before looking back up, his face tangled with disgust. "Can you not finish what you have started?!" Phallen dropped her head, unable to watch any longer, sobbing the word, "stop", over and over. "I have your "Pet"." Acadia informed icily. "and she is hurting right now. That means you are too. So if I want to inflict pain on you, I must do it through her." He doffed his long braid of black down his back and swung the bloody blade straight at her, stopping just short of opening her belly before bringing it to his pant leg -- wiping it. "Take him away!"

240-241

Acadia turned to Phallen with a most sinister intention, ignoring the inferno of curses flying from the ape-general. "It looks like it's just you..." and he poked her breast with the knife. "and me." Bad move. Thade heard him.

Six men holding him with every ounce of strength did not prevent Thade from inflicting some form of wound or permanent scar. His hands were like vices. His nails; talons tearing at their flesh -- rendering up shrieks as he clamped onto whatever part of their anatomy he could. "I'm going to make you wish you were never born!" The words spat frothily as his fangs snapped at the nearest appendage, tearing into the frail underlayers of what Acadia's men considered mail. Hurting and finished with the whole fiasco, Thade laid into them with all he had, feeling his shoulder tear in his efforts. It only enraged him... One man, much taller than he, wrestled up behind Thade, swept his arms up under the general's and held him in a Full-Nelson while his legs were caught up by three brave souls -- but not before having the shit kicked out of them...

With a heave-ho, they sent him sailing through the cell door, slamming it smartly behind him. He hit the far wall hard, too

disoriented to react. Back burning, Thade slid into a crouched position groaning in pain. Not even giving them the satisfaction of him seeing their vulgar gestures. He kept his eyes closed until there was no sound. Keeping himself quiet for now. Locked behind the iron bars, he felt safer, but he thought of Phallen. She was in so much trouble. His comfort soon turned grey. There seemed to be no way out this time. His army knew where he was but if they infiltrated, Phallen was certain to be killed. He was alone again. Trapped. His beautiful human could not release him this time. They were doomed... He did not remember dozing off. It could have been all a nightmare if not for the searing pain in his shoulder. With bleary eyes, he examined himself. Thade gasped in spite of himself at the extensiveness of his injuries, gingerly touching where his nipple had once been, proving to be most tender of all. With an evasive growl, he swore how he hated all humans. "It won't be soon enough until every last one is wiped out..." How he had been tortured. Scarred. Mutilated. Now, so defiled, he lay in their stinking pit. His hatred rose. If not for them, his life would have been of such leisure... Phallen... If it were not because of her... Being subjected to such brutal treatment, he even placed her on his permanent shit-list. She was of no concern to him in this damning stage. All he wanted was to get out. To get his hands around the neck of that... His lungs rattled with rage. "I should have listened. They were right." he concluded, pushing his foot through the straw. "I was blinded." He laughed cynically to himself, shaking his head in disbelief. 'All along, I felt I owed her simply because she freed me...' Scratching at his silver chin, Thade came to the realization that it was simply infatuation. If he got out of this one with his hide some-what intact, to relinquish her was right. Send her back where she had come from. Then, perhaps, his own life would return to normal. Accepted back into where his strength reigned. Among his peers. A discerning growl sealed this acceptance and his mind rested.

Slumped against the wall, a begrudgeing resentment fell like a veil as he stared a hole through the wall beyond his cell. Such a

jagged pill to swallow reminiscing over how he adored his "Pet".
"They are ALL alike..." he grumbled, cradling his injured breast.

* * * 242-243

"This is all her fault!" Attar's condemnation rumbled like thunder. His head pounded fiercely at the goose-egg throbbing on his brow. Corporal Omri reached for his arm. "Don't hold her responsible. She's just as much a victim as we are." He sat under the medics steady hand as his eyelid was sewn. Attar's growl of indignation spoke of the skepticism held for that comment... "This is a disaster!" He exploded. "and that thing you call Phallen, or Pet, or whatever you candy-coat is the cause! Your lame excuse is tripe! Phallen is a harbinger of death. I say get Thade the hell out of there and let her rot!" Omri flinched from the last tug at his sutures as the medic finished up. Waving the chimp nurse away with her dressing, he warned himself to remain calm. One more sentence containing the name of his beloved Phallen, or her pseudonyms, from his commander was likely to land him in the brig, and with the cantankerous attitude Attar displayed, Omri knew he could end up there purly from thinking of her. Still, he contended it was not she who had caused such turmoil. He had only met her briefly, yet in that time Omri sensed the difference between she and the other humans. Especially after seeing her on the beach that night long ago when he was sent to search for her. How beautiful she was coming out of the water like a newly metamorphisized butterfly, glimmering under the silver moonlight. "Don't let them both perish?" He defended. His preambled statement wheeled the commander's head and he stared contemptuously. "I plan on bringing our General back. Let them keep her." growled. "Thade will never renounce her knowing she is..." Omri clamped his lips tightly, cursing himself for what he had almost said. But enough had been released to capture Attar's undivided attention. "Knowing she is what...?" the commander pried, narrowing in on Omri's roving eye. Thinking fast, the corporal blurted, "in love with him..." Attar cringed. "I don't want to hear it." "But she does!" The gorilla lunged across the narrow tent in a huff, heading for the flap, but not

before Omri beared witness... "He would die before renouncing her." Attar knew his words rang true. He had seen Thade's eyes light up as he spoke of this human who had taken him from death and healed him -- capturing his heart in the process...taking control of his emotions. "Thade loves her, Commander. You know it and I know it." Deep, black eyes roamed over the creamy canvas, his great black hand caressing it. "I know." Perking up in his seat, Omri placed a hand to his ear. "Sorry?" "You heard me!" The commander snapped impatiently. "But I would just as soon leave her." "Then I grant you full charge in explaining why." Omri relaxed, falling back into the recliner leaving Attar to ponder, alone, his options. To leave Phallen equaled Thade's wrath. To take her; Thade's hearts' desire, on the same token, meant destroying Thade's chance to return to rank... General, as a matter of fact. "We will do what we can."

What time was it? The stench from the cell filled Thade's nostrils when he was suddenly awakened to the sound of the front door unlocking. He had slept, but lightly. Never knowing when they were to return for him, and he wanted to be prepared when they did. This return promised a quick kill before their greasy hands touched him again. Crouching on his haunches, waiting, Thade heard their subdued voices. There was a nervous air in the tone and as the shadows regulated in the tortured flame of the torches, he saw three were approaching. 'Lunch...' he thought wickedly, knuckles popping into tight fists. Adrenalin pumped through his veins as he readied to retaliate. Watching from beneath a furrowed brow, he was still in the corner as they fell into full view. In the wink of an eye, it all changed. He sucked in a breath upon realizing that the one in the middle appeared to be held up: carried. This is all wrong! His intentions altered painfully when he recognized who was in the middle. He began to shake, closing his eyes as he bared his fangs -- the breath within him coming in short bursts. To hold himself back was nearly impossible. Upon their arrival at his cell door, Phallen was passed off to the wiry-built

fellow while his co-hort searched through a stock of keys. "Stay back!" the man holding Phallen warned, seizing her dangerously around the neck in a promise of swift death if Thade dared make a move. Upon finding the appropriate key, the hostler turned the lock, all-the-while keeping his sights on the livid chimp. Thade did not move, but his eyes promised death... A slow one... Phallen was deposited, in a heap, on the cells floor. "Still want her...?" Thade snapped out of his daze when his cell door clanged shut... "She's all yours, Monkey-boy!" Laughing as they faded out of sight, their insults faded into a lingering echo as they left the structure, leaving Thade alone with his hatred. He could not move. Shock left him paralyzed.

The beatings he took were not as severe as what he faced now...

She was still.

His conscience gnawed, unforgivngly, and he began to sway...a moan of despair gurgling in his throat -- tearing from his very soul... resounding through the village...

246

"Did you hear it...?" The Elders' all nodded. Morrow sent them far. "Stay away. Thade will spare you. Our Sage promises, for he received the Lawgivers' acknowledgment."

* * *

He could not stay away from her, recinding his admonishment within guilty tears. In one effortless bound he was beside her.

Scooping her up into his arms, Thade held her next to his body.

"I will kill him..." he swore.

Cradling her, his features softened. Smoothing the shredded clothing, he studied the face lying in his arms -- combing his fingers through the tangled tresses... Hoping for some sign that she knew he was there, an emphatic whimper eked from his lips when he drew close to hers. "Awake,my pet...?" Closed eyes rested their lashes upon high cheek bones. Long, black lashes which framed deep, brown, soulful eyes he wanted, so desperatly to open to him. But they did not. "I doubted your intentions..."

Thade confessed, rocking her. "I doubted how I felt for you." And he bent to kiss her forehead. "I was wrong..." Her skin was hot and dry under his lips. Wandering beyond, he found the welts. Bruises covered her arms. Bringing his hands up to cup her face they harbored blood. Her hair had been pulled out in clumps leaving bloody pulp in its wake. Pulling her up, great, bleeding strap marks striped her back.

His fangs flashed against her ivory skin. His steady gaze; so intent that if anyone had seen, surly would have made peace with their maker. Clearly, deadly revenge clouded...

Holding her, Thade stared out through the bars, straight into the blackened heart of Acadia.

"I am sorry, my pet...", Thade whispered, pressing his cheek to hers...

* * *

246-247

Omri stood before his platoon... "This is for real, my friends. I'm not going to candy-coat what we are about to embark upon. It's been a fairy tale up till now, but it's becoming ugly. Our Leader and his fair Lady, Phallen, need us in all of our rare form. Steal deep and silent through the wood." Gathering under a naked hall, the flames licked desperately for reverb. Morale ranked but still fell under the blank membership offered by the red-yellow flicker of the torches. Standing alone, Corporal Omri stole glances.

"We know and we trust in our belief."

Commander Attar stood in the shadows watching after until he could see them no more. He bowed his massive head in silent prayer...

After the task of removing the dead, not to mention delivering the news to loved ones, it landed the commander in a deep funk. To lose Corporal Omri in such a way... He blocked the thought. Shook it away..

"LISTEN UP..!" he barked diligently on his troops...

* * *

Loping stealthily between huts and cabins, The Elite seperated in a wide arc, scouring many fields before regrouping, providing one another with brief, yet critical imformation, crucial for the liberation of their Superior. Narrowing their search down to half-dozen-or-so structures running along the eastern half of the village, the group scattered once again, prowling the allyways, black-on-black; cloaked in shadow, evading the sentries patrolling the streets prepared for invasion; just not knowing when or how...

They had no idea it was happening right under their noses...

* * *

Thade felt himself drifting off. Jerking awake, he fought his somnolence. Eyes burning. If he could only rest for a few moments it would help tremendously. He wrapped his arms, protectively, around Phallen resting his head against hers... "Just to close my eyes..." he spoke wearily, feeling sleep overtake him.

"HERE...!"

He snapped fully alert. Had he really heard a familiar voice? Thade raised his muzzle, smelling the air.

248

Following his nose, so-to-speak, Thade shot an excited eye to the small barred window in his cell. A rustle, then a set of digits followed by a hollow set of eyes sent Thade hustling. Moving Phallen, his heart was in his throat as he lurched for the fingers encircling the bars, grasping them desperately. A black-hooded figure peered into the cell. "General Thade?!" came a raspy exclamation. Though all Thade could see were the beady eyes, he knew who it was and dug his nails into the Corporal's hands, never so glad to see the partial face. Nodding, Omri let go and dropped to the ground disappearing into the darkness as if he had never been there. Leaning against the stone wall, Thade closed his eyes in relief, sighing heavily; almost hysterically; a laugh, of sorts, screeching forth... Looking back over his shoulder, Thade's eyes fell upon the still form. She was so hurt. Kneeling next to the seemingly lifeless body, he cradled her head in his arms, bending to the elf-like ear. "We will soon be freed from here, my pet," rasped,

his silver goatee brushing his beloved's cheek. Past thoughts of denial came back to haunt him, overwhelming his senses. Swarming the emotions. "Forgive me, my pet?" choked his petition. "I doubted you. I know better now. I want you with me. You must pull through this." He could not speak another word. She had not responded and he leered furiously toward the window, draped in gloom over what had been unleashed upon his pet. Enfolding her within his arms, clutching her close, his hands came up bloody and he searched. Just below her belly grew a patch and he realized she was bleeding. "No... You can't lose this child...! Phallen...?" Rubbing her skin to warm her, he breathed warm kisses on her face. "Come back. Don't do this..."

* * *

The sentries at the jailhouse were taken without incident. Unaware of their interlopers, the chimps swept down with deadly intention, slicing their throats and dragging their bodies off into the darkness grunting and hooting softly with triumphant glee. Bounding through the doors into the building, three gibbered under their breath as the stock of keys jangled. "Omri saw him. He's hurt bad..." "As long as he's mobile, we won't have a problem." "What of Phallen? We have to find her?" Hearing their footsteps Thade leapt to his feet and pressed his face against the bars relieved to see it was a part of the Stealth group. Scooping Phallen up into his arms, he waited. Their conversation ceased when they came to the cell. "What the hell took so long? Hurry up!" Thade's voice grinded. With but the lone torch off-centered along the curve of the ally, Tahn, the leader of the Stealth, fumbled through the keys, trying his picks without success. "C'mon! Get it!" The ape-general urged, leaning against the bars as he watched the hall. "I thought you were good at this." Finally, the lock tumbled. Forcing the door open with his shoulder, Thade stopped shortly as the trio froze at the two. His brow furrowed. "Move it!" Fangs flashing menacingly, he pressed past. "I know we're in bad shape and you did not expect my cargo, but let's save the dead-pan stares for later." All grace, if he ever possessed any at all,

diminished, replaced by a most sinister growl 'Later I will tell a tale of a love undying'... All seemed to nod in unison, horrified at the sight of their General -- the wounds he had sustained...and the bedraggled figure held firmly in his arms. Sentiments aside, the chimps grasped his arms and half-carried him and his female companion down the vacant hall, sliding through the recently abandoned front door and around to the back where Omri waited... "SIR...?!" The dark rhythm of Thade's heart pulsated up through his mouth as he panted. There was no resound for his devastation.

Wrestling free from his aids, Thade lumbered up to Omri. "Take her from here." Pain etched the breathless words. He was numb. Exhausted. As Omri's ally reached for her, Thade hesitated letting go. Afraid to surrender, perchance to never see her again. His eyes lit up in the silver moonlight. "My pet," he breathed upon her, clutching her body close to his -- cooing over the paleness of her cheek. Revelling in the softness, his

The Corporal nodded as he touched Thade's shoulder. The General rescinded defensively, eyes wild, his mind wrought with despair. "Trust me..." Thade released a long held breath. "She'll be alright. My group will make sure she is safe." Thade's brow softened and he blinkied back the burn. "Yes." he said, gazing down on his darling human. His breath hitched. All of his energy came forth within that discomfited sigh. He realized that if he did not give her over he would soon drop, himself. Releasing her into the waiting arms, he began to cry. Angry, hot tears ran down his cheeks into his beard before he could wipe them. The haggared expression aged him beyond his years as he watched two black-clad figures vanish into the wood, unable to recall ever feeling so desolate. Not even his imprisonment had left him feeling so hollow. Spinning back to Omri, Thade snarled, "I WANT that man! I want him DEAD!" With the same quick-silver movement, Thade turned and stared into the blackness, declaring his loathing for Acadia on his breath. Omri watched as the General's hands formed into talons -- his back expanding muscularly in a flex that would

frighten even his own species. Omri pricked up his ears listening to the growing restlessness, deciphering all of the abrupt disruption...the rise in temperature...the smell of human sweat and testosterone... Looking Thade in the eye, Omri's message was plain: they had been discovered. The remaining Stealth warriors began to glance nervously about seeking their junctions of departure, preparing for immediate invisibility. "We really need to go." Omri instructed, taking hold of Thade's arm. Thade ripped free, folding his arms defiantly across his bloody chest. "Go ahead! I want that bastard now." Omri fumbled for words. "Can we discuss this at a better time, sir? I mean we're in trouble!" "There is no need for discussion!" Thade's bloodshot eyes narrowed on the gangly chimp. "Are WE afraid?!" Looking at Thade as if he had lost his mind, Omri shook his head madly. "NO! I just want to live..." "Then do not deny me the right." Giving the signal to the lone Stealth, they both grabbed Thade and bolted for the forest. "This is not a good time, sir...!" Ambling deep into the wood, trying to grapple Thade from returning was more than they bargained for. He fed off of his injuries, fueling the hatred held and all he wanted now was revenge. Out of danger, for the moment, they stopped to catch their breath. That was when Corporal Omri finally let go. He was done fighting. "GO...! Go back. I'll let Phallen know you were a dumbass..." Thade ceased his struggle for redemption and turned stealthily back. "You would do that to me?" "Why don't you take a breath and look at yourself?" With a wide gesture, Omri pointed out the numerous injuries. "You are in no shape to take on your own shadow!"

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Thade froze. He had never felt so sore. Through smoke-burned eyes, he chanced to examine his body. 'Oh...I am in bad shape...'
Torn and bloody mail hung to his knees. His armor missing altogether. Bringing a shaking hand to his head, he felt the swelling above his eye -- dried blood flaked onto his fingertips with a sting as probing fingers entered the gash. "...who will she have?" Thade shot out of his mortal examination at those last words. "What?"

"What will happen to Phallen?" the Corporal quipped, obviously hitting a raw nerve, for Thade instantly quelled his wrath. "She has only you." The ape's anger growled. "I know." "Then you understand that in your state you don't stand a chance..." Omri sighed, "Good..." Taking Thade's wrist, he clasped tightly. "We'll all return to camp where you can rest. Attar is on it and can assume command until you are well." Thade twisted his arm free, haunching regressively away. "You all want to take her away from me..." In one swift movement, Omri, unknowingly, caught Thade by his branded shoulder sending the General into a fit of rage and pain. "I didn't know!" he apologized prophetically, releasing immediately. Panting heavily, fighting for control, Thade had almost forgotten about that wound, the stinging recollection blurring his senses. He staggered back, trying to catching himself before falling. He cradled his face in disgrace... Lying on his back, he shook his head. "Just let me die. She has places to go. She will be safe." Just then, a bell pealed. The Stealth warrior measured his grounds before making eye-contact with his leader. Omri gave him a nod, saying, "don't leave too soon." Stealing about, the Corporal's deep-set eyes scoured their surroundings. If Thade could keep his mournful cries to himself, they might have a chance to slide out of there... Clapping a hand over the General's mouth, Omri cocked his head to listen. The low, morose toll echoed throughout the village, out into the wood where they lay... "Kill me later, but SHUT UP NOW...!" he hissed as he sunk himself and Thade deep into the thicket. The slap of snapping undergrowth against the legs of their antagonists circled their covey. His hand still clasped over Thade's deliriously babbling mouth, Omri wrapped his legs around his superior and tucked them both into a hollow tree. Along with slime, insects slid over them, slithering into collar. Along hairlines to the back of the neck. Thade squirmed under Omri's restrictive hands, feeling the slide of a centipedes one-million legs cross his missing nipple. Pressing his lips to Thade's ear, Omri was close enough to bite it. "Shut your mouth for five minutes! Bugs suck but something's going on and you have to stop!" Hidden

within the split trunk, Omri could make out the shadows of scouring troops from Trident. If the moon remained hidden behind those clouds, he knew they would be safe as long as they remained quiet and still...meaning if he could keep his hand over Thade's mouth long enough before being bitten... "Stop fucking fighting! I'm trying to save your life! I know what's going on but I can't do anything about it at the moment. Get a grip, THADY...!" A slug up against his jaw pacified Thade and Omri sucked them both into the bole of the tree... The struggle was over... Trodden footsteps passed and Omri peered out over his injured's head. It was time to move. As Omri leapt upon his horse, Thade found it almost impossible to lift his foot to the stirrup. Every cut reopened as he forced himself up into the saddle -- dizzy with the agonizing pain. Every muscle in his body protested while he took hold of the reins, wheeling his mount in toward the deep forest, back to the city of Derkein. All he could think about was Phallen...To hold her again... Her distress. The dire condition in which she had been delivered had Thade qualming over her pregnancy. Had Acadia succeeded in beating the child from her womb...? In a sense, Thade hoped so. Her chance for survival was much higher without the "unborn" than with, knowing she would die soon after giving birth. To raise the child without her was not something he wanted or needed. Thade wanted her. Only her. The adoration felt from simply stroking her cheek, sent him. When she looked into his eyes he could not help himself from falling to her gentle persuasion -- in its innocence, as she brushed her lips against his. She was unpretentious...innocent... With that, and only that in mind, Thade fell into the saddle, ignoring the pain. For his Lady, death was not an option if that was what it took to free Phallen from her antagonist. Then, at least, he knew, his soul would rest...

* * *

"They what...?!!!" Acadia shoved through the crowd gathered at the jail-house, his steely gaze afixed upon the night sentry. Clenching his fingers tightly around their esophagus, he ran the man back against the bell housing...

"You've got to be kidding...?!" The poor fellow could only shake his head, fumbling for words choked off by Acadia's hands... "YOU LET THEM GET AWAY...!"

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He released with a jerk, whipping around to his men. "Find them! KILL THEM!" Storming into the bulk of shoulders he shoved them aside. "I have had enough of Phallen and her apes. I want them all dead." Staring back at them, his face contorted into a twisted rage. "Well...?!" He screamed. "What are you waiting for, an escort?" Glowering, Acadia watched them scatter. "You will not live long enough to be Lawgiver..." He swore it. Promised himself that the fire burning in his heart would not be snuffed out. Thade's self-righteous persuasion did not hook into this fish. The filthy ape thought only one way: his way. His intentions were sugar-coated with promises of a new beginning. An innocense reborn for the whole of the planet. A planet reborn to HIS specifications... As long as they did as he ordered, everything would be fine...

"You sonofabitch, you...I'll be damed if I allow you to take over..." Acadia's throat burned with bile. His guts on fire. Deep inside, a gnawing presence let itself be known... 'It's going to happen with or without you...Thade and Phallen were destined.'

Tugging on his plaited hair, Acadia surveyed his surroundings. It was a ghetto and he could not deny it. A drop of rain fell in his eye as he looked to the heavens, stinging before he could wipe it away. Blackness covered the blue-velvet sky. There was no doubt the Gods were about to release a deluge upon the mountain of Derkein and her villagers below. It was to be spoken through disaster, Acadia shivered. Breaking into a run, the clouds opened -- releasing sheets of rain.

The gypsy band were rapidly approaching when Attar lumbered to the gates, eyes wide. They plowed by, one at a time from the forest, wheeling about and coming to a halt once inside. Omri, followed by Thade, brought up the rear, pulling hard on the reins. The General's appearance fell hard upon the eyes of his peers.

Blood, long dried, caked the side of his face. His breastplate was gone. His mail, hacked away to the waist, hung in strings. Deep lacerations, criss-crossing his chest, bled from the long, hard drive.

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Sliding gingerly from his mount, Thade turned to find Attar waiting tentatively in case he faltered. But he did not. Thade stood tall despite his wounds, looking the gorilla square in the eye with undeniable vindication. "They will pay with their lives for this atrocity," the Commander rumbled. Thade snorted in agreement, swooping 'round, regarding those who had stayed in his defense, smiling cynically upon meeting their gazes. "Indeed, they will," he injected harshly. There was a sway under the General's feet. He felt like puking when it hit him full force. Attar stepped into the sway unobtrusively, catching him non-chalantly. "Okay...?" "No..." he admitted, his lips unmoving. "I really need to see Phallen right now..." "You said to send her from here." He spun, jutting his face up into the Commanders'; "I can smell her! I KNOW she is here!" Thade caught Attar's wandering gaze. A still calm seized him... "What is it...?" Attar had watched as Phallen was whisked past -- seemingly, on her death-bed -- by the stealth warrior. Taken immediately into the ER. He could not tell how badly her injuries were. Only that she showed no sign of life in Yahn's long arms as he rushed past without hesitation. It was not long before he was informed... "There is something you need to know..." Attar humbly announced. Knowing Phallen was with child, Thade forced a painful smile. "She is alright...?" "I don't know." The General's heart raced. "You know something, now tell me?" Attar fumbled for words. "The blood on your hands," he stammered. "is not yours. She bleeds..." Rage built its fire steadily in Thade's eyes as he prepared for the slap of reality that would send him over the edge. Stigmatized by the inevitable, he took in a deep breath. "Tell me, my friend." Attar lowered his eyes folding his hands. "There was a child." "WAS...?!" Thade whipped around, concealing the hurting grimace distorting his face. Hot tears welled, and he swiped at them stubbornly as they fell on his cheeks. His

world was not fair! Her world was not fair! Thade snarled viscerously up into the Commander's face, unable to hide the pain. "Do you doubt us now?" Attar delivered a quaint shrug. "Yes." and he produced the message...

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Slumped shoulders and a remorseful expression confirmed the outcome. "I'm sorry, sir." The chimp scanned the warning letter, his eyes springing open as he came upon the part declaring Phallen as the aggressor. "No...", he muttered, shaking his head, letting the parchment fall. "I can't believe this." "It comes from Senator Lantres...your Godfather..." An ominous cloud of violent emotion fell over the chimp with frightening silence. Attar took a step back, recognizing the madness gleaming in the General's eye -- the involuntary tics as they coursed, ever-worsening in his state of denial as he grasped, desperately for the strands which held his whole unravelled world together... Thade closed his eyes tightly bringing his hand to his forehead. The cuts and burns no longer badgered for attention. He was numb. "No..." came softly. Feeling as if he was going to puke, Thade steadied himself against a tall tiki-torch. "This is bullshit. She saved my life over and over. If she wanted me dead why did she release me from Calima?" He clasped hold of Attar's breastplate. "She did not know you would come for me. Attar, this is a lie! You must realize!" The orders to have the human transported to the target fields had already been given. "Her fate is sealed, I'm afraid." Thade shook. "They killed my child! You can't take her away from me! She's all I have! It all went crazy. "You must realize that she is the enemy! This is but the tip! I don't want to have to incarcerate you, but if you don't get a grip on the here-and-now, I don't have much of a choice." He backed away, nodding. "Oh, I get it," he laughed. "Let's commit Thade and throw away the key and let the humans take over...?" Attar's patience was running thin. "That's not how I want it to be..." "Oh, but that's how it could end up to be?!" Thade paced away, fading in and out of the shadows as he talked it over with

himself, totally animated as his hands flailed confusedly. "I must go to Lantres." Attar's chuckle rumbled like distant thunder. "Have you looked in the mirror? You're in no shape to go anywhere let alone back into the forest." "Don't send her away." Thade warned. He peered devilishly over his shoulder. His eyes slits. "I have not lost my mind yet." he smirked. "I'm saving that for Acadia." "You show the signs of insanity." Thade spun. "Oh REALLY? Do you know what it looks like? Here..." And he bounced off the torch, his feet kicking out, snapping the stalk like a twig -- landing on all fours before the gorilla, the shredded mail distributing his blood as it whipped around. Thade stood erect, his face pulled back in an evil grimace. "Is that nuts enough for you? I can give you more if you like?" Attar went to touch his shoulder when he recoiled violently, lashing out. "This is all a ploy! None of you ever trusted her." Batting away the helping hand, Thade staggered back, catching himself. "You say you are my friend, now," he forced breathlessly, feeling his chest -- blending his own blood with that of Phallens on his hands. "but you don't trust either of us." He spun away deliriously and bolted, leaving Attar in a quandry as for what to do with the renegade. The Commander saw the breaking heart. A shiver ran through him -- told of the adoration his friend held for the girl lying in the med-tent. Her life was far more important than the General's. They had killed Thade's child.

* * * 255

He wiped at his lips, gathering all he had inside just to control himself as he lurked in the shadows. Bile rose, choking him as he fought to keep from puking again. Coming upon the sight, Omri fell back into blackness, his eyes glowing brilliantly from the Ninja-like costume. He had heard it all... Seen it. Someone was attempting to frame Phallen for all of this! He appeared from the dark. "I know this is all a lie." "Sir, I know..." and his arms opened knowingly. Thade fell back, scraping for balance, his wounds splitting wide and painfully from the retreat. Giving in, he fell against a tentpost -- where he rested with a swoop of his hand. "I'm done. Lock me up -- take me away, do whatever you came to

do." Leaning wearily against the post, Thade shook his head angrily. "None of you ever cared about her. She's a curse... that is what everyone thinks!" He dove into his hands as he wept. "After all that has happened in the name of Justice!, still, no one has accepted her as my love..." his words hitched . "...my life..." The torch above flickered and he and Omri both watched as it went out. Distant thunder awoke a new sense. Quick-silver gleamed from what was left of the moons ... in Omri's eyes. "You know me...I love your human as much as you! You need to get a grip, though, or we're gonna lose this battle. Attar has a message addressed to you..." Thade scoffed bitterly at the announced pity. "Why, now, are there bleeding hearts everywhere?" his voice rose madly. "There was uncertainty." Thade launched, charging the Corporal. Facing him with brash abandon. "Due to this "uncertainty", WE have lost a legacy!" he fortold. Releasing him, Thade slouched away, shaking his head in defeat. "There is no mercy. I made sure of that. And I only have myself to blame." Wheeling back, his eyes nailed Omri. "Therefor, I expect all of THEM to be wiped out!" Hot, angry tears fell for his Phallen and the child taken from them. To kill the bastard, Acadia, who had deprived him of that one joy he had wanted, felt warm and welcome. The one world, so desperately desired had been rendered into a language he could not translate...An innocent life had been taken... His own flesh and blood had been terminated... "No mercy." Thade spoke through clenched teeth, grinding the words as he stared, gravely, past the young chimps shoulder. "No mercy." the Corporal appended solemnly.

Thade's head swam when he stood erect, feeling suddenly unsteady. Nonetheless, he was not ready to forfeit. The pounding of his his heart and head left him breathless, causing a slight sway in his step, prompting Omri to reach out and steady his gait. Thade did not realize his lethargy had affected him so profoundly feeling the hands grasp firmly around his mid-section. "Let me be." came his neurotic demand. Pulling away, the General growled his un-ease as he bee-lined for the med-tent, a snarl on his lip and stars dancing

before his eyes. Forgetting the damage inflicted upon his body, his blurred mind was set on finding his "Pet" -- to comfort her as best as he could. Their child... "GODDAMMIT...!"

Reaching the scarlet tent, Thade realized how weak he was, leaning precariously against a supporting post of the canopy just outside of the entrance. The concussion at the base of his skull throbbed and he felt himself blacking out -- falling out of consciousness -- sliding -- helpless to stop his descent. Down to the ground he fell, shakily, to one knee, his head pounding so severely that to find anything to halt his descent was futile. Surrendering up all defenses, Thade squeezed his head trying to force out the pain between his ears. Large hands were upon him. Pulling him to his feet. Stabilizing the weakened General. With eyes tightly closed, Thade shook off the disturbing alteration. Dismissing his miss-step. "I-I am alright now." he assured, recovering, finding balance. Not quite prepared to release, Attar kept his hands glued to Thade's arms sensing uneasiness as the chimp swayed upon standing. Squirming from his hands, Thade turned unsteadily to confirm his recovery. "I said I am alright!" His hands still shook, but not as badly as his pride. To fall was a major blow to his ego, and whether Attar accepted or not, Thade felt it unacceptable in his book. He was not weak in any way, and for him to collapse as he had was a personal let-down. Taking a couple deep breaths the General shook his head slowly. "Forgive me," he apologized, straightening. "I deal with deceit about as well as you do." and he rolled his eyes knowingly up to Attars.

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The Commander looked guiltily out at the bonfire, his beady, black eyes igniting. "So you know I carry a message?" "Yes." "She is the enemy." Thade gave a light chuckle. "No, my friend, I do not believe she is." "But this comes from your Godfather. He..." Thade waved it away like a fly. "That piece of nonsense did not come from my Godfather. You only read into what you want to hear. That is propaganda, my friend. I can promise you that. Now, let me see it?" Attar retrieved the note from behind his breastplate.

The wax seal was broken but Thade could still see that it was not Lantres'. It was a sloppy job where the Senator was meticulous at. Thade snorted as he read the scrawled message, breaking into laughter when coming upon the hasty wording of his "impending danger". Rolling the parchment back up, he hobbled across the narrow court to the fire, tossing it in. "You have been there for me in the past." Thade began, wincing when his cuts pulled open upon returning. "Do you think I am blind? Is she an emisarry?" Attar lowered his head. Reaching for the tent flap, Thade stopped and turned back to the Commander's bowed head. "You have been there for me even after the evidence of my guilt could no longer be kept hidden. Don't condemn her until you have as much?" Resting his hand against the gorilla's armored chest, Thade made him look him in the eye. His eyes were lucid. The sincerity so heart-felt. Attar stared hard, never seeing that kind of look in his General's eyes before. An unblinkable, honest exchange of painful admittance. It stunned him. This calmness Thade had mastered was eerily unnatural sending a chill along the Commander's spine. Releasing confined emotion was not one of Thade's traits as he stepped beyond the flap, professing his adoration for Phallen. "My lover lies within."

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Without a second glance, Thade let the tent flap fall, and darkness descended. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Heard it in his own ears. He hesitated. The gloominess altered his mood as he stared after the glow of a distant flickering light, emotion raging across his face once he understood that what had happened was to bring tragedy upon his Phallen and Derkien.

This was not going to just pass by without incident. Grief overwhelmed him as he made his way. Everything crashed down around him sending him fighting just to breathe, for suddenly, there was no air. Slinking up beside the bed, Thade watched her breathing; a slow, rhythmic interpretation of life, reticent, in comparison, as to how those same breaths had instilled in him splendid abandon when her soft whispers fell on his ear. Taking

her hand, he received no response when he brought it to his lips. "Phallen...?" his voice whispered. "...my Pet...?" Bowing to her full lips he kissed her softly. "My love...?" Deeply affected by the lack of response, his expression changed dramatically from hope to raw fury -- his wounds, though many, were in no way as bad as hers. He was alert while she lay trapped in a profound state of sleep.
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"Stay with me..." Each word brushed her lips - his eyes piercing. Watching. "I am selfish with you." confessed. "I need you here with me. Open your eyes unto me, my pet?" His features softened as he gazed at her, eyes so gentle if anyone saw them they would not have recognized him. His soul was bared, hurting for her, revealing a loss only he felt. It was not too much to ask that his beautiful human awaken to him. But she did not...

* * *

Red dawn cast its blood over the outpost, yet he remained, steadfast, guarding his Phallen despite his own burning body. The troops were in a quandry. What were they supposed to do? Prompted by Corporal Omri that this was a critical moment for Thade and Phallen, he ascertained the loss of their child. "We must be patient," Omri quietly requested. "Our leader is in mourning. The very ones who assassinated our brothers have taken from Phallen an innocent life, and Thade remains beside her. She has not awakened. That is where he is and where he will stay."

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His hand rested on her breast feeling her chest rise and fall. "I can feel your heart beating." he softly told. Looking down on her sleeping face, a ghost-of-a-smile flickered across his lips. "Kiss me, dearest?" Closing his eyes he touched his lips to hers feeling her response. Falling dizzily, like the first time, taking his breath, this time surrendering completely, Thade wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her up against his chest. Holding on loosely, he gazed down into the eyes he thought would never open to his. "Kiss me again." Only she seemed to uncover his gentler side as she rose to the gentle request, her hands coming up to

stroke the silver goatee back from his mouth, forcing her mouth over his in one passionate embrace. Tucking her head beneath his chin Thade closed his eyes. "My love..." he breathed over her. "I am so sorry." His hand rested over her mid-section trying desperately to hold back his feelings, only to weep as he moved to rest his head there. He felt her hands fall on his head. Her fingers combed through the thick auburn hair. "I am bleeding..." she heard herself say, sensing emptiness. "This is all my fault." Thade requitted. "I let you down." She traced a thin finger down his chest coming across the most tender of spots. Thade seized her hand, masking his discomfort as he brought her hand up to his lips, caressing her fingertips. Pouting, Phallen nuzzled against his cheek. "No, you didn't." Peering up with those big brown eyes, Thade felt so wretched. Emotion warred across his face as he tried to accept her words of condolence. A great breath escaped and his chest collapsed. "Rest." He said. Pressing her hand to his mouth, he bent and kissed her hard, his blood surging hot through his veins for his awesome entity. "Acadia will never hurt you again." Thade swore vehemently. Phallen searched his eyes, shivering when the fire behind them blazed for her - a rage she had never seen in any species, burned fervently - wildly out of control, yet calmly sedated for her. Thade was going to kill Acadia this time. "I love you, Phallen." Though he said it, he did not have to. It was obvious, written in his gleaming jade eyes. She had captured him. He was delighted. 259-260

Sweet adoration along with the heartbreak of losing his child brought bitter-sweet tears to his eyes. "Please don't grieve, my beloved?" she beseeched. His gaze shifted coolly. "I ..." Phallen touched his cheek and he jerked away. "Let me finish." She shrunk from him almost obediently. "Phallen, I must know something and only you can answer it." Ignoring her shocked expression, Thade needed to know. "Are you the enemy?" A deep groan escaped as she rolled on her side, her hands covering her face as she began to cry. "Oh, Thade, I can't believe YOU!" He went to touch her shoulder when she lurched away, burying her

face in the pillow as she screamed. "GO away!" Thade was enraged. What that bastard, Acadia had done could not be overlooked. Taking her by the shoulders, Thade rolled her over. "I will, for the time being, my pet, but I will come back." Kissing the soft swell of her breast, he worked his way up to her mouth where Phallen turned away. "I am the enemy...REMEMBER?!" "OH how you tease me..." Gone... Thade flitted from her side and disappeared into the shadows, his words snorting profusely all along the way... * * * Thade sat quietly in his tent, staring into the warm glow of the firepit, pipe smoldering a wonderful dime of hashish as the wheels turned in his head. Puffing on the pipe, he leaned into a cluster of pillows, all of the pain dissipating as he stared up into the conical ceiling of red and black textile. "You belong with me." Wishing to stop the clock and reverse time, he closed his eyes and fantasized that she was there, her long black hair draping over him as she hovered, seductively, above. Opening one drugged eye, there was no one except him, and he sat up, his erection painful as he fought to bring it down. Drowning within his euphoria, Thade lifted his head as someone entered. He smiled lustfully as he flung his arms open. "Come into my tent." Plucking the pipe from his outstretched hand, Josee sucked on it as she flounced into the pillows next to Thade. "Hello, Lover." rolled from her lips in one long smoky word. He inhaled her smoke as he rolled over, inhaling her breath...

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Lulled in pure hedonism, Thade felt her lips caress him all the way down, unable to say no or to stop her from doing what he wished she would do, for which she was attempting when her hand reached down. 'Oh, Conscience, must you step in?' "Josee," and he pulled her up. "this can't go." She looked at him quizzically. "I don't know how you got in here, but you have to leave now." "C'mon, you want it as bad as I want to give it." He held her wrists firmly. "Indeed...," and he took the pipe from her fingers, clenching it in his teeth. "but my heart belongs to..." Josee fell back defeatedly, crossing her arms across her chest. "That human...?" Thade

nodded guiltily, shrugging. Rising, he felt his wounds tug.
"Please...?" and he extended his hand.

* * *261-262

Escorting his former courtesan from his tent, Thade searched for the culprit, knowing that it had to have been Attar. The gorilla never had much hope in Phallen... 'Have a nice trounce', he bored as he shoed her along.

Corporal Omri appeared from nowhere, as usual, surprising Thade. "This is bad, sir!" he blurted breathlessly. Thade gave a blow of amusement as he shook his head. "What can be worse than what has already happened?" Omri put his hand against Thade's chest and pushed him against the taught tent wall. "Phallen has disappeared." Fingers crawled over baring temples. "Sonofabitch..." Crashing from the high, Thade became distinctly aware of all movement. A breathy sigh escaped as he searched his surroundings. "She could not have gotten far," he relayed. "Search the outskirts - the stables - she knows how to ride. Don't let her escape." "Escape?" Thade threw his hands up confusedly.

"You know what I mean! Don't let her leave!" "How many females do you need?" the Corporal sardonically shot. The General felt his fury reach its boiling point, glaring out at the brazened chimp from beneath a heavy brow. "Don't tempt me, Omri." he snarled. "You were the first one I thought of when Josee showed up." Thade lied, taking the winds out of the youngster's sails. Omri shot a long glance. "Oh, come now!" "Go..." and he waved him off. "Do what I asked." Watching after, his hands ventured over the cuts covering his chest. A sentry was passing when he stepped in front of him. "Send me a medic." surged painfully, eyeing the wily young gorilla unsurly. With a curt nod, the soldier spun, all along fighting the urge to inquire what had happened.

Sneaking a peek into the holding stable, Phallen fell back against the wall. There was no way she was getting a horse out of there. There must have been at least a dozen apes, and they were all on their toes as they scoured the area. She felt the denial creep

again - wiping angrily at her tears. The question played over in her mind: "are you the enemy?" He could not have hurt her more.

'Just leave...' requitted softly. 'Get out and never look back.' A cold sweat broke, sending her shivering in the night air as she searched for a different option. Light-headed, her knees gave and she collapsed...

* * *

"My Pet..." He brushed her hair back from the bruised cheek. A touch, if under different circumstances, would have meant certain death if it crossed anyone else's skin. "Why did you run? You belong with me." It did not matter anymore how he had come to love this female. Right or wrong, he accepted her. Fight as she did, Phallen's eyes welled with tears before she pulled away from his tender touch. "You never trusted me." she wept, wiping stubbornly at her cheeks. Those words struck him strongly as he watched her flinch from rubbing too roughly her own cheek - her uncaring dismissal. He let out a low, guttural groan. Thade dropped his head. Gently, he reached out to her, finding her hands, and clutched them to his newly bandaged chest. "I damn myself for your suffering." Kisses, mixed with hot, bitter tears, were planted on the backs of her hands. By all he had learned - whether right or wrong - he wanted her. It went against every grain of his life. It went against everything in hers. He was an ape. She was human. Still, the look in his eyes told. They were to be. His passion was not fleeting. Standing over her, there was no hiding the almost-human emotions of hopeless pain warring within him. He prayed to feel differently. The life which once had thrived in his beloved had changed his outlook. Altered it drastically. "I wanted it as much as you did." quivered over her fingers. Their sadness was equal. * * * 263

Try as he might, Acadia could not ignore what the Prophets declared: Thade and Phallen were meant to be, thus completing a circle - forever altering the course of their world as they knew it. That ape, his human mate at his side, was to rule the world, allowing a select few to survive - eradicating the evil... These so-called pre-

destined rulers were to receive divine powers with which they could over-see all. And their off-spring were to continue this legacy...

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE...?!" The old man's voice burst through the door ahead of him startling both Acadia and Rhenai from their work. The black-haired warrior let out a long breath, shaking his head ever-so-slightly, rolling his eyes. 'Not him again!' Rhenai's leather face studied the old man suspiciously before he turned to Acadia. "What is he talking about?" Acadia's eyes shifted from the old man's to Rhenai's before settling over his lap. "I took the unborn." he said flatly. "He is incited. There is no stopping him now. Thade is on the rampage. What you have done has brought his wrath down upon us ALL!" Horrified, Rhenai gawked across at Acadia. "MAN, is this true?!" Fine-tuning his new weapon was all that seemed to occupy Acadia's attention - pointing it across the room - peering through the cross-hairs. "It does not matter...," he replied coldly, centering his sight. The arrow shot across the room with lightning speed imbedding deeply into the plush back of a chair. "he will not live much longer."

* * *

Stitched and bandaged, Thade stepped out of his tent, tricked out in new jet-black armor. He cursed under his breath as he adjusted the leather trusses, tugging violently, with each syllable that rasped forth: "I WILL STRIKE YOU DOWN for what YOU HAVE DONE...!To take MY CHILD from ME!" Despite his many wounds, he was ready and his instincts were sensitive. This was a vindication rather than a battle for what "they" had done to he and Phallen ... He steeped in rage...

Collecting the horses, Omri overheard Thade's passionate curses. Taking the General's horse first, he led it toward him. Upon hearing the approaching steps, the ape glanced up from his grooming to see the young chimp sauntering toward him. He rolled his eyes, not really wanting to be bothered right at the moment. This was not a good time and Thade regarded him with a low-brow grin. Taking the reins, he tethered the horse to the post feeling the Corporal's eyes imbedding into his back. "What is it?"

Thade inquired brusquely. "I just want you to know that I, along with my wife, feel for your loss." The General raised his head bravely - his back to the chimp. His usual, free-style-upward-nod did not surface. Instead, a sigh weighed the proud shoulders low. Hearing someone else say they cared - who seemed to understand his ardence - displaced the soreness of sutures and bandages, landing the pain directly in his heart. Checking the horse's gear, Thade retained his dignity, muttering, "there is reason for everything, Son." His voice thick. He was not feeling very heroic, though Omri worshipped him. Thade looked thoughtfully at the Corporal. He could not help but to feel protective of the young warrior, and he smiled sadly. His eyes glistened with feral, vicious promise... A promise of redemption... Holding that gaze, the aging conquerer was able to shake off his creeping malaise. Keeping what little pride he had left, Thade broke away, snorting as he tossed his chin into the air, walking away, only to stop in mid-stride. Turning around, General Thade gave his upward nod. "Come...", he invited humbly. "walk with me..." Omri broke into a run to catch up. Clapping the corporal on the back, Thade pulled him close as they walked to the mess-tent. He felt trust, realizing he no longer had to hide his feelings. He had allies...

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Under the rising suns polished armor bled scarlet as they snapped to attention upon Thade and Omri's appearance. Commander Attar stood before the barrage, directing their every move, his eyes following the General and his newly appointed ally - a cock-sure sense of confidence dictating every sutured move made. Stepping up next to the gorilla, Thade cast a leary eye. "Still waters run deep..." casually murmured, as if commenting on the day. Attar started. "The message..." Thade snarled back, "belonged to me, not you! You opened it and read what you wanted to read." Throwing his shoulders back, the chimp raised his head proudly. Stepping out. They waited. And he began to speak. "The attainment of our goal cannot be gained without the alertness and stealth which WE possess. Together, we WILL seize our enemy.

SMITE them with NO MERCY! They are the horizon and we are the approaching tempest!" Massive fists pumped high into the air as his words were received. Growls and hoots of approval rolled over the mass declaring absolute power. A smile, all too knowing and painful, crept across Thade's lips - his eyes roaming, a hazy expression filling the hollows of his soul where he hid. "DO NOT throw caution to the wind." he forwarned on a breath. "they are cunning. Stay in formation. Stay together. DO not think over what you should do. STRIKE FIRST!" Averting his eyes, Thade closed his them, the wicked expression softening, the terms hitting home from all that had transpired. His voice was barely above a whisper. "They have taken a legacy." Recalling his loss struck with fury and he began to shake. Long, thick fingers curled into fists. It was obvious his love for the human was passionate, deep-seated, for his voice choked before he could finish. "LONG LIVE GENERAL THADE!" thundered from among the entourage. The chant grew, repeated among the volunteers, hitting their superiors like a tsunami. Thade tipped his head, peering out at them from beneath a thorny crown of sorrow. From the corner of his eye, Omri saw the General sway. He inched closer, reaching out. Giving a terse nod, Thade let him know everything was under control, masking the pain behind a quivering smile. Glancing at Attar, Thade added, "some do not condone my feelings for Phallen..." Shaking his head, he esestablished. "It does not matter, for I cannot denounce her. She freed me. Saw beyond my misjudgement..." His mouth spread in an open grin as he shook his head. "It did not deter her intentions of healing me...to send me here." He shuddered beneath her invisible touch - reveling in its satin. As he raised his head, though, a scornful mask of indignation ravaged his face; fangs bared; snarling savagely. The suns' light sat his eyes on fire. "Only when Acadia is dead, will I rest." he revealed. "Once we have conquered our antagonists..." Thade exhaled slowly. "I will take vows with Phallen and retire." Stunned astonishment surged throughout the congregation... Their General...Retire...?! "You can't!" Omri rebelled, lurching forward

and clutching Thade's arm pleadingly. "You honor me." He acknowledged humbly, a pencil-thin smile tightening over his muzzle. "Let us tend to the here-and-now and leave the rest. Tomorrow will take care of itself." Omri's otherwise, bright eyes turned dark. He did not want Thade to leave. All he had learned came from those who had worked closely to the General, and now that he had finally worked himself up in rank enough to stand next to the legend - to see, first-hand how they really were no different than he - for Thade to step down was not acceptable. His emotions fought for higher ground. Deeper understanding... Pride, fear, anger...all vied for first place... "It is destined, son." Truth gleamed in Thade's eyes. "Greater things are to begin, and I am needed there. You will understand in time." Frustration clouded Omri's better judgement. Sadly, Thade's gaze wandered over at him.

'You are so young. So unsure, like I was at your age...needing a mentor, someone to look up to. I, of all, am not one to follow.'
"Don't do as I do..." Being the first to admit, Thade had fallen hard. Clawing his way back only to be rejected once again, only this time due to the company he chose to keep, placed him in trouble for harboring an "infatuation"; a most beautiful and incomparable "infatuation". Not something he wanted Corporal Omri to ever have to endure... "Trust me on this...?" he advised, certainty filling his voice, followed by a wink.

* * *

Stating his wounds were far too fresh, both Commander Attar and Corporal Omri pulled rank on Thade and he was not allowed to leave the outpost. Thade glowered at them. He hated them and their idea that he needed to heal, watching the soldiers as they shot through the gates - all drilled, by him, in what to expect, what to do, and how to handle the situation... He felt useless and angry at the same time. "Damn this rehab shit!" swore under his breath as he swaggered toward the stables. He would go by himself. No one was going to tell him what he could or could not do! Upon entering, though, the last person he expected to run into was Attar.

The five-hundred pound gorilla blocked his path shaking his

head. "I'm sorry, sir," he admonished stoically, crossing his arms. "This is ridiculous," Thade spat. "let me pass!" Side-stepping the massive shoulders, they followed in sync, barricading entrance. "You are denying me access?!" Thade stammered, so upset his words tumbled over themselves. Attar held his ground as Thade stared up with wide-eyed dissent. "Yessir." rumbled, avoiding the intense leer. Midnight Jade pierced for retribution.

Forcing himself to turn away, a great snort of disgust and anger emitted from the General's muzzle. "I cannot believe I am a prisoner once again..." he snarled. "The night is our cloak." the Commander contested somberly. His jet-black eyes sauntered, hesitantly, down to Thades. "Attar..." Thade breathed deep, his sutures pulling threateningly. "how do you see me?" "Very vulnerable..." The General's brow rose as he nodded in acceptance of the honest opinion. "So, you think I'm under the influence of infatuation?" Attar looked confused. "Don't ask me to answer that. I only know that she has brought war upon us. I never thought you, of all apes, would step beyond the boundaries." Thade clasped his hands behind his back as he began to pace. "So, for her to lose my child was a good thing, in your eyes?" He fought back an urge to laugh. "Very well, then..." he concluded with an uncertain tone, stepping back to observe his surroundings. "I have no choice then but to wait. Perhaps, in this lull, you will have time to recollect, also." Thade spun on his heel and strode away. Perhaps he, too, needed more time...

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Hastened steps led him to the far out-most area of the outpost. Back where there was nothing but silence and darkness. Where, under a willow, he sunk, head in hands, furious and frustrated. Pounding his fists against his forehead, Thade was almost bawling, searching for just a piece of solitude... "I need direction..." prayed from his lips. "Lead me where I must go." "The soul of a true warrior must do what is right in their own heart..." The voice - carried on the wind - passed through Thade as a wave of emotion, echoing past - spinning round him like a cyclone.

Thade's head swivelled, seeking the force behind that voice, recognizing it, searching for its origin. A form began to take shape before him and he leapt to his feet in fear at what was manifesting. Short of breath, Thade pressed into the tree, trying to escape the effigy. Kalib stood before him, looking so much like Thade, it was like he was looking into a mirror... Golden robes flowed about him, shimmering brightly. "FATHER...!" Shielding his eyes, Thade pushed away from the tree, reached toward him. "My Son, you are the chosen...Accept what has been granted and reign over your Kingdom." Thade gazed at his father, longing to touch him, to embrace him. "Do what is just. Attain the highest honor, my son. Silence your enemies..." The warrior dropped to his knees, sobbing. "Father, my child has been taken from me. Now I am lost!" "No..." Kalib corrected, his face breaking into a creaseless smile. "She remains in the womb of your beloved... a daughter for you thrives still." and he nodded as if caught in slow motion. The specter began to fade. "She grows, still..." Thade reached out. "Please, don't leave me!" "Go to her, my son..."

* * * The General spoke to no one upon returning to the encampment, and no one dared say a word to him, seeing he was visibly upset and shaken. Making his way across the alley, his complexion was pale and waxy; eyes avoiding contact. No acknowledgment meant no queries aimed at him. Getting back to Phallen was the goal. There was no air. No breeze, and Thade fought to keep his steps neat. 'Do not let this all be a dream?' he prayed.

She slept. Dreams so vivid roused the life still inside of her - a first movement, quivering - rousing her. He was there...felt it under his hand. Just being there, watching her sleep - his heart beat frantically both with joy and fear - sadness and rage... "My Pet, our child has been spared." He bent to her, kissing her tenderly. Hovering there, his breath passed over her like a warm breeze, his lips brushing her forehead. "My father came to me in a dream. He told me our child is in you."

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Sleepy eyes met his and Phallen cradled the pain-etched face in her palms. Her beast, so vulnerable now, folded his arms around her, pulled her up from where she lay. Clutching the frail human close, he buried his face in the safety of her long, black hair. "I love you, Phallen." Wrapping her arms loosely around his shoulders, she held him. There he was safe. There he felt alive. Nuzzling into her warm neck, he inhaled her deep, rich scent, fascinated with the euphoria it evoked. "I will return to you." he whispered in her ear. Gazing down on this one he loved so much, Thade caught his breath. Revelation flowed freely from him... "There are stars which we have not gazed upon. Our daughter needs us both. I will be by your side until the day I die." Jade-green eyes reflected a warmth which seemed to flow from his very essence, intoxicating them both as the heavens opened with a deluge of rain. "As long as you want me here, I will remain." Phallen said. She touched his forehead. Brushed his hair back. "I have no plans, my beloved, that you are not included in." she finished, stroking his beard into place. Thade's mood changed from elation to pure depression in a flash. Clamping onto her wrists he brought her hands down to her own belly, pressing his atop. "Can you feel it? She stirs with life!" He was almost hysterical - his emotions swapping place from satirical to outright spite for the one who had attempted to take his creation. A groan of exasperation rumbled in his throat.

(CHAPTER 7 "THE BATTLE FOR EVERMORE") Part III

"I am a casualty of your love." he admitted humbly. "I am not easy on one's eye, for I am hardedned...war-worn, and desperate as to why you still love me." The General lowered his head, unable to hold the pensive stare. "You do not hide your true feelings from me." Phallen softly revealed, her hand gently lifting his chin. "I said terrible things to you, though. I was so critical!" Cradling his face in her hands, she softly kissed him. Falling into her embrace, he pulled slowly away, regarding her with care. Her simple words rang in his ears. The blind romance. His flash of lust... All of it fell gracefully into place in the form of warm, trusting

ambience... With a sigh, he yielded. "What are you?" "One day I will tell you..." He knew all along that Phallen was not quite human. There was something about her that separated her from the rest. 273-277

"Acadia is not your brother..." Phallen shook her head. "He IS my brother, but our bloodline is not pure. Mine lies in my mother, though I do not remember her face. All I know is that she was from a far away land." Thade shook it off like water from a duck's back. "It does not matter. You are beautiful. When I looked at you in the candlelight that night - felt you touch me..." he closed his eyes, inhaled deeply...remembering. "it would not leave me be. I tasted your sweet caress. Held you..." His arms crept behind her, brought her closer. "You opened my eyes. Shook me until I saw beyond simply existing. Now I want to live." To lose her now would surely place him on the path to madness... He frowned darkly at the images playing in his head of the brutal treatment they had endured. How could they do that to such a creature as she? How, from any species, could anyone be so cruel? Thinking back, even he could not recall being so heartless as to beat a child from a human female's womb. Swimming in his own guilt, Thade realized that all of his hate manifested from the cruelty the human race inflicted. Yet, to keep Phallen meant he had given in... Given in to a very special and unusual ONE. She was everything he wished in a human... He found it hard to say what was in his heart - coming out all wrong in the most inopportune times... Phallen, somehow, made sense out of his rambling. She accepted his flaws. His faults. His fears. Understood the struggle in his outbursts...the cries for attention... Interpretation: "I CAN do the right thing! I AM NOT afraid...!"

Thade shook his head as if coming out of a daydream. "I don't know how to say to you what I am feeling right now." He fell against her with a sob. "I hear the words but they become lost in translation." It seemed to take all of the strength he had to fester up the courage to continue, rattling him deeply. Not even Ari had invoked such an emotion as this extraordinary being seemed to call

forth... "I do not care if my love for you is wrong. It goes far beyond that now. When I first laid eyes on you there was nothing, I thought, to keep me from simply using you. I had it under control." Thade shook his head in denial, waving a finger, shamefully, between their lips. "Oh, but you had bewitched me. You had done something to me. Something more than healing me." Clutching her arms, he shook her gently, raising his chin, staring down his muzzle at her, his breathing growing shallow. "I knew there was no forgetting..." Abashed by the awkwardness of his confession, he bowed from her eyes. "Your warmth overwhelmed me. I knew then that my feelings were undeniable...That I had to have you for my very own." His hands ventured below feeling the cloths bundled between her legs... The words, "The bleeding has stopped..." formed from his lips upon hers. Phallen saw his shoulders shaking as if he were on the verge of breaking down. Finding his hands, her fingers intertwined in his, meeting his cheek in a soft, blushing caress. How he could dismiss the pain from his own wounds - exchangeing them for the ones dwelling within their entwined hearts - baffled her. She knew what he had been through, first hand... Hovering precariously over her, Thade's tears fell on her face. "I am prepared to give it all up for you." Pressing his lips to hers he fell into her, enwrapped in one of the very embraces which felled him. If to die, in her arms was where he wished to expire... Unexpectedly, he pulled back wiping at his eyes, donning the persona of the seasoned warrior so well known for; taking a proud stand as he adjusted his clothing. "I must go now..." His voice was strong. Surly. He kissed her. Kissed her neck revelling there in the safeness. "I will return to you." Without another word, Thade turned and strode from the room hoping he had not revealed too much of his vulnerable side. She felt it though. And she prayed to
Red sky at dawn, Sailor be warned...

* * *

Acadia sat by the window of the hut watching the blood-red sky. His face, calm. Too calm for a man about to enter a battle

for evermore. Fate-verses-fate... It was about to come down to he and Thade; one to remain standing while the other falls into memory... Wicked images of the ape-General bleeding to death drew a dark grin across the man's face. 'Just to watch him die...' It would certainly change the future in favor of the humans. It would belong to them, and Thade's damning reprehension would be cast aside... Reversed... "You will fall..." Acadia seethed.

* * *

He scratched at his bandages. The stitces beneath begging to be itched. Slapping his tent flap back, Thade entered the brightly lit room squinting against its harshness. All discussion ceased. Commander Attar eyed the General warily as did Corporal Omri when Thade began pacing the floor, his determination blazing on his sleeve as he strode from one side of the tent to the other, stopping to scrutinize a map of the immediate area, scouring it in all detail as he tried in vain to remain still. He spun, the light of the fire catching his eyes - igniting them. "I know how you feel already! Stop staring at me..." Fighting to not tear at his stitches Thade grit his teeth. "You make me nervous." he quietly confessed, tugging on the cuffs of his mail. Attar and Omri remained silent. Witnessed the unsettling conclusion as it loomed over their General. This was to be his last battle. Whomever remained standing in the end was to rule the planet. There was to be no second-guessing now. It had to be done right the first time, and Thade was feeling the pressure... Chimes, taken from Phallen's tree-abode, dangled outside of the General's tent window. He had confiscated them as a reminder of her upon discovering she had fled. They danced on the humid breeze. Soothed him. They were the first thing he heard when he awoke. The last when he fell asleep. He favored its gentle lyric, for it not only reminded him of her, but of his own home. That was a place far away, now. A place he knew he could never, really, return to with the same outlook. Many irrational - and some, totally outlandish thoughts - spiked. What, honestly, did he wish to accomplish? Delving within, did he love her? Thade sighed loudly, exasperated by the whole escapade. "I do believe I

am going mad!" he scowled. "I am tired of putting everything off!
"It is in our best interest to wait." the Commander reminded.
"Perhaps you should rest..." and he stood to leave. "REST...?!" the
chimp retorted. "Oh, yes, I can surly recline now. That is how I'm
feeling!" Groveling in mock-subservience, Thade snarled back
over his shoulder as he stepped away from the gorilla, "YOU
rest...!" Clearly far too upset to accept any constructive criticism,
he glared, wild-eyed at Attar before he turned and stared out far
beyond the window's panning view. He found it hard to breathe and
it took some time before he settled down. Fighting to catch his
breath, Thade realized that the sound he heard was his own lungs
rasping and wheezing. He closed his eyes. "I gave twenty years,
my friend." and he looked up into the leathery, black face. "Do you
really think I can rest now? Could you?" The chimp's fingers
flexed wide before squeezed into tight fists - knuckles popping.
"Don't close this book yet." But the dullness in his eye...was it
resignation? Was he going to give up?

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Attar leaned close enough to hear Thade's heart pounding.
There in the back, he saw that flame in the General's eye. As
Thade stared back he nodded slowly, "Acadia will fall. No doubt."
came with sudden calmness, a curve raising the corners of his
mouth. Then, as if he had not smiled at all, Thade became business-
as-usual. He shifted his weight, clasped his hands behind his back
and prepared to explain as he side-stepped the hulking gorilla.
"My choice...One I have given much thought on is to keep Phallen
with me. I know she will never be accepted and due to this, I am
going to leave Derkein." He began to pace again, the anguish
from his decision warring across his face. Stopping at the window,
he searched the sky for solace. He reached out and touched the
chimes sending them singing and it looked as if he were on the
verge of tears. And, as he spoke; words so quiet that Attar and Omri
had to practically hold their breath to hear them, Thade seemed to
break. "There has been so much blood-shed. So much pain for my
brothers. I cannot watch any longer." He turned around, a sinister

scowl ravaging his rugged features. "Will it end when I leave?" Speechless, they could only shake their heads. "That is why I am so frustrated!" Knowing his sentiments threatened the relationship he and Attar shared, with as much grace as he could muster, Thade requested his privacy.

There was no one to analyze him now as he, again, questioned himself, under his breath, placing the sitting pillows back against the wall of his spacious tent where he fell into them. Sitting motionless... He threw things in anger. Cried. He poured a drink. Threw it back in one shot and smashed the glass into the fire-pit, the remaining alcohol sending up a dangerous flare. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he shook his head and laughed. Thade wanted Phallen well and with him; his little blessing and curse all wrapped up in a beautiful taboo-decorated package. He crammed his cheeks into his hands and pulled on his hair. "What have you done?!" But, trying to blame her was futile. She was his gift. He adored her. And in his final self-confession, he admitted to himself that he could be loved. That she did, very much, love him. "I am very fortunate to have you in my life..." It breezed up from his lungs like a prayer. To risk it all: Power, leadership, wealth, all he ever wanted or needed... The human was not the waste of a good life. Even if she were, Thade, for the life of him, could not think of a better way to squander it. With that warm thought, he yielded to her gentle influence even though she was absent from his side. Unbuttoning his shirt he drew it gingerly off of his shoulders and kicked off his shoes before cozying up in his chair, pulling the ottoman up with his feet.

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Stretching out like a lazy cat, he rested his head back and closed his eyes. For the first time in many days, he slept. There were no nightmares. No reflections flashing behind his eyelids. Hands folded across his belly, Thade fell into a deep dream-state...

* * *

Far away in another part of the world, their child - the very image of Phallen - appeared. White, feather-light snow fell cold and

wet melting as it hit their exposed faces. Looking up in wonder, flakes fell painlessly upon his eyes, an entirely new experience for one used to the warmth and humidity of the lush jungle. Winds travelled from a different direction. Blowing out of the north, chilling him to the bone. Through chattering teeth, he asked, "where is this place?" Wrapping his shivering body in warm furs, Phallen appeared, smiling. "The Northern Region." she replied as she pulled the fur collar snugly around Thade's neck. Her cheeks were scarlet. Her breath came in frosty puffs of steam as she drew close, kissing him softly with cold lips, the snow settling on her lashes, settling on her head, turning the jet-black hair white. It clung to his beard. He tasted it on his lips as he gazed across a blindingly-white terrain. From the corner of his eye, he saw the child standing next to Phallen and he crouched before her. Eyes - so like his own - gazed wonderously into his. No more than nine or ten, with hair as black as ebony plaited down her back, she smiled, apple-red cheeks plumping under a fur-lined bonnet. "Our daughter?" he queried through a tensed jaw, fighting the urge of chattering teeth.

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Phallen's chin rose proudly. Spoke for her. Yes... How had she grown so quickly? Thade could not comprehend where time had gone, where he had been, how so many years had just simply slipped away. Picking the child up, the girl peered curiously at Thade's ape face with deep, Hazel-green irises when her mittened hands cradled his face, growing moist and warm as she held him there. Cupids-bow lips pressed against his with innocent affection. "Father!" She cried. Clutching her, he looked over the child's shoulder meeting Phallen's approving grin. Though he shivered from the cold, a warmth rose from the little girl's embrace. The love for her father brought forth such fervent emotion from within him, he no longer felt the chill. This has to be real! It was too kind to be one of his dreams. "Catch it on your tongue..." then she stuck hers out, gobbling up several of the falling flakes. Wrapping her arms around them both, Phallen nuzzled deep into Thade's collar. "I love you, beloved." He felt her lips brush his cold cheek...

* * *

Thade awoke with a start, his stitches pulling in protest, as he shook as if freezing. To dream of snow - something Phallen had only spoken briefly of - left him momentarily disoriented. Inspecting his surroundings, he felt the heat of the day through the perspiration breaking over his body. Yet his hands were like ice when he clasped them together. 281-282 "I need answers..." Wrestling up out of the chair, all-too-snug between its thick arms, Thade perched on the edge as his chest objected. Clutching protectively, he rose, releasing the pain with a slow groan. Pins and needles still stabbed across his bosom. Gritting his teeth, he swaggered, groggily, for clean clothing. Too much was happening for his simian mind to process. It seemed like he barely had time to take a breath before another obstacle popped up in front of him. Nonetheless, he contended his future did not lie in the hands of an Almighty. Even when his soul was tormented by demons bringing caustic results, he never bowed down. But he did pray. It was all becoming a game and resentment rose for those who judged him then... and now. His hurt ran deep. Deeper than any still waters. But this change was approaching. Who would drink from the chalis in the end? His heart weighed heavily as he tried to bring solidarity into the picture. "In my dreams..." he smirked cynically...

Dressed in black silk, he made his way to the four-spired med-tent. He had to make one last visit to Phallen before departing.

Throwing the curtained entry aside, he entered boldly, only to be blinded by the sudden darkness. Hushed voices led him back.

The doctor spoke softly to his patient unaware that Thade had entered - appearing from the shadow of the hall. Anything they had to say, he made it clear that, he, too, was included. "Oblige me?," he keenly proposed. The doctor straightened. Turned to Thade. "You are both quite fortunate." The General's eyes shifted suspiciously. "What's going on?" "The bleeding has stopped. Your Phallen is with child!" Removing what looked to be a stethoscope from around his neck, the doctor handed the instrument to Thade

and she hated herself for allowing it to go so far... "Thade...our child..." She broke down. "Our child will NEVER be accepted... Not by your people or mine." He could feel his temper flaring. His nostrils twitched as his brow grew dark and heavy. "Do you think I give a damn what "they" think? Phallen, you know me better than that." She wiped at her wet cheek when he took her hand, tasting the salt of her tears when he kissed it. "I will be with you," he swore, his feelings extremely obvious, so close, now, to her lips that she could smell the faint aroma of brandy on his breath. He wanted her. All of her. There was no consent for their accidental meeting. And on that one night their intimacy had produced a life Thade knew was to be his daughter's... And he shuddered... "My GOD, GIRL, can't you see?!" "Your intentions are gallant, my Beloved, but there is no chance for us." His eyes narrowed perceptively, aware, now, of what she was saying. Agast, he withdrew, staring at her incredulously. "You cannot leave me now. Not with my child. I will not allow it!" and he spun from the shattered expression. Incited, an encroaching growl stifled her words. With his back still to her, Thade gathered his wits - fangs bared dangerously... "Do you not know how I am by now?" he snarled over his shoulder, hiding his face. "You are my obsession!" He swung back to her, his muzzle touching her nose, his ire reaching its crest when he pressed into her frightened eyes. Closing his eyes - inhaling her fear - falling helplessly under, he rested his head against hers. "I never thought - after all we have been through - I would be hearing these words from you." He shook with each word spoken, falling further from the dream which was slowly turning nightmarish. His stomach knotted. Without warning, he suddenly grabbed her up by the arms, shaking her. "To leave me with but a memory will deliver me to madness!" His whole Goddamned world; he had surrendered. His life; how he wanted it to be was being crumbled into a ball to be tossed away. To be set on fire and burned to ashes was a lesser torture than this! She was letting go...! "You planned this from the very beginning..." he glowered. "The message was real wasn't it?! You want me

DEAD!" Phallen reached to touch the pain-etched brow when he flinched back, his eyes turning to stone. "No..." her voice trembled. "Is what you pursue the consent of others who mean nothing to me?" She could not look away. The numerous emotions - from her refusal to outright rage - waged for recognition - over his body. Taking over...

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'All she wanted from me was a child, and now that it is to be, she is ready to leave...taking that life with her!' He was furious, forgetting all of the things they had shared, dismissing the tragic look on her face as just another ploy... 'What are you doing...?'

Thade stiffened, his conscience screaming in his head, reminding him of how fucked up his life had been. The storm was clearing as rationality captured the wildly ambling rage, softening his jawline. Unfurling the tangled brow. Had he been shaking her all the time? Thade released her suddenly and backed away. "What have I done?" Holding herself, Phallen curled into a ball as she cried. He went to touch her but stopped. "Forgive me," he begged. "My God, to hurt you..." Resting his strong hands on her shaking shoulder, Phallen shrunk away in fear. "My Pet..." and he bent and kissed her hair. "just to be with you is all I seek... Believe me." Feeling his sweet caress, the last thing Phallen wanted was for him to relinquish everything in her favor. Her adoration was genuine...having fallen head-over-heels in love with the General. That was not going to change the minds of the Senate. They held his future in their palms. Without their assent, Phallen would not stay and allow them to strip Thade of everything he had strived for. "You belong here," she tried to sound strong. "I belong to the forest. And this life we have created will never be accepted." That was all it took. Thade released her at once and backed away, raging across the room, eyeing her with distaste. "You should have left me be back at Calima. You should have left me alone." he growled. He whirled and stormed from the partitioned room. Damn their ever meeting! Fine, he thought. I will go back to my world and renounce everything as a mistake. No

goodbyes. Only erasure. In that passionate moment, all he craved was to be alone, the hurt of knowing he would never see her again clawed at his back. How could she say these things?! Has fear taken hold so profoundly? Questions abounded sending him farther into his so well known frenzy. Stopping dead in his tracks, the one emotion which did not discriminate overtook him - wrangled him in... "I understand now..." he spoke aloud, shaking his head. "I, too, am feeling it." Fear choked him. Clutching his temples, Thade bent. "How could I have been so blind?"

To let go...

Phallen had released him. Her sacrifice was just. Thade did not deserve to lose twice. There was no need for him to grovel at the feet of those pompous asses. He was their superior now. The battle between he and Acadia was unnecessary. It did not have to erupt into the full-scale war developing. She had denounced the relationship and would return to the forest, or perhaps to a farther region, forfeiting the whole liasion...dismissing it all - to raise the child alone. Hurting him was the one thing she never wanted to do, though.

"Phallen...?" His voice carried softly. She looked up with tear-stained cheeks, breaking his heart. Cradling her in his arms, his eyes misted as he nuzzled her cheek with his own. "I can't let you go away from me." He looked at her with the eyes of a child. "It is how you are that captivates me." Settling on the edge of the bed, he stroked her hair. "Obstacles abound for everyone. Not just you and I..." For her to comprehend and to believe they were meant to stay together - that, on his life-road, she was to be beside him and that he would protect her with his life - never to allow harm to befall upon her again, flamed from impassioned eyes. She reached up, stroked his beard. "My love..." A deep purr rose from his chest as he pressed against her touch. "When you touch me I come alive." he sighed. "I could never go on without you. My devotion runs far deeper than my wounds." He pulled her close, cupping her chin. "I love you." whispered. "I cannot help it."

Reeling as he tasted her salty kisses, he knew he could never turn away from her... No matter what came...

* * *

Stepping out onto the jagged bluff known as "High Ridge", Thade observed his world. It appeared so serene from way up there. A bitter-sweet smile came, knowingly, for things were not as peaceful as they seemed. At that very moment, from the safety of the surrounding jungle, his army was watching as the Trident army stole inland. "Come on in." Thade brooded. "You have already incited me." His spirit, the very life force which once swam in his hot blood, had been stripped, but his pride blazed fervently, and the love for his fair human was unbreakable. He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes taking in the warm, humid air. He could not silence the rage within...

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"It is almost sunset." the gorilla announced with a touch of irony. Re-entering the compound, a calmness so unlike the General had Attar chasing after as Thade continued across the road. The chimp-General looked up. "You know what to do." he said, making his way to his tent to prepare. Stopping abruptly, he turned back, his eyes distant - as if seeing something just beyond Attar's shoulder. "By the way..." he called, walking backwards, "Phallen has not lost the child...!" He grinned hard before turning on his heel. "Wonderful." the gorilla grumbled after..

* * * Part V

Attar hid his emotions poorly, realizing how strongly Thade felt about the human. Why did their relationship continue to grow stronger? Silently, the Commander said a prayer for them. Especially for his comrade. "I had no idea so many more had come!" Opening his eyes to the voice, Thade, himself, had stepped up next to him, the words breathing hard from excitement. Attar nodded slowly. "They stand for you, sir." Thade gave a half-smile before stiffening, clasping his hands behind his back, giving a brusque upward nod. He knew... Risking a glance to the Commander, Thade cleared his throat. "If

you are uncomfortable with being here, I..." Attar glared straight back at him. "No, sir. I stand beside you and your trophy." "She IS NOT my trophy!" Thade shrieked through clenched teeth, grinding out: "when this is all over, I have a few things to let you in on, my friend." That damned girl! Why did he love her?! Why did Corporal Omri? Why did the citizens of Derkein? Was Attar so blind, or were all of the others? What made Phallen so different from the other humans...? Oh, he knew. Whenever she was around, a calm seemed to fall over whoever was near. A feeling of sweet, melodic amity... There was not a brazened bone in her body for anyone in Derkein. And these tides of war, unbenounced, treaded heavily on her. All of the fears she hid burrowed deeply into her conscience. If Thade would have allowed, she would have went to Acadia, giving herself for the peace that Thade deserved. He forbade it, though, proclaiming his devotion to her in so many ways... To leave him now would kill him.

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Measuring the hours by a slit through the tent window, Phallen watched the gold turn to red...to grey. She closed her eyes. "This is really happening!" The first sound of nightfall issued forth from a cricket somewhere inside with her. "Please watch over them all...Especially my Beloved Thade." She ended her prayer silently and opened her eyes. Attar was standing next to her. She shrunk away. "Do not fear me, fair-skinned one." he soothed as best as his booming voice could allow. "I came on my own accord. I mistrusted you. Yet, when I entered, I heard your prayer... Forgive me, for I now know that your feelings for my General are sincere. Human, he loves you deeply." Phallen slowly ventured to look up into the leathery, black face of the gorilla, his beady earth-tone eyes, dewy, seeking pardon for his doubt in her. "I have loved him far longer than he has known me." she replied gently. Reaching out, she took his hand, her own disappearing within the gently furling fist. "We will protect him..." Attar assured. "with our lives." The agreement was set in stone as they stared at one

another, broken, only, by the sound of encroaching hoofbeats followed by the soft thud of feet hitting the hardened ground. Thade burst into the room, intruding, unannounced, upon the moment, his eye suspicious as they fell on the gorilla's back. He powered over, his hands clenched. What was the Commander doing here?! He had no reason to be there! "Am I interrupting something?" came icily. Attar pulled away from Phallen's hold and turned to Thade. "No, sir. I..." "He is here for "US", Thade." Phallen finished, casting her hypnotic gaze on the General. It took a few minutes for Thade to settle his doubtful spirit, unsure of just why the Commander was comforting her, sashaying into the room - brow raised suspiciously - staring contemptuously at the gorilla. His hands tightened into fists; knuckles popping as he stalked. "Indeed...?" he queried subtly through clenched teeth, fangs flashing. The ominous presence, so close to his "pet" ... As Attar rose, he squeezed her hand, catching her eye before turning to face his superior. Thade snorted loudly, snapping his head in an upward motion of disapproval... "Get out of here..." he hissed, following the Commander with stabbing eyes. She felt him shaking, obviously quite upset by the presense of Attar. "Are you alright?" he asked as he cradled her protectively. Stroking his arm, Phallen soothed his worries, her small hands cool and light, taking away the animosity Thade harbored - calming the beast... "He came on your behalf," she whispered. Taking his trembling hands, she brought them to her lips. "He came in peace...FOR peace..." Cupping his face, she pulled him in, gazing deeply into his darkened eyes. "Thade, please... there is no reason for suspicion." With a snort of disgust, Thade lurched back. "There is suspicion and doubt from everyone, my pet..." 293

"It's not over till it's over." he injected. Hiding his face, the tone of his voice carried over his shoulder: "I am so protective of you. Of the child I know you carry...Our child." "Would they be here if no one cared?" she posed. Feeling shamed, Thade ducked his head, his hands clenching. "Phallen. My sweet, beautiful being..." Without seeing, his hands combed through her black hair

in an endless caress, brushing her breast. "You are right." whispered, following his hands, lips gently falling upon the swell... Again, he understood why he adored her. She was contagious... Lips wet with kisses, he rose to meet hers. "You make me want to try." The General felt weak, yet, at the same time, strong. She loved him and he saw it in her eyes as she watched him...a far gaze which dug into his soul, never letting him forget how deeply she touched him. The power to erase any mood, good or bad, lay in her hands... And he liked it...

"Don't you dare leave me alone." His teeth slid along her salty neck. Heart and soul bared, Thade demanded her. There was no thinking twice any longer. He was comfortable, leaving nothing to doubt. The message, well, he would deal with that and the asinines who forged it. Rising, slender fingers combed through his goatee. Giving, barely, a shake of her head, a soft whisper confessed, "I pray for you." "My feet are firmly planted on the ground, and I believe we both agree that this will not come for free. But, I keep the key in pursuit of your love." Kissing her hard, Thade revelled in the sweet return. * * *

On barded horse, Thade guided the beast past Corporal Omri, bringing the steed's nose parallel with Commander Attar's. He felt his guilt. Not wanting to be as hasty in apology as he had been with the accusations, Thade remained silent and focused on what was before him. The Commander peered at the nervous General from the corner of his eye. He knew... It was coming... And from his General, for the first time. Leaning from the saddle, Thade breathed, "I owe you a great apology for my behavior..." Everything good that had happened flamed in his eyes, and it was all because of Phallen. Attar saw that fire. Recognized the enamored glaze. The gorilla chuckled softly, replying, "I am deeply touched by the fact that you ask for forgiveness, but I'm afraid you were already forgiven." Attar never made eye contact. He was steadily watching as the army split into their quadrants. "Promise you will take care of her if anything should happen." Attar was thunder-struck, quaking in his stirrups.

"I will protect you." he vowed, coming around and meeting the General's eyes. Thade dropped his head, shaking it. "That was not what I asked." he returned huskily before prodding his horse forward. Attar watched after, troubled by the statement. He had known Thade for so long. He thought he knew him, but this spell. It could not be broken, holding the proud soldier steadfast...

The deep, almost sonic bass of Attar's tone reverberated in Thade's ears : "We need you." Pulling hard on the reins Thade wheeled his horse around. "You what...?" The Commander sighed. "We need you, sir." Oh, the silence. Like the calm before the storm. Thade stared, inquisitively, awaiting further requital, a wry smile creeping across his face. "Do you?" He shook his head, a fangy grin spanning. "No," he sort of laughed. "you don't, really." Attar was about to rebuke when Thade halted him with a slight hand gesture. "Let's be real here, alright? Maybe there has been a change in me. Phallen is that change. She is my alteration of life. I simply love her. I love her so much..." He sighed morosely at the thought of her. "Keep her safe, my friend. If you can find it in yourself, I'm begging you. I may not come back from this, but I feel I must fight for her." Attar looked somberly at his General then slowly nodded. Thade smiled wanly to the conviction. "Let us watch over the young Corporal," Thade advised, changing the subject easily. "he's liable to do anything."

Splitting the army into four quadrants, they slipped into the darkness. Thade took the west corner. Attar, the eastern half. Omri had the northern region, the farthest and least likely to see any real action. This was the Corporal's first real battle and the seasoned warriors wanted to keep him further away from the prospective danger, bringing him in last once all had fallen into a controlled scene. Matthaszar carried over into the south with his battalion, all war-weathered , prepared, despite their ages. Fueled by pain, Thade led his troops to the front knowing Attar and his infantry would soon fall into position. He watched under the cloak of darkness, his eyes so much keener than those of the humans' who crept through the forest - his forest - and he gnashed his teeth as

they passed but an arms length from him. All remained motionless, turning into stumps, rocks, and shadow until the whole Trident platoon was within their assemblage. Thade gave the signal, crossing his throat in a slashing motion. They took the fifty-or-so humans without incident or sound, or mercy. Lashing out with machete and gauntlet, human blood sprayed the western portion. Those who managed to tear away were soon cut off by Thade as he shook his head. Dressed in black armor, he was virtually undetectable until he was upon one, reaching down to pluck them from the ground. "Take a good look." He bade before slashing their throat.

Still, a handful did get away, diving into the overgrowth like moles, crawling along the wet ground on their bellies. Wheeling his horse around at the sound of snapping twigs, A large stone, hurled by a wrist-rocket struck Thade square in the chest sending pins and needles through him, taking his breath as silverfish danced before his eyes. Shaking the dizzying feeling before it took over, he shrieked furiously, chargeing forth into the refuge where the assailant hid - claiborn raised mightily , coming down in wide arcs, sending the human scrambling out of the mist and into plain site while Thade pulled a bowie knife from its sheath. From the tip, he threw it accurately, centering it just below the human's neck and directly in their spine, felling them like a deer. Thade snorted with disgust. These wimps were no match! Though they seemed to fight well under cover there was no competition once they were out in the open. The Trident were ignorant. They had no discipline - rushing and raging forth only to be struck down almost immediately. Every maneuver attempted had been contemplated and intercepted by the Derkein Army. Thade's ears pricked up. More were coming. Raising his hand, he gestured for his troops to retreat, backing them off into the heavy foliage. "Resign from haste," he guided softly. "let them think we have gone. Allow them to draw closer." His nostrils flared from the stench of blood and fear and he jerked away from the offensive odors. Pulling the reins with instruction for his steed to retreat further into the blackness, Thade's eyes shifted

restively studying every grey outline in front of he and his band. A devil-of-a-smile ran its course: He had them, too. Reaching back for his sword - gliding his hand along the hilt, feeling the familiar finger placement imbedded into the handle, Thade stole a glance over his shoulder catching the glint of blue steel as his troops also groped for their weapons. "Not yet," he breathed coldly, gesturing they fall back even more. 298

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"Concentrate on his army," Acadia instructed. "I will take the General." The men broke off into their designated groups, slithering through the mist and along the hillside like a hood of snakes. "Take them out. Take them all out!" bellowed a chilling conclusion. Acadia folded his arms firmly across his chest and smiled. He realized his men were doomed, yet he wore a Chesire smile as they hustled along, disappearing into the thick fog. "you will bow to me, General Thade." He hissed through a clenched jaw. The brazened warrior could taste the victory - bloody - in his mouth...

* * *

"Do not charge hastily...Do not fall prey to false security..." Omri, along with his entourage, remained still as a large band of Trident stole along the shadow lands just below. Thade's words had rung true. The young Corporal could almost feel the grey coming as his hand went to his bearded chin, tugging nervously at it. Staring out on the, now, deserted land, he exhaled. Bowing his head: "Just let us make it home," was prayed silently.

"We will remain here until there is movement from the other corners." he instructed with as much courage as he could muster considering he was scared to death of capture. It proved to be a wise decision as more humans emerged from the fog directly in front of them,

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sulking along the dew-soaked grasses, the soft swish and slosh of wet legs and feet forgeing through. Omri felt for his weapon, never taking his eyes from the tour, biting anxiously at his lower lip until it bled as sweat beaded on his brow. The Trident filed by

without incident and he released another long-held breath. In fact, it were as if his whole platoon exhaled with him, and he looked back at them shakily. It was all quiet, now... Real quiet...

With his army now in position, Thade stood on the edge of the jungle scrutinizing the dark, flat land sprawled before him. So calm... Too calm... "Let's go," he ordered brusquely, nudging his horse out onto the terrain. Despite his wounds, pulling relentlessly against their sutures, more now than before, the General purged into the wide-open, his muzzle high, sniffing the air for any scent of human stench.

"SIR...!", Thade jumped, turning aggressively to the alarmed voice. "What is it?!" A long gloved finger jutted over his shoulder.

Clutching the hilt of his sword, Thade brushed the chimp's hand away. "Stay where you are," he ordered vacantly, giving a haughty snort. "let them think I am alone." There was no turning back. Thade raised his hand to halt holding firmly for that perfect opening. Where was that bastard, Acadia?! Thade wanted him most of all. "Patience..." he bade, more to himself than to those surrounding him.

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His eyes blazed quick-silver as he turned slowly and looked back at his troops. The word was foreign coming from him. Heeding his own warning was like telling himself not to defend what was right. And he knew now what was. Being most unpredictable among his peers, Thade had caused more trouble than his worth. Raising hell for no sound reason except out of pure maliciousness, that had all changed since his return. His life had reason to apply caution. Someone loved him...

His past did not lie easy. His integrity had been cast down by the Senate. To them, he had none, for what he had committed; taking a human for a mate. But he had found her to be more than a mere human, and to fight for her burned, eternally, within him.

He dropped his hand and the Derkein Army manifested, catching the Trident squadron completely off guard, converging headlong into the humans, ominous glowing eyes glaring from

beneath solid helmets. Leading, Thade swept down with his sword slashing through the first human that dared step in his path - nearly cutting them in two. In a clash of fury, the armies met. Clubs, swords, gauntlets, and bow and arrow were brandished lethally beneath a black-velvet sky... He felt his chest tear, but he would not stop. Hot blood splattered before he could turn away, all the while a dream-like expression remaining on his face, perhaps due to shock. Locked in mortal combat, both ape and human fell, their weapons knicked and bloody as their barers dropped like flies. Through the shrieks and screams, a distinct resound descended upon Thade's ears. Looking up, he saw the approach of HIS horse, 301 the very one Acadia had taken. And he was riding it hard, storming from the rear, staring directly at the General. "He belongs to me!" Acadia screamed, chargeing through his own men to get a better aim on Thade. Aware that he was in danger, Thade turned momentarily and caught the sudden movement from the corner of his eye as the Eastern Infantry rose into the horizon, appearing as if from nowhere, approaching with hurricane spanse. Thade came back with an arrogant laugh paying little heed, now, to the man demanding his full attention, distracted by the oncoming. And he grew careless... A tomahawk grazed his head. Thade twisted in the saddle as blood trailed down the side of his face. Swearing under his breath, he raised his claiborn high as he charged, missing the human's head by only centimeters as he sliced through thin air with a growl. With only seconds, Thade surveyed his options avoiding another attempt on his life as another tomahawk was hurled toward him catching his left thigh, laying it open just beside the armor plate. With the grace of an acrobat, Thade flipped from the back of his mount landing surefooted, and in complete control of his balance - sword in hand and braced for confrontation, startling his adversary with the nimble maneuver. Stepping forward, feet braced firmly, Thade raised his weapon high above his head, letting go with a grunt as he brought it around - the human, too stunned to move, took the deadly blow before he knew what happened... The ape-general, for a brief moment, felt weak

and let his sword falter. He searched the darkness for Acadia but he had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared. Thade scrutinized every corner of the conflict looking for a clue as to where the man could have hidden so swiftly as he fought his enemies. Striking some dead where they stood while others, upon challenging him - he simply bashed unconscious. His patience was growing thin and he was tired of the cat-and-mouse game, gritting his teeth as his temper flared to life driving him stark-raving mad. Thade shrieked as he began swinging the claiborn at what ever came near him, blind to whom or what crossed his path. Teeth gnashed so tightly, his jaw ached, the General huffed and puffed clearing his passage with the motion of one clearing a field with a sickle, sweeping back and forth throwing debris to either side, except in his case, the debris was body parts. He had snapped. No one was safe anymore. He had gone back to his savagery and rage had driven him. Foreign language spat from his lips - a language he could not even interpret. It was primitive. Cryptic. A touch of pure evil splaying. He could not stop. It felt right at home in him and was settling deeper. Phallen was not in his thoughts, nor was Attar or Omri. This was a bull seeing red. A runaway train. Alone again, Thade fought for his own survival. Looking up, a young Trident broke through the mist, riding up hard on the General with a look of pure hatred in his eyes, bow and arrow at the ready. Thade watched as he approached realizing this was but a boy, no more than thirteen at the most. Nonetheless, their eyes locked, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Then he caught the boys' quaking apprehension upon coming face-to-face with the simian only to turn cold just seconds before releasing the arrow. Thade leapt to the left, tucking and rolling before he sprang to his feet, the stitches in his chest giving all the way. Two steps though, and Thade stood like a baseball player up to bat, staring with a warning that he would kill the boy if he came a breath closer. "Go home to your mother," he chided as he swung the claiborn at the boy's horse, sending it rearing. A sound from behind sent the sword in a full circle slicing across the midsection of his stalker, spilling their guts. Heaving, Thade

clutched his chest with his free hand as he saw them collapse in their own entrails. He knew he was bleeding beneath the mail and armor as he turned back to the boy, receiving a sharp blow to his jaw that sent him reeling. Catching himself, Thade's fury ignited. "Why you little..." He cursed under his breath when he realized that it was the boy who had delivered the fist. The chimp lunged at the boy and grabbed him by the collar lifting him off of his feet. "Do you want to die, Flea?!" he snarled, fangs snapping close to the dirty ear. Thade gave him a shake, snorting menacingly. With a terse nod he tossed the boy landing him in a thick patch of grass. 'That one will not be back soon', the General surmised smugly before a dozen or so Trident warriors fell upon him.

His sword impaled many, stumbling over the falling bodies while he kicked, clawed and bit at the rest. But one, in particular was most aggressive - as much as Thade - when he managed to get the General around the neck and strangle him, cutting off his air. It threw Thade into a panic. Dropping his sword, he groped for the man's eyes pressing his thumbs deep into the sockets, feeling himself starting to fade. Bearing down, he shook from exertion until his thumbs hit the backs of the man's eyesockets. "This is for what you did to Phallen!" He shouted into the blind man's face as he clawed at Thade's arms. In one swift move, the chimp snapped his neck. Wiping the fluids from his hands in the grass, Thade retrieved his sword, stepping over the body as if it were nothing more than a pile of horse shit. "Okay," he breathed heavily, eyes shifting from one hairless face to another. "Who's next?" He happened to glance down. Blood covered his legs...A lot of it, and it appeared to be his own coming from beneath his breastplate... "Wonderful..." he grumbled, coming up to face the angry mob. Pivoting, he kept them at bay while looking for an escape or at least something solid to place his back against when from behind came a heavy thud. Tossing his head, Thade's eyes trailed up the chest of a very large gorilla. "Izu..." "Commander Attar sent us to find you, sir." Thade leaned and peered around the thick trunk.

"Us?" "I lost the others on our way here." Thade looked up worriedly. Still, he was relieved to have him there, feeling himself tired and very much aware that his wounds were fresh again. Fighting their way through the mob a sudden blow from a sling sent Thade to his knees. The gorilla spun and lifted him effortlessly back up on his feet. "I got your back," Thade assured as he caught his breath, eyes scanning their predicament. Though neither saw, they both nodded, confirming mutual protection as they moved, back-to-back until being attacked from all sides. Were they the only two taking on the whole Trident Army? Their swords swung out wildly into the oncoming hazard. Blood spattered across their faces as bodies fell at their feet only to reveal another wave in wait. Where were his troops?! "Sure..." but before he could finish Thade swung the heavy sword with all of his might, severing an arm. "...Sure could use some backup here!" he finished with a shout. They were alone. Just the two of them fought off the barrage of angry misled humans. The gorilla nodded in agreement. They were way outnumbered. He heard his General swear then heard him say; "I refuse to go down this way." Another stone smashed into the chimp's chest. Thade made a harsh hacking sound as the burn rose through him. The blow knocked the wind out of him, doubling him over. What were only seconds felt like hours as the pain stormed every nerve. He was not doing so well. His fingers gripped the hilt of the sword engraving his imprint even deeper into the leather wrap. Struggling to right himself, to regain his hold in the deadly standoff, a massive shadow blocked the moon's light, intercepting a murderous attempt on his life. An immense fist smashed into the Trident warrior's face sending them flailing through the air to crash atop a group which were coming straight for Thade and Izu. Turning, the shadow lifted Thade gently to his feet. "Alright?" Attar's voice boomed. Still shaken, the General nodded holding his gut in hidden agony. Just when he had thought his number was up, losing all hope in getting himself out of this alive, Attar had come in all of his raging angst to bail him out of yet, another bad situation. Maybe it was time to slow down. The notion agreed with him as he

took hold of the gorilla's huge arm. NAH...! "Seen Omri and his tour?" Thade questioned, taking a second breath and damned thankful for it, believing the one before was to have been his last. "No..." Attar replied curtly, batting a stone away. The Commander soon discovered that he was the third to be caught up in the middle of all hell breaking loose. He risked a glance at Thade and saw the look of dissatisfaction cloud the General's face. Recognized the flash of error at giving the young Corporal such an important responsibility so soon. Omri was precarious. His beliefs and prejudices had yet to be cast. He fell on what he saw and this rebellion was for freedom. For Phallen and for Thade... And so, Omri kept hope...

305 - 307

The Corporal and his battalion remained hidden on the ridge waiting for the moment to charge. To lead the Trident to assume that the whole Derkein army had been deployed was his plan of strategy even though they were needed now. Things were not going as expected for his General, as he was caught in the eye of the hurricane.

Caught like a fly in one swift move, Thade's hands held Morrow's neck in a vice-like grip. The human, unfortunately realized much too late that he had met his match as he squirmed to free himself from the outright condemnation offered up from Thade when the ape suddenly released... 'An able warrior does not fight in rage...' The General gave the man a tremendous shove sending him reeling. "Leave now," Thade roared. "Do not return!" Scrambling to his feet, Morrow retreated from the battle but not back to the Trident village. Instead into his own future - dumbfounded - altered - thankful... Attar stopped his deadly repete in mid-swing upon hearing Thade's retribution. Staring across to the chimp, the gorilla could hardly believe his own ears. Did he just say what he thought he did? Thade stood, glanced at the Commander. Feelings plain. Yes... The General swept his sword in a wide arc: the rest were to be wiped out, his frustration apparent when he turned to Attar; "Something told me..."

he started slowly. The explanation was interrupted by a sudden yelp from the north gate causing everyone to turn. Attar's muzzle rose into the acrid air. "Something has occurred." Thade searched the black horizon seeking translation. In the mist Omri's fleet was spilling over the hill only to disappear in a thick cloud of dust as they were intercepted by a waiting troop of Trident soldiers racing up to meet them. The two superiors watched in horror as the masses met, clashing head on in a squirming bowl of blood and mud.

Appalled by the sight, Attar spun to consult his comrade but he was nowhere in sight. A cold sweat broke on the gorilla's brow. "SNIPER...!!!"

Throwing caution to the wind, contradicting every word he had stressed on his troops on what NOT to do, Thade stood alone. In the very thick of it all he waited, searching for Omri, smacking down those who dared face him...

"What in the hell is he doing?!" The Corporal gaped as he wheeled his horse about forcing the beast to face its fear of humans, crashing over them in his excitement. 308

In the torch-lit distance Omri spotted the General - recognized the emblazoned gold icon on the breastplate. He raced feverishly through the assault hacking through bodies as he went...

Stalking among his assailants with no more regard than one scuffling through the sand, Thade scattered the wounded and dyeing, his silver shining eyes glinting as he caught sight of Omri... What was he saying? Thade did not detect the approach of danger. Echoes surrounded him blending with all that was occurring in a flurry of misdirection. Those near him heard it plainly - a trumpet, so-to-say - for they all hesitated. Some looked at Thade almost sympathetically before they soon dived away. Riding up hard, Omri leapt from his horse, rustling the general to the ground. "Stay low!" Thade, still quite dazed from the sack gazed up into the chimp's bruised face as Omri held him firmly to the ground. "Don't even get up!" Leering over his shoulder, the Corporal fought to catch his breath as Thade began to struggle beneath him. "Your captors are just over that small ridge." he

finished, pointing quickly. That was all Thade needed to hear. With a mighty shove he pushed Omri off, a stare, for anyone daring look, fortold of his unstoppable quest. "Who is over there?" he demanded, wiping his fevered brow. Omri became aggravated by his superior's obstinance and took it upon himself to accept all consequences when he shoved Thade into the dirt. "They have a weapon!" he bawled. "One never seen before." Thade looked up into the tortured face and smirked. "Right..."

General Thade had seen the ultimate weapon. He had been wounded by it. What Acadia had would never equal what he had held in his own hands, how it felt - cursing it and thanking it all on the same breath. Hatred erupted in a deep resonant growl emanated from his chest, swelling with intensity as the words, "suicidal imbecile" seethed from his lips. "He holds nothing that I have not already withstood..." Just as he finished, an object, too fast to identify flew past, barely missing him. Insulted, Thade bawled, "an ARROW?!" "Not just any kind of arrow." Omri emphasized, forcing Thade back to the ground. He realized he had a fight on his hands and with the very one he was sent to protect when Thade refused to believe this could kill him. "PLEASE...!" the Corporal begged, wrapping his arms and legs around him. Thade kicked loose and pulled himself to his knees peering into Omri's beseeching eyes. "We can take them..." He gave a compassionate smile momentarily soothing Omri's worries...

309 - 310

Unforgiven... Acadia held the General in the cross-hairs. "Stand up you sonofabitch." Thade's glowering expression spilled the nonsencial hand Omri held. No more friendly fire. He had had enough. "Get off of me!" Standing, Thade began to stalk toward the ridge with sword in hand and a thirst for revenge. "You want me?" he bellowed. "COME ON!" He felt the blow. An unbelievable force lifted him physically off of the ground and hurled him at least six feet back, landing him flat on his back with a bone shattering crash. He felt as if he had been struck by lightning, shaking uncontrollably. Protruding from his chest just between his

breastplate and shoulder an arrow had penetrated the thick leather mail, driving deeply into his flesh. Thade dared a look. His hands froze around it, paralyzed with shock. "W-w-what...?" stammered. "WHAT?!" he screamed. The fight was on, igniting as he stood despite the pain. "THADE...!" Turning to the shriek another arrow descended bouncing off of his armor. "GET DOWN!" Omri's urgent words fell late, for another arrow sent the General to his knees as it burrowed next to its brother. He caught him as he fell back. "Stay with me." the Corporal drove, shaking Thade. He felt himself fading from shock, yet managed to give a weak nod. "It hurts to breathe." and he clutched Omri's arm tightly.

311

Daring a second look at his own chest, Thade caught his breath. His hands shook as they touched the protruding flights. Gripping one of the arrows, thinking he would simply pull them free, it would not budge sending stars before his eyes from the attempt. A snarl formed from the wrath. "This really hurts!" he snapped, falling back, his words forced by the repulse of his own mortality. To be stricken by such a device as primitive as this completely absorbed Thade into its den of damnation, fueling his revolt past the threshold of pain, numbing his body. "Help is coming..." Omri kept his courage up although he had never seen such an injury, understanding that a mere bandage job was not going to suppress it. With calm, almost passive regard he struggled to keep the General comfortable. "just be patient and wait..." The look on Thade's face said nothing about patience. He was not about to "just" wait there for help. Pride decided. He would be damned if he was going to found lying on his back in need again. It would destroy him. He held his own self-worth higher than death. "Omri?," he said with a jagged breath. "don't..." His eyes ignited with rage, far outweighing the agony as he pushed off of the Corporal and stood. His heart pounded out of his chest. His head swam as he staggered on his feet. The shock left his vision hazy in the fight for control, his wounds sending the warning that he must stop now. Looking numbly around, collecting bits and pieces of

the immediate area and where exactly in his scrambled mind, from which direction those approaching horses were coming from, spun him drunkenly. Bringing the rising sun an infantry of gorillas, on horseback, clouded the deep purple horizon surrounding the duo. Thade flagged one of them down. "Give me your horse." His words were intense, finding the energy from somewhere inside to simply speak. The gorilla stared in disbelief. "Sir, you are bleeding!" Yanking the reins from his hands, Thade's breathing was labored. He had no time to lose. "I know," he muttered, gesturing impatiently for them to dismount as he leapt from the right side into the saddle. Gazing uncertainly at them, the General gave a gentle nod before kicking the horse hard in its ribs. Hands on his hips, the dethroned gorilla watched after, shaking his head. "He's a gonnar." "Don't bet on it." Omri retorted as he watched the horse and rider speed out of sight.

* * *

Whipping the beast side-to-side with the tethers of the reins, Thade drove the steed directly toward Acadia's foxhole. Genuine revenge pushed him past any and all pain, and not even Phallen was the reason any longer. This was payback and nothing was going to interfere. Nothing. The whole scenerio was a mass of confusion. Not only for him but for every breathing soul around him as ape and human fought for their very existence - dust and grime filling the air as if a cyclone had touched down right in their very midst. Arms, legs, and bodies were scattered across the once peaceful field. Horses without riders shot for open land, their eyes wild with terror as they stampeded from the battle, screaming in fear. Hollow eyed, Thade reached the base of the mound just as the horses crested the roll of land, speeding past him, frothed...eyes haunted. 312 - 313

Delirious surprise... His brow rose as he watched them, and that was all the Trident needed: one unguarded moment, and one brave idiot to act upon it... The bowie knife plunged into his thigh.

Thade's face contorted from pain, his hands curling into talons. This was the last thing he needed as his head began to pound.

Rage intervened, halting the dizzying spiral into unconsciousness as he reached down with one hand and grabbed the "idiot" up in a sleek sweep while pulling the dagger from his leg with the other. With a groan he dragged the man up, their eyes locking. "You wasted your youth on me." Thade rasped with a wicked laugh. He twisted the knife between the man's ribcage and jerked up hard. "Don't blame me." All fangs and snot, Thade ripped the knife free, letting the lifeless body crumble before him. He was not sure how he had pulled the dagger from his leg. It must have been in the heat of passion, for now the pain was more excruciating than the arrows imbedded in his chest. Clenching his teeth, he held back his screams. He kicked the horse, continuing, even though he was losing blood rapidly now...

The sky raised with scarlet ambition as Attar and Omri raced to intervene, the dust in the air so dense in areas they could not even see three feet in front of them, let alone three-hundred. Once past the silt though, Attar caught a glimpse of a young human with long blonde hair pop out of nowhere, sending the general's horse rearing. He drove faster, witnessing as the two went at it tooth and claw, swinging at each other as their horses raced, neck-and-neck... Erasmus was young - unusually strong for a human, and he was a skilled rider also, granting the same parity as the seasoned General held. But Thade was wily from his years. His skills ranged far higher in experience and in downright dirtyness. "You want a piece of me?!" Thade spat, swinging his sword into the flanks of the young man's horse. "I don't think so." The sword sliced across the stud's chest maiming it enough so that Erasmus was forced to abandon his mission. It was a low blow on Thade's part but he had no time to piss away on the likes of that one. He wanted the "Big fish". The one on the other side of the ridge. It was so near... 'Let me make it', Thade prayed. He made the mistake by looking down at his leg. The bastard must have hit an artery by the way it bled. He needed a tourniquet and a good doctor to sew him back together about thirty minutes ago...

Omri passed the Commander, a large group following in suit consisting of gorillas and chimps with a few oranges sprinkled in between. But for the most part, the chimps traveled on foot, passing as they fell into quad-ped - all arms and legs, propelling ahead at such speed even the most cunning human was unable to divert from their path fast enough. The corporal waved them past as he slowed for Attar, allotting the battalion full berth. Racing neck-in-neck, they pulled their wrist-rockets, and swords from their sheaths smashing skulls in tremendous feats of horse-man(?)-ship, jabbing ferociously into naked throats. In the struggle to just break through a handfull of Tridents managed to slip away granting them a few minutes for preparation to retaliate. From out of nowhere something hit Corporal Omri. Both horse and rider crashed to the ground with stunning force, disappearing in a cloud of dust, burying them. Those bringing up the rear swerved to avoid trampling the fallen ape when the very last halted and picked him up, taking him back to the safety of the out-post - an ugly goose egg growing on his forehead. Attar gripped the reins and dove into the neck of his charger - the glint of a rising sun impairing what lay ahead.

Thade dropped gracelessly from his mount clutching his chest near the arrows. The jolt from landing penetrated, delivering up an almost paralyzing agony throughout the left side of his body. He felt blood pulsing from the wounds - into cavities - places it did not belong, making it difficult to breathe. His face was ghostly pale from shock. Pure adrenalin drove him now. Climbing the hill proved trying as he stole along, fighting back the pain and sudden stitches of distress whenever the protruding arrows caught on the overgrowth. He fell on his back and stared up at a blue velvet sky, catching what breath he could before he looked down on the four or five inches of arrow pulsing in his chest. Silver light danced before his eyes nearly taking him when he gripped the arrows, snapping them off, sending him into a fit as he bit his tongue so the shriek would not give his position away.

Through tear blurred eyes, the General looked around. There was no one else. He was alone. Very alone. This crusade, he felt, was to be his last. The only thing that moved him was that human... His Pet... And she waited for his return. Why she had placed herself before him despite her own safety to protect him mesmerized his blood-starved mind... How he hurt, though...

* * *

"There are so few of us!" Acadia breathed heavily, feeling the pressure as he heard the screams of his own men, followed by the even more disturbing sound when the ape's blades slashed their flesh. His men were falling. The simian army had taken the majority out leaving the rest to either retreat or surrender. Still, Acadia continued to carelessly snap off deadly arrows into the midst of the battle striking his own as well as apes, only wanting one. Caring not as his own fell from his very hand, though he should have, his very target, his prey, worked ever closer. Through the cross-hairs Acadia concentrated until a blur - black and imposing loomed. Thade stood taking the black-haired warrior totally by surprise with his abrupt appearance, moving with the accuracy of a cobra. "You will die now." came a deadly promise as the ape stared into the man's stunned face. For what felt like an eternity, they simply studied one another. Propping his chin atop the butt of the cross-bow, Acadia said calmly, "you are near death, General." Thade smiled wryly, casting a knowing eye upon the weapon Acadia so casually reclined on. He knew what the man was capable of doing with the bow and he moved quickly, pulling his sword and lashing out at the stock, knocking Acadia off balance. He twisted and rolled out of sight back into the thick brush. Thade clenched his teeth, raised his muzzle into the air to catch the scent as he watched. Waited. Listened. His patience so calm it made him forget the pain.

"You are a coward!" Thade bawled, searching in the grey light of dawn, feeling that he was on the spot and vulnerable. "If you are so brave why then do you hide?!" the General rebuked. "You and I..." Thade heard before Acadia reemerged, his eyes guarding against any sudden movement. The black-haired man laughed

nervously. Wiped at his sweaty forehead. "We are much the same..." The man rose slowly, maintaining eye contact all the way while his finger slid over the trigger of the cross-bow.

317 - 318

Thade bored into the movement, all the while grinning into Acadia's face. "You will not get a second chance," and he gave his trade-mark nod before letting go with a snort of haughty indignance. Acadia raised his weapon and stepped forward. "Oh, I plan on using this opportunity." Every breath was contemplated. Waiting for that instant to see the uncertainty flash across the young warrior's face, Thade felt his second wind and it pulsed his blood to his senses. Acadia saw it. He anchored the cross-bow against his shoulder. Thade stood bravely before the direct aim. Caught in the cross-hairs. He had never run away from anyone or anything, so this predicament barely phased him. "Cross-hairs do not lie." He counceled, a deep warning penetrating his tone. In that split-second his hand whipped out snatching the bow before Acadia realized what had happened. Holding it, Thade scoffed as he waved it, taunting him. Enraged, Acadia charged head-first into Thade's gut, tackling him to the ground in a cloud of dust. Hand and claw they grappled over the bow. Landing a blow to the side of Thade's head, Acadia figured he had the upper hand when he saw the General fall. But he came back up with a fist that sent the young man flailing. Falling back, the wind knocked out of him, Thade fought Acadia off before getting the upper hand. Straddling him, the chimp dug his knees into Acadia's biceps pinning him painfully to the ground. Breathing laborously, the chimp retrieved the bow, neverminding the blood, now, covering his armor. Wiping at his own face, Thade turned his attention to the weapon he now possessed and admired it thoughtfully. His shock-driven eyes looked down at his prisoner and he let go with a sort of mock laugh, stating, "I know what this does, you see." his finger curled around the trigger as he brought the "bussiness end" around to rest it between Acadia's eyebrows. "In my youth I was a champion archer." He raised the device into the air. Examined it closely as he ran his hand

along the stock, aware of the approach. Still he remained focused, waiting with growing anticipation for them to surface. 319

The distraction granted Acadia the advantage to latch onto the General's arm and he swung the ape off. Lungeing at the chimp was fruitless, for Thade swept the man's arms up in his own, and spun him face-foreward, the bow pointed at the interloper, forcing Acadia's hand to shoot his own man between the eyes. Thade appeared to smile as he glared over Acadia's shoulder. "You're out of your mind!" Acadia spat as he tried to free himself. Thade shoved the man to the ground. "No..." he rescinded softly, almost whispering. "Just tired, now." His sandalled foot fell heavily on the man's chest as he reached down gingerly to pluck a new arrow from the quiver on Acadia's back. "This is quite an invention." he admitted, loading the projectile. If there were any admiration for the ingenuity involved, Acadia could not tell. He was too busy watching Thade place the arrow along the stock, doing so as if he had done it a thousand times. His hands working the mechanism as if he had built it. "It will be of great service to my army." Pulling the string back, Acadia heard it reach its taughtness - the gutstring denoting its limit before it locked into place. The chimp seemed to sigh with relief though he was actually growing weaker by the minute as his blood beat from his chest. His leg throbbed from the stab wound and he knew it would not be long before shock took him down. Nonetheless, he pressed on, breathing down on the one he loathed, knowing full well he had blood on his breath and that it was foul. With a grimace, Thade lifted the heavy bow and rested the bull-end between Acadia's eyes centering it just at the bridge of his nose. "How does it feel, Acadia?" he demanded wearily. Tilting his head, Thade studied his reaction with dull surprise, adding; "does death frighten you?" Hypnotized by Thade's impeding stare, he squeezed his eyes shut when the General leaned intimately close to his ear. "Phallen carries my child..." Acadia snapped his head up squinting as if he were trying to interpret some foreign language. Enraged, Acadia spat in the chimp's face. "You raped her!" "It does not matter what you

think." Thade replied calmly, wiping the spittle from his cheek. "You are as dead as I am." The ape turned into the rising sun and his eyes lit up quick-silver. In that moment, Acadia realized Phallen had, indeed, given herself to this heathen - that when she said she loved Thade she was telling the truth. All the information which carried from the city about how the General had seemingly changed was true also. "You tried to kill them..." Acadia barely heard him. "What?" "You tried to kill them, fool, but you did not succeed!" Thade reproved bitterly. 320 - 321

Falling on top of him, Thade breathed heavily as his blood covered them both. "You have achieved nothing." With much effort, he brought the cross-bow up and prepared to pull the trigger, ending the life when Acadia broke down... "PLEASE...!" he bawled, thrashing his head. "Don't kill me!" Thade stared down into the reddening face. His lip curled with disgust. 'What kind of warrior is this?!' pondered. To allow the little bastard to live with his own beseeching ass was far worse than ending it. "You're not worth my effort." the General grumbled before he rolled off with a painful groan, seating himself next to the blubbing boy. "you're disgusting." Thade retorted, turning back to the sun, his deep hazel eyes igniting. He was exhausted. And he waited. Acadia would retaliate. Thade saw his future fading as he released his Phallen. Yet she remained. Loss of blood sent mis-fires through his brain relighting past details, held most dearly, of those intimate moments with the one he fondly called "Pet". He smiled sadly as he shook his head with a sigh. Stunned by the passive retreat, Acadia rose slowly to his elbows, watching the General's profile stealthily. Silhouetted against the red dawn, Acadia imagined Thade more human than simian by the way he sat so calmly staring out at a dismal morning - the arrows protruding from his chest throbbing rhythmically with every weakening beat of his heart. He almost felt pity... Lungeing across, Acadia seized hold of one of the arrows, and with all of his might twisted it, pushing it further into Thade's chest with a scream. White shock clouded the General's vision when he felt the head bite deeper sending a different type of

pain which he could not register. Staring into the eyes of his enemy - Phallen's enemy - Thade could not stop the seizure that was rapidly consuming every nerve-ending with astounding force. Looking up at Acadia, eyes fixed and dilated, Thade heard himself utter, "You lose..." before his hands convulsed, unable to stop himself from squeezing the trigger... Black eyes, glazed and distant, focused on his. Raising a shaking hand Acadia latched onto Thade's breastplate and pulled himself up. "I will see you in hell." Thade squinted, scrutinizing the dyeing human before prying their fingers loose. "Perhaps." he agreed almost amiably. 322

Still holding the trigger tightly, he felt Acadia's grip slip away and he let him fall. With a heavy breath, Thade bent down to his face: "Why couldn't you have just surrendered?!" Unable to sheath his sabre, it dropped to the ground with a deadening thud. Using the cross-bow to stand brought stars to his eyes as his life shot before him. To just make it up that hill and out onto the field was all he wanted as he drug himself along. It was not so far away. Just a few more feet and he would be alright... He felt his own tears. To have laughed, trifling the man for his fear of dyeing, Thade felt that same fear as he crested the foxhole. The air was hot and humid and to take a breath was like inhaling water. Drenched with blood and sweat and unsure of just what was real and what was a dream the General tried feverishly to concentrate on the ground which seemed to move farther away from each step he took, causing him to stumble. Stopping him. The soil was wet and cold as he fell to one knee, stretching his neck to the heavens for some kind of guidance, his teeth clenching under a shiver. "This is not how I am supposed to go!" He screamed, steadying himself, his hands sinking into the chilled sludge - cool and unforgiving... "...Come to me, my Beloved..." Phallen held out her arms. Seeing her, Thade pushed himself up, staggering into a run. He was never so glad to see anyone when he saw her there with open arms to catch him. But as he drew closer the vision began to fade. "No," he begged, his arms enfolding himself as he came to a halt. "Don't leave me." Defeated, Thade swaggered. This was it,

he thought, not really giving a damn anymore. His goal had been accomplished, a legacy was to be born, and now he could rest.

"It is alright," came a voice, soft and still.

Catching a glimpse of one of his soldiers out of the corner of his eye, Attar turned his full attention, curious as to where they could have possibly come from. The wounded trooper carried a foreign weapon in their right hand unlike anything he had ever seen. Attar's eyes took a harder longer look when all of a sudden he recognized who it was. "Holy Semos..." His heart was in his throat. It was not one of the volunteers, but Thade, so covered in blood that his uniform appeared to be crimson. With a mighty roar, the Commander drove his steed as fast as it could go, the steam snorting from the beast like a locomotive...

... A heartbeat...

Thade knelt subserviently - on one knee, head bowed - seemingly taking the prose of one at his knighthood...

... Hoofbeats...

Both man and ape stopped in mid-swing upon seeing Attar fly across the field, his face contorted in rage and fear. Riding up hard, the Commander leapt from his horse and hit the ground running, his massive arms pumping as he raced to his friend's aid. He had never seen his leader so beaten. Thade looked up from under his brow as if in surrender. "Attar..." he breathed raggedly. A flash of a smile hopelessly disguised his suffering. He shook his head and looked down at his own chest. "I am in bad shape, my friend." What spark still left in his eyes fogged over. The cross-bow dropped from his hand and he began to fall. Everything stopped. Both species pressed forward to see the fallen General, staring in disbelief when he collapsed.

324

Attar caught him up, held him in a heartfelt embrace while he stared down and saw the extent of Thade's injuries. "This is all her fault!" he cursed through hot tears. The gorilla's hands trembled. Where to hold Thade without further harming him - there

was not a part on the chimp that was not bruised, bloodied, or burned for that matter. His strong shoulders shook. Choked with grief, he wanted to scream. To lash out at those standing there. His eyes searched, helpless as for what to do when Attar felt a weak squeeze on his forearm. He looked down to vacant eyes. "Don't hold her responsible." Thade rasped with a small shake of his head. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. The same sadness he had felt from the denial broke through when he smiled. A tear waited in the corner of his eye until they closed, the reassuring touch slid and his hand fell lifelessly to his side. "YOU CAN'T DIE!" the gorilla charged, his voice reaching fever-pitch. The mass parted when Attar scooped the chimp up in his arms. "GET HELP!" he bawled. This battle was over.

Acadia had fallen.

Thade was dying...

The civilians scrambled for safety, leaping up onto sidewalks - into shop doors to avoid the race taking place down the main street of Derkien, shouting their disapprovals as three battered soldiers careened around the bend. Out of sight.

"You must come now!" Dr. Mahq peered up over his tiny specs. "Are you out of your mind?" "It's a matter of life or death! Please..." In a battered and torn uniform, Corporal Omri was barely recognizable as he stood there trying to catch his breath and speak at the same time. His words were short and frantic. His expression ripped. "Collect your things and come with me. The General is hurt. Commander Attar has sent me here to collect you." The doctor's brow creased heavily. Having brought Thade into the world, he did not want to be the one to ease his pain on the way out. Still, he had to help. He was well seasoned in the practice of war-time medicine having been present during the Creed wars many years ago when Thade's father was a rogue warrior. With all he could cram into his medical bag, the orangutan was swept from the city, surrounded by the three rag-tag soldiers as they raced at break-neck speed back to the out-post. Startled patients filed from

the office remarking to one another of what they had heard: The General was critically injured.

Dips and sharp turns along with near misses from low branches did not alter their haste. The goal was to bring the doctor, the one who could treat Thade. The one capable of ceasing his downward spiral...hopefully. In his heart, Omri knew how Thade had changed. Had chosen by himself, the wee human which he had fallen so deeply in love with, to bear his child. That above all drove the young Corporal. To slow for even a second meant his General could breathe his last breath - something Omri did not want to think about. Too much was at stake. As they thundered into the encampment silence crept over their hides like a spider sending shivers along all four spines as chimes danced all-too-calmly on the humid breeze. Dismal, overcast skies promised rain as the suns flickered in murky puddles along the trodden main-way. There was not much movement except for a few hostlers tending the injured horses at the makeshift stable. Otherwise, the rest were busy tending to their hurt comrades or just isolating themselves as they tried to grip just what was right about the whole thing.

326

As the four dismounted they were greeted with a sobre nod and their horses were led away leaving them alone in the middle of the huge camp. "Where is everyone?" the doctor asked, hefting his bag up over his shoulder. "All over." Omri replied wearily. Without a word he took the bag from the orang and started walking toward the largest tent in the compound when Attar emerged waving his arms in a heedless gesture in the direction of his wounded leader. An urgent air surrounded the Commader and all who stood nearby, their faces stern, concern etching the brows of those closely related to the General and Commander. Anger. Frustration. It all appeared in the soldiers eyes. "Better wait out here." Dr. Mahq gently prescribed as he took the bag from Omri. The Corporal dropped his head as he nodded. "Let us know?" "You bet." and he gave the wyly chimp a stocky pat on the shoulder before disappearing behind the flap. The air inside hung heavy

with the pungent odor of blood and sweat as he was led along by the usually colossal shoulders of Attar which now seemed shrivelled, withdrawn - back to where Thade had been placed. The General was still. Barely breathing. The gorilla stopped in the doorway, unable to go any further. The doctor breezed by him and ducked under the flap stepping up next to the sleeping ape. Lifting a closed eyelid, Dr. Mahq peered deeply. "There is little life left in him," he murmured despondently, his brow furrowing. Taking Thade's wrist, he counted. "There is hardly any pulse." Having been snapped off in anger by Thade, the arrows which imbedded his left chest were not yet detected until the doctor pulled the sheet down to examine his patient. His eyes gaped at the sight as his hand flew to his mouth, uttering, "ohmygod..." The stubs throbbed with every beat of Thade's heart... Dr. Mahq shook his head. So many wound! "I don't know..." he stammered as his hand fluttered at his throat. Observing just how shaken the doctor was Attar took a pensive step forward averting his gaze from the bloody mess that was once his friend's chest. He concentrated on the back of the doctor's head instead. To have laid the General out had to have been pretty bad and Attar had to look. It was all too threatening - the arrows, their paced rhythmic beat, the bluish-purple flesh... He felt himself falter. Blood, as deep scarlet as one could imagine gurgled around the arrows and he knew at once he was going to be sick. It was so dark! Feeling himself sway, Attar caught himself against the canvas wall with a shaking hand. "Don't you go falling over!" the doctor scolded, shaking a stubby digit at the swooning soldier. The Commander stepped back into the shadows. "I'll be alright," he confirmed. "Good. Now open a few of these flaps in here. He needs air." Opening only the westward shades Attar ventured a glance over his shoulder. "He is to be a father." "With the human, I know." A small sound, almost like a squeek purged from the physician.

327

Memory recalled of the last hybrid child brought into the world; that being Thade, distressed the doctor immensely, for it had no happy ending. The human, Phallen, so like the fair Khet, was in

for it, and the past was coming to haunt the Son as it had his father...A first giving forth the last...

* * *

Omri pressed the spots where he had been stitched and bandaged as he stepped out of the intermediate unit. He shook his head defiantly knowing Neena, his wife, was going to throw a fit. That was the least on his mind at the time though. He paced outside of the critical care unit - his uniform covered in mud, blood, and whatever else he had fallen into or upon. Maybe even horseshit... His hair was stained red and his expression was that of a lost child. Fingers so tightly intertwined, Omri tried to stand still as he awaited word when Attar emerged, stumbling despite his best efforts to carry a character held so dignified. Not a chance... Corporal Omri saw the Commander falter. Stealing up next to him, Omri surprised him for a split-second, bringing the gorilla around defensively. "Omri...," he sighed. Sunlight glinted off of the Commander's armor, shined vacantly into his irises, revealing a cold, unforgiving glare... "he is dyeing." he bestowed, no soul, no emotion backing his words, coming in a metronomic sense. Omri stopped in his tracks, his arms outstretched. "What can I do?!" Attar turned slowly. "Pray." Knowing how the corporal looked up to Thade ate at Attar and hiding his face did not hide the grief he carried. Omri watched after, his own fear rising, feeling as if he had lost the greatest teacher of his future... "PRAY...?!" he cried.

Thade and Attar had a history that went way back. They had done things in that time whether it be good or bad. Thade had always been the essence. The backbone. The fire. He was the keystone above his people. He was tormented though. Greed tarnished his reputation. Refusing to heed and obey the revelation led Thade straight into a dead-end resulting in his own downfall. If not for the very species he loathed, his ideals would have never changed. Swept off his feet by her gentle healing, that girl, alone, now held his heart and he loved her madly. Omri found it easy to accept their relationship but Commander attar struggled

with it on a daily basis. How could Thade be so easily defeated by that Sprite? He was the ultimate warrior! Being such a cultured ape, how could he entertain such an inane interlude? "They are all savages..." the General would declare. He was fearless. His wrath dauntless as he stood up to damned near anyone daring get in his way... Now he stared death square in the face. For what? The love of a human...for the love of Phallen... From the very beginning, Thade had expressed; "no one will really understand..."

328 - 330

To say nothing to Phallen of Thade's injuries, unless they became dire, was best... Sitting in the dark, Attar pondered over the attack which had placed his comrade in the throes of death. A pipe which he had not touched in nearly a year smoldered in his left hand. The pulsing arrows haunted his closed eyes. He clutched the pipe... Brought it slowly to his lips before he stopped... "Let him live..." came a solemn prayer...

* * * * *

He felt as if he had entered a viewing, whatwith the empathy he now carried for the girl. If she knew he came she gave no indication. Her prayers swept over Thade in a sorrowful moan, wreaked in great gasps as she wept, her shoulders shaking with every breath she took as ardent whispers were breathed on the General. There was nothing to hide. She adored him and cried over him unabashedly, stroking his cheek softly while her tears fell on his face, running down his cheek as if he were shedding them. She bent to kiss him holding the caress perchance tthere would be a return... Attar bowed away. He could not feel her pain. There was no return from her embrace... But when she swayed he stepped silently up to catch her if she fell. Phallen stiffened, struggled with the reality that Thade was dyeing and her chin jutted sharply - bravely as she stared at her beloved... "No...," She took the sleeping face in her hands and stroked the silver goatee... "I am SO sorry for what I have caused..." Her words, so drowned in sorrow, were barely audible. Ashamed of what she had

caused, Phallen turned away only to confront a wall of armor. "Do not upset yourself." Attar's deep voice consoled. It was beyond that as she felt a wave of nausea sweep over her, sending her down.

Since first meeting her, Attar had not trusted her. But upon witnessing how distraught this made her, he realized how much in love she was with the General. The compassion he felt for her effected him deeply. Pulling her back into a chair Attar sat her firmly and made her stay. She claimed to be better and that she wanted to return to Thade's side, but the Commander would not hear of it. "Your strength is needed. Please...just remain seated." came his stoic order, physically preventing Phallen from rising, avoiding looking into her dark, baleful eyes, fighting to remain unmoved by her plea, yet to gaze at her meant to succumb. 'It was for her own good', he justified. She had her fair share of bumps and bruises. Lacerations criss-crossed her back where Acadia's henchmen had whipped her...

Phallen buried her face in her hands. "I am sorry..." Bursting through the canvas, Omri appeared breathless and physically upset to find Phallen so distraught... Omri! Sweet, compassionate Omri! and she reached out for him. To see Attar towering over the weeping girl alarmed him... What was happening?! Omri rushed to Phallen and fell to one knee: "What's wrong, Thade's darling?" He adored her. To see her anguish as it poured in those great sobs pulled at his heart. She looked so pathetic. So alone. So dejected... Phallen sensed his anger. "He has been here for me, Omri." She fought to control the great gasps for air only to be stopped in mid-sentence as she tried to convey. Omri looked over his shoulder, a grim smile crossed his lips. "Phallen," he lulled. "Thade is strong. He will pull through!" In the back of his mind though, he wondered if the General would make it past this hurdle... Omri hid the uncertainty. Pulling loose hairs away from Phallen's face he forced her to look at him... "You carry his child." he cherished, cupping her face. "YES!" Attar exclaimed before realizing how boldly his thoughts had come, quite jovially, forth. Phallen wept. Only now she seemed to be on the verge of

hysteria. She knew if it had not been for her Thade would have been fine. None of the hurtful things would have ever occurred and his life would be normal again... "It's alright, Phallen," Omri consoled. He dipped into her vision. Pulled her hands from her face. Phallen shook her head morosely. "I am s-s-o-o-o responsible for this." she moaned. Guilt ate her alive and there was nothing they could do or say to comfort her until Omri took her by the shoulders and shook her. "You made him fall in love with you," he charged. "Your whole goal was to hurt him wasn't it?" The shattered look, the slow shake of her head produced exactly what he inticed. His gaze narrowed... "That's right... No. You didn't make him do anything against his will... So don't sit there and feel sorry for yourself. When Thade returned he was miserable without you! All he talked about was how he 'loved his Phallen'. If YOU love him, don't fall away from him now." 339 - 341 Moisture collected on her upper lip. Her gaze skittered from his to Attar's, searching, hoping what he proclaimed was truth. "Phallen, we don't owe you anything...You owe our General a chance at happiness though." Their eyes locked. There was understanding. Phallen took a deep breath and smiled. Touching the young chimp's cheek she leaned forward and placed her lips against his forehead; a caress so soft Omri only felt satin as her mouth brushed his skin. Frowning, Attar lowered his eyes when he felt her tiny hand fall into his gigantic paw. "Thank you," and she strained up to his leathery cheek. Bending to her he felt honored by the unbiased gesture. "You are a gentle giant..."

* * *

Pulling his hair back behind his shoulders, Omri gestured to Attar that they depart. Phallen heard the crinkle of the canvas. Heard their footsteps along the sandy aisle. The sudden fire of torchlight lit the room before the flap dropped. She sat still. In her tree abode she could have heard Thade's breathing, but there was no sound now. Phallen clenched her fists in between her knees, too afraid to stand and cross to her beloved's side for fear of witnessing his death. The air in the cubicle was heavy and hung with

the smell of blood. Even the glow from the lanterns seemed to appear reddened, reflecting the gloom that filled her heart - her whole being - as she watched her soulmate fall from her. In a last ditch effort, she sprung from her seat and fell next to Thade. Words fell along his jawline. Fingers trailed his lipline as her eyes watched him breathe in slow motion as she prayed over his mouth for a kiss from her beloved... A scarlet blot grew on the cover and she bent to it staining her lips with his blood. "This is my fault. But I will not leave until I am sure you're alright. If you die, I will die with you..." Phallen licked her lips. To taste him, all she wanted was to feel him touch her again. Her wrap fell and she pressed her body to his. "Come back to me." she demanded seductively. "You took me. Now don't leave me alone!" Dr. Mahq entered silently, catching her intimacy, and he shook his head defiantly as he took her arm and pulled her away. Covering her nakedness with a sheet, he saw her red lips and the wild, unafraid look that now shown in her eyes. No words were spoken and he did not dismiss her. Phallen remained at Thade's side. The orang doctor approached, plugging a stethoscope into his ears. Breath, usually labored, fell to a shallow gain as he listened. "Come back..." Phallen whispered, her stained lips brushing his earlobe. "Come and see our child..." The hair on his chin rose from her breath. There was a surge in his heart rate. He had responded to her! He took in a jagged breath, something along the wave of a sigh, it seemed. Phallen gasped and looked up to the doctor hopefully... "Talk to him," he urged as he continued to listen for another surge in Thade's heartbeat. She encircled his head in her arms and pressed her lips to his ear. "You hear me, don't you? Come back to us, my Beloved..." From beneath closed eyes, he searched, she could tell, for a way back. His brow furrowed briefly... Then there was nothing. All responses had ceased and his expression went lax... Thade was slipping away... Phallen shook as if jolted at the sudden surrender creating an anger within her that manifested physically. She clutched his head in her hands and began to shake it... "FIGHT!" she screeched. "You never backed down from anything!"

Hot, angry tears rolled down her cheeks as she scoured her lover's face for any sign of life, frustration and confusion, along with hurt weathering her already tortured soul... "You can't leave me here alone..." she cried. "Don't you DARE leave me here alone...!" She threw her arms around him sobbing uncontrollably against his cheek... "Stay, my Beloved... Don't leave me alone... I've always been alone until you..." "Come..." The doctor took her shoulders. "You are distraught." The girl shuddered from his touch and pulled away. "No, I won't leave him. He was there for me." Pulling the sheet tightly around herself, Phallen shook her head, the raven flood drowning her body. "Don't make me fight to stay." Through crying eyes her resolution sparkled. She stood firm feeling Thade slip further away, unsure if his last kiss was in love or forever... "I will bring him back..." she promised etherally... Enough said...

She stayed...

* * *

The morning broke drearily...

Heavy grey clouds clustered over the outpost pouring a dismal rain of sombre mood throughout. It felt as if the rest of the world basked in the warmth of the sun while they hid from the gloom even though it was raining all over the region. Phallen remained next to Thade back in the tiny cubicle of the med-tent stealing what little sleep she could, stationed beside him, lying her head down on his pillow yet never really falling into deep slumber - jumping at every sound he made. He would be in trouble if she left him. He heard her voice. Smelled her. Tasted her whenever she pressed her mouth to his. He could feel her body when she held him. And the throb in her belly! The LIFE... His child... He could not convey how he understood. He heard her cry. Heard her adamant denotation to the doctor's suggestion that she rest... What a pitiful sight she had become. It was good, in a sense, that Thade had not seen her detriment, for his wrath would have crashed down upon them all...

Days passed and he remained locked in his deep sleep, not so much as uttering an audible sound in redemption for any hope of

recovery. All hope had dissipated and the doctor held no choice except to approach Phallen... "His battle is over. Let him rest." he conveyed painfully. Her eyes flashed at him with bitter resentment. "How dare you!" she cursed under her breath. "While he still breathes, you call him dead. He wants to live. His fight was for his people, not for me. Unfortunately, I was in that picture." In the light of the lantern her face was pale and stern as she shook her head fervently. "Soldiers do not give up, Doctor." she announced. "He is a SOLDIER!" She began to weep, collapsing around Thade's neck... "Tell them, my beloved. Tell them how you are not ready to let go." Dr. Mahq was beside himself. He realized Thade was on a oneway trip and that there was no route to bring him back... "My dear...", he consoled. "his life has all but diminished..." and as he took her shoulders, he said, " Let him go..." Phallen searched her feelings. What he spoke was truth. Maybe she was being selfish by keeping Thade's subconscious alive. Her heart ached. She felt him there, though, and she knew. She felt his determination... "No..." she affirmed, bringing her head up. "I will not let him simply slip away. He's a fighter." Dr. Mahq nodded unsurly befor leaving the cubicle. He saw no future for Thade and was ready to prepare the body for the funeral...

* * *

Clean linens were delivered daily, along with clean dressings as fine clothing for the General and his fair "pet" were sent from the city along with wishes of recovery, and how she was welcome there. "Don't take him..." 'Do you remember when I first kissed you...?' "Make him strong..." 'I am having trouble finding you.' "Bring him back to me..." 'My Pet, hear me... I feel your body, smell your essence...sense the life in your womb...Don't let me go...!' Intended for the General and Phallen, the gifts piled up in the corner of the room. Fine silks and linens wrinkled beyond recovery. The only articles used were the light cotton weaves for Phallen. Standing beneath the shower of water she wept. It was the only place she knew of where she could fall to her knees in petition... "Please do not take him from me. Bring him back..."

Pulled from beneath the shower, Phallen was aided by a trio of sympathetic USOs. One held her up while the other two dried and dressed her. To comb her hair was useless, for she pulled away, turning to them savagely... "I will comb my own hair..." Draping her with gossamer, the three chimps scurried from the shower room without a word, understanding her chastising... Falling just beside the mirror, Phallen did not want to see herself. She knew how she looked; pale, too thin and extremely pregnant... She felt weak and powerless, wanting no one else to know and no one to help as she fought for balance. This was one thing she would deal with on her own. Staring at the barren tiles, all falling into the same design, she staggered before catching herself on her heels... "This is ridiculous! What is wrong with me?!" Taking a deep breath before venturing through the swinging canvas doors, Phallen wrapped her hair in one of the virgin cotton scarves left behind by her servants... The pregnancy was unusual... Unlike her species, the gestation period would not span three gestations... for a hybrid was springing forth from her womb as with the birth of Thade and those before him, due to inter-breeding... "I should just let you go. My love will still be strong...If you leave, I will succumb thereafter..."

Phallen curled gently up next to Thade and went to sleep...

Lighting the pipe great rings encircled his head... "I am concerned about Phallen." He began with a puff from his mouth. "She has not left Thade's side. And though she stays there in hope, the child she carries may fall into jeopardy, and this child is an heir whether you like it or not. Whatever happens to her could end our legacy..." Dr. Mahq reclined in his seat, the pipe smoldering just before his lips. What he professed was true and he waited patiently as Commander Attar collected all of the evidence. "What can I do?" The tone was so low it seemed to tremble the floor. "Relieve her, Commander. Allow her to rest. Stand guard over Thade." He drew on the pipe. "If you stay with him she will go and rest." Attar stared across at the orangutan, then ventured, "Is this child really his?" Dr. Mahq spewed his last puff of smoke into the Commander's face before sitting upright, exclaiming,

"ABSOLUTELY!" He tamped his pipe, eyeing the Commander contemptuously. "All days coincide proving that she was with Thade on the day of her conception. Hell, Lantres practically walked in on them when he had the unpleasant duty of delivering the message that their liasion was to end or else." The orang's usually ruddy complexion turned one solid color of angered red. Beady, brown eyes pierced from beneath his furrowed brow straight at Attar. "Come on, now, let's get real with this." Clutching the bowl of his pipe tightly, Dr. Mahq leaned across. "She could never..." and he stopped, waving his hand. "Let me rephrase that. She WOULD never hurt him. She is so involved in his world...so in love with him..." Dr. Mahq shook his head. "Can't you tell?" He leaned further across, a great breath exhausted along with the sweet smell of his tobacco; "You can't deny her..." Attar's eyes wandered, pondering this new dimension, sighting the way the water-trails blurred the red and black designs of the tent walls into a swirl. The canvased floor, once smooth, was deeply grooved from the pacing of a worried tempest. Lost in memeoery, the Commander recalled how he had witnessed his friends sudden change, how he had responded to the seductiveness of Josee's ways and how she had almost taken Thade. The General was beyond the one-night-stands and senseless moonings. He had found his soul-mate. "You know..." the doctor awakened Attar from his day-dream. "She has been getting a response from him." "He is recovering?" Attar pressed, shooting to the edge of his seat. The doctor swivelled his head in a sort of half-nod. "Let's just say he hears her. He cannot awaken, though." Cradling the smoldering pipe within his palms, Dr. Mahq tried to explain. "Thade is in what is known as a "coma". He lies in a state of deep unconsciousness to where he can hear, yet cannot physically responde." 342 - 348

Attar lowered his head and stared at his fisted hands. "These days have tried me. I blame her, yes, but I see how she carries her own burden of guilt. I know she regrets what has transpired. However, her remorse cannot restore Thade's health." "No..." the

orang agreed with a slow shake of his head. Then his eye twinkled...
"Her love may..."

* * *

Very few were out in the heat of the late noon-day suns. Those who were made their way around the out-post on errand only, collecting supplies for those in need. The medics on hand thanked their lucky stars that Dr. Mahq stayed on to help. Especially in Thade's case which fell under a totally foreign diagnosis... Arrows imbedded so deeply into one's chest...? That was a new one...!

* * *

..."He stirs once in a while..." She tried to sound positive. The tremble in her voice, however, told another tale. "You must go and rest now." Either she had not heard him or she had ignored the demand, Phallen never batted an eye as she continued to caress Thade's forehead. "Phallen..." Attar resounded with a bit more aggression, and she turned. "I will stay with him." She shook her head slowly. "No. That's alright. I'll stay right here. I can't leave him." Her voice whispered among the quiver. To look at her, Attar could not believe he was seeing the same girl as before. This shell was thin and gaunt - weak. She shivered in the coolness of a breeze as it found its way into the opened tent flap. Two bodies materialized behind the Commander in the form of Corporal Omri and Private Yahn. "Thade's darling...", Omri sought, his hands reaching out to her for restitution. "You must..." Phallen backed away shaking her head. "No. He needs me and you won't make me leave. I remember how you made it perfectly clear how you did not have to help me, but I have to help him!" Omri slumped from the recall. "I know you understood what I meant. Don't twist my words now." It took time to coax her from the General's side, assuring her that it was all under control and that Thade would not be left alone. "Please..." she whimpered. "why are you making me go?" Getting hold of her arm he pulled her out of the corner as gently as possible and enfolded her in his arms. "If anything happens to you, what will happen to him?" he reasoned, lifting her chin, his deep sienna eyes searching. "Come with me." Phallen reluctantly

followed for a few steps then went to her knees in tears, her fists crashing into the floor defeatedly... 'She has lost her mind!' The commander moved agilely, rushing up behind to suddenly lift her to her feet only to feel her collapse in his arms. She was but a feather as he gathered her up, rising effortlessly. If he had held her any tighter he could have crushed her - feeling her bones...almost counting her ribs. He was overwhelmed by it. Solemnly, he handed her over to Omri resting his mighty hand on Phallen's frail back. Meeting the Corporal's pensive eye, Attar gave the nod to take her. He heard her cry. Even in that poor of a state her devotion remained unwavering. Taking Omri by his shoulder, Attar nodded his head and said, "I know now why you love her." Phallen's virtue was pure. Unmistakable. She only wanted what Thade deserved... Truth... She had stayed by his side unrelentingly til the end. What was she supposed to do? The last thing she expected from it all was that stupid senseless battle! When would there be an end to it all? When would she and Thade just be allowed to "be"? In death?!

The innocense... "Please..." she begged grasping desperately at Omri's sleeve. "Don't take me away!" Through the tear-stained face faint bruises revealed what she was... flesh and blood, and more than that. She was a dream. A dream so far out of reach Thade should have realized it long ago. Perhaps he had, yet did not care about the consequences. His life was shit by then anyway, and she made him feel good about himself again. Who should care? She was extraordinary. Worth the gamble. He adored her... His "Pet"... Those who had met her pondered. The complete picture was out of contrast. Would Thade allow himself to fall victim? No... Her affection was real for him. Phallen loved her General so much that she gave herself to him - conceiving his child.

Like Father like Son...

Aided with the help of Lucerin, Phallen slept deeply in her pit of despair. Blackness filled her dream world. Pictures, once

displaying emotion had been drowned in the depression now
consuming her. 349 - 351

The Corporal remained at her door. He heard her cry out. Checking in on her, though, he found her to be still deeply locked in sleep. His eyes roamed the room. It was bright enough, what-with the sun's light glistening, along with all of the flowers and gifts from the citizens of Derkien... But she did not see them. This made Omri quite unhappy. If Phallen could not see how everyone felt it could not change her bleak outlook... Give her hope...

Omri sent word home:

Nothing has improved. Phallen remains in a sedated sleep and Thade has not improved. I need to stay a bit longer. Hopefully, all will turn for the best... Love, Corporal Omri Trust

His heart could not help but to reach out to them. He stood sentry like a guard-dog. No one went near Phallen as long as he was there...

* * *

Not even the worst storm of the season stirred her when it crashed down upon the region. Rain pelted the tents in a maddening drum beat as lightning fired the blackened sky. Thunder, so unforeseen and earthshaking, sat even the bravest straight up in their beds... "What the...!" Omri shot frantically from his seat, lungeing from one side of the door to the other in search of the blast which had shaken him from slumber. The thunder rolled slowly into the distance when he realized that it was nature which shook him. "WOW!" Omri exclaimed beneath his breath. How many had that sent scrambling?, he wondered... Probabaly the majority...

* * *

Upset by the ferocity of the storm, Dr. Mahq emerged from his sleeping quarters, which was next to Thade's, wearing a schin-length night-shirt. The lanterns were extinguished by the howling winds leaving him but the single candle clutched in his thick fingers

to guide him... Attar, too was shaken from the disturbing force of the weather. "That was really something!" he relaid in his bassist tone, almost rallying the thunders own rage. The doctor hobbled past the hulking shadow with a nod heading for the General's bedside. Thade had not so much as flinched. He was so far down that they doubted if he even felt it. 352 - 353

Looking up at the gorilla, Dr. Mahq knew he needed to sleep, advising he do so now while there was still a few hours of night left... "I will stay here with him. After that last crack, I don't think I'll be going back to sleep for a while. Not until this storm passes, anyway." To sleep... It sounded so good to him considering he had tried, sitting in a stiff chair at Thade's feet. The rain did not slow his quest for the bed waiting in his tent. It had been days since he was able to stretch out comfortably. And that welcoming tent seemed to be on the other side of the world about now. Once in sight Attar quickened his pace sloshing through puddles and not giving a damn. He was physically and mentally beat. Standing beneath the awning he pulled his boots off, spreading his toes, bending the pain out of them with a groan. A small fire glowed from the chimnea centered in the spacious tent. A few personal belongings welcomed as he half-stumbled through the curtained entry. Fiery-red canvas reflected its ambience over the articles of furniture, reflecting off the shields decorating the walls, the glittering bands of golden apaulets dangling from his dress uniform danced in the flickering firelight. It was wonderful to be there! "Bed," he mumbled, approaching it stiffly. "Sleep..." Removing his clothing on the way he fell into it, asleep, probably before his head hit the pillows. Soft, restful slumber. For him. His snoring, however, was so profound that it left his neighbors no choice but to seek sleep somewhere else.

Watching the sleeping ape, Dr. Mahq knew their chances. He pulled the chair up next to Thade and sat with a sigh. He took the chimp's hand rubbing it between his own. "You have so much to live for," he said. "why don't you fight? This is so unlike you to let go. You're a fighter, Thade. And poor Phallen... She cares so much. You

surly can feel that. Come back, son. Come back to us."

To responde... He could feel the pain. It burned him... Far into the desert, he was back at Calima. "You are a dream I dare to come true. You belong in my world, for my heart beats with yours, my pet." Phallen smiled sadly. She slipped her hands from his before disappearing on the desert wind. "No...!" His head tossed. "Don't go away." Thade shuddered beneath the blankets muttering inaudibly.

Dr. Mahq had fallen asleep, his chin buried deep in his chest. He did not hear Thade's cry..

By morning the rain had steadied. The skies were grey. Attar stepped out under the awning and took in a deep breath tasting the earth. Rubbing at sandy eyes he scanned the encampment. There was no movement. The scarlet tents were surrounded by their own dim reflections in ruddy puddles. The heavily trodden central road was a stream as it ran like watercolors, laid deep from hooves and many feet. Standing humbly he heard the rain pelting the awning like the soft pitter-pat of a cat's paws on freshly laid linen. He closed his eyes. It all came back and he dropped his gaze onto a puddle dancing at his feet. He had hoped that it had all been a bad dream brought on by that awesome peal of thunder last night. It did not matter. The day was dismissed. The gloom had overtaken as it continued along its murky forecast. Shifting his weight, Attar wondered where Corporal Omri was. He had not seen him in days. Before he could mutter a word a voice from beside him said, "Omri has been with Phallen." Dr. Mahq, looking extremely overworked, shuffled under the awning next to the towering gorilla. "He has not left her." Attar nodded once. He remained silent as they both just stood there. What was there to ask? Obviously there was no change in the General. "Very well." he finally acknowledged. A slow roll of thunder crested the horizon. They looked at each other haplessly. "I must get back. I don't know what to tell you other than he has not died yet." The Commander's face filled with shock. "Yet?!" "His prognosis is not good, my fine fellow. It is best if we simply grip the fact that General Thade has met his match."

Attar gave a heavy grunt in disagreement before starting out into the rain, dodgign puddles and streams as he headed for the mess-hall, thunder on his heels, pursuing him by only inches, followed by a sudden rip in the clouds as a torrential downpour stepped across the out-post. He hit the door just as it reached him. Crutches, canes, and awkward attempts to stand at attention were dismissed by a terse gesture of his mighty hand. "At ease, soldiers." he relieved somberly. Raphael, the silverback who had been there when Thade was struck down, asked quietly, "how is the General doing?" "There is no change." came the Commander's reticent reply. 354 - 356

In that reply he knew he alone held the responsibility of telling Phallen of Thade's demise. The recall of her cries when Omri had to take her from the room shattered his soul. He did not hear the solemn apology usher forth from Raphael... But he felt it from everyone and dealt with it and the difficult phase of possible change as a totally different set of rules unfolded... "Was all of this really worth it?" The question drifted into Attar's ears. "There is reason for everything..." He replied. Not at all the answer Raphael was expecting. "Good reason."

* * *

I am so far! Is the sky pouring so hard? Do not let me stay here. Bring me back! Bring me back to life...!

Thade frowned. His hands clenched with revenge. His last image, that being of Acadia falling - stricken down by his own weapon - was the last thing the General remembered... Wished he could erase, still tasting the blood in his mouth... And of Phallen... How beaten she was.

His jaw tensed under a measured breath, hating himself for allowing things to get so far out of hand. Recalling how she looked when he departed her tree abode; her image. How he tried to tell her goodbye... How beautiful... "If I reached out for you I knew you'd be there." My Pet, only you know how I feel. You showed me how it feels to love and my heart has opened to only you. When I look into your eyes I know why I fight...

In his sleep he could taste her. Feel her...

"Phallen...?" And he opened his eyes...

* * *

Attar pushed the shingle away. He could not eat. He was sickened. Rising, he bid those around him to remain seated; "Let us all relax our duties for the time being." Lumbering down the aisle of tables, the Commander stopped behind Raphael; "Let the Corporal know that I wish to speak with him, hhhmm?" The lieutenant nodded assertively. Attar gave him an assuring pat on the shoulder: everything was going to be okay..., then headed for the exit. He felt so bad for Thade as his hand reached for the door, pushing it wide, when out of nowhere, it seemed, Dr. Mahq materialized just when a serious flash of lightning forked across the sky. He clung to the jamb like a lunatic heaving for air and soaked to the skin. His words came so winded, wheezing badly as he fought for breath. Obviously the old orangutan had run clear across the out-post... Holding up his index finger for a moment, he leaned over and clasped his knees. Critical perception gripped Attar as he bent to help... "WHAT! What has occurred?!" "SWAKENED..." the doctor wheezed, still fighting to catch his breath. Attar leaned back... "What?" he half-laughed. Grasping hold, the orang rose with the aid of the gorilla's arm - shaking his head furiously. Gesturing adamantly, he bolted, moving quite agilly, for an ape his age. Momentarily perplexed, the words replayed in Attar's head as he mouthed them: "swayken... say waken... he haswaken..." the words rolled off of his tongue jolting him like a tasted battery... "He woke up?!" Attar exclaimed nearly taking the door off its hinges when he broke for the critical unit tent... Hope, at last, and the whole mess tent buzzed in reverberation of the word...

That sonofabitch... Hitting the doors, Attar skidded to a halt just inside, seeing the doctor shake the rain from his pelt. "I came as soon as I knew it was not a false alarm." the orang announced, wiping at his face. "It all happened so suddenly!" "What...?! What happened?!" the gorilla pressed. "Has he died?" Dripping wet, himself, Attar cared less as he flew the curtain back

allowing the doctor to proceed ahead as he gathered up all of the strength he could to follow on those heels, all the while hoping it was true; that Thade had, indeed, awoke and not how he had misread the blurred message to witness a last breath from him.
357 - 359

"He called out her name, Commander. His eyes opened and he went to reach out for her." Taking to either side of the bed they leaned over Thade, waiting with bated breath, concentrating upon the calm features. "Are you sure..." "S-s-s-h-h...Watch!" Attar's eyes darted back to Thade in time to see his head move. He let go with a gravelly moan. The orang looked at Attar promisingly... See? The slow, yet promising stir of recovery developed before his eyes as he watched his comrade painfully stir. Thade's mouth opened then closed as if he were taking a drink. Stunned, Attar lurched back as if shocked. "He is waking up!" Fixing his sight back on the General, a semi-blank stare awaited. Confusion was the first emotion to register on Thade's face as he slowly became aware of his surroundings. Thick fingers clamped on his wrist, checking a pulse that was never there until, then while the other hand fell over his forehead, forcing sleepy lids wide... "Thade, can you hear me?" Dr. Mahq called softly. A weak, but affirmative nod replied. He gave a weak attempt to speak but his voice would not come... lost in the desert of his throat. When he tried to swallow, a clicking sound from deep in his throat could be heard and he gasped for air, coughing dryly. "Relax," the doctor soothed. "You're alright, now." Thade needed water. It had been over three weeks since he had any real fluids. With a reed straw, Harbour Mahq retrieved some water from a pitcher stationed on the night stand. So many times he had dripped the water onto those lips. Now was the first time it was actually received. Placing his finger over the top, the water remained trapped as he placed the other end in the chimp's mouth. "Slowly, now," he instructed noticing that Thade's lower lip had split. The fluid dripped into his mouth. His tongue absorbed it like a sponge and he closed his eyes. It was difficult to swallow. The dryness in his throat rejected the water, sticking shut when he

tried to gulp it down, grimacing in pain as air followed in one forced bubble. It hurt like hell. Still, he drank, emptying the reed. "Welcome back." the doctor greeted, refilling the straw, this time letting it flow a bit more freely. Thade turned his head... no more... "Understood, but you must replenish your body." He gave a weak nod then turned to Attar, staring up with desperate, shuddering emotion. Trying to speak, the gorilla leaned his ear to Thade's lips feeling the air of his words; "Phallen...?" He rasped, swallowing with a grimace. "She is here. She is resting." Attar assured, his deep voice calming Thade's fear. The General fell back, relieved and exhausted, his expression calming to a peaceful resignation as he closed his eyes. A smile skittered across his face and his breathing fell easy with a sigh. It was all coming back to him, crashing down like a tidal wave. The battle - it was so bloody... He could still feel the blood on his face...taste it on his lips, though it had been many, many days ago. How many, he had no concept. All he could recall was the black sleep he had been cast into... The arrows that had placed him back at Death's door. It was she who had beckoned him back, the desolate sound in that voice, as if she were unable to breathe in her petition imploring his help. Oh, how it had infuriated him, drawing him back to protect her; his precious love. No one heard him coming. Not then. Not now. The damage was done... Realization hit home all at once. His strength had been tapped dry, slapped with the raw truth that he would never possess the physical strength he once had. He could not feel his fingers in his left hand let alone move that arm - venturing a glimpse down. Muscle tissue had been severely damaged nearly taking his arm. Anger fueled hot tears and he hid his feelings from his comrade poorly. Attar pretended not to see, recognizing his superior's defeat, realizing that Thade would never again reign as General. To break this sullen mood, Dr. Mahq asked, "Would you like to see your Phallen?" Thade rolled his eyes: Need you even ask? The orang smile sheepishly before sauntering off to retrieve her. Thade smiled sadly to himself. Nothing really mattered to him anymore. With her by his side - to stay there with

him - well, that was to be his last battle to wage, resolving the end of his hell-raising career... "Everyone was happy as long as I did what they expected." Thade expressed hoarsely. Attar spun back from watching as the doctor hobbled from the room, stunned, if not insulted by the remark. "You know that's bullshit." he responded. "Don't take it the wrong way, my friend. However, you can't deny that no one really listened... As long as they knew they were safe, they didn't give a damn. Given one threat and it was pandemonium." Glowering, Thade fell deeply into his own impression of the future; "I'm sorry I let you down." He lamented. "I can't change what has happened or the way I feel. My ideals had backfired, yet I still love that girl. You don't quite feel her understanding and I don't expect you to, but through my tribulation, she was more than any species could hope for... I am indebted, Attar... I am in love with her." There... He said it, bearing his feelings on his useless shoulder... "Think it over." Attar prescribed gently, embarrassed for his General and the unabashed confession he had voiced. There were options in which Thade had not thought of. In an attempt to boost his morale, Attar reminded, "Your options range widely. You could be a Senator." The chimp scoffed harshly. "Fuck that! I want my life back!" He sunk into his pillow closing his eyes and mind to the whole thing. "I only did what I thought was right." came a sulky reply. Resting a mighty hand on Thade's uninjured shoulder, Attar requitted, "We know you did..."

* * *

Upon entering, Dr, Mahq heard her crying. The pillow her head rested on was tear-stained and wet from them. Gently touching the lined shoulder, her eyes popped open instantly; searching fearfully. Something was wrong or had changed for the worse, and she anticipated what his words would be: "he has died. Please come with me." The tragic look prompted the doctor to explain, as quickly as he could, why he awakened her, despite his exhausted appearance. "It is impertinant that you come with me, my dear." Trembling beneath his hands, Phallen struggled to the

edge of her bed. He felt her weakness when his arm wrapped around her feeling each rib. If his fingers crawled, he could have counted them. 360 - 364

"It's bad, isn't it? I killed him, didn't I? "Be strong, Phallen." he urged, lifting her to her feet. She would bring strength back to Thade, he realized. To see that she was alive and that their unborn still lived in her womb... The weeks had left their mark, though. This was far more dire than when she had cared for Thade, herself. It seemed to be in the hands of a Greater One, casting her assistance into a lull, pushing her far away from her beloved and leaving her nothing to do but sleep the sorrow away until she could slip out of his life forever. Phallen took in a deep breath, consuming the misty air and the remembrance of her kiss upon her lover... He is dying...! She suddenly began to shake, seeing the tent loom ahead where Thade rested, stalling her where she stood... Unable to take another step, Phallen held her ground.

"I can't..." she announced with a queasy note before sliding from the doctor's arms to the ground. His hands flew to his cheeks with exasperation; "Oh, Phallen!" exclaimed, and he crouched before her forlorn expression. "I'll be alright," she assured breathlessly. "I just need to rest." Drawing her knees up beneath her chin, she wrapped her arms around them... "give me a minute, okay?" Reaching back, she leaned on her hands and stared up into the grey sky. Holding its rain, seemingly, for this opportunity, a large drop fell right between her eyes. She barely blinked. "Soon, there will be lightning. When will it come?" Her hapless stare sought answer. Psychology was not a field offered in his doctrine in medicine, however, common sense ventured... "Phallen...!" he scolded. "You have to stand! This is something you do not want to mess with!" He could not budge her even though she was light. She would not get up and she held herself like a stone when he tried. So he left her there, hobbling off for help. The rain began to pound the ground so hard, by the time he hit the med-tent, thick mud, from the bottom of still puddles rose, coating everything with its thick deftness - including him... Chargeing through the doors,

the orang was beside himself as he pointed desperately back, trying to express his agitation; so upset he could not speak... "Gather her!" he exploded, taking Attar by the arm and swinging him toward the doors. "I can't help her!" It was her end... Washing with her tears, the rain fell on her face. Maybe the lightning would strike - send her to him on the other side... There was nothing for her without him...

Rounding the bend, Attar had no idea what to expect, and when he saw her just sitting... sitting in the middle of the road!, he started to laugh. Focusing, he snorted; "What the hell...?" She looked up blankly, hearing the hastened steps as they splashed through the lakes, not caring if they came to help or to kill her where she sat. Stopping in front of her, his hands went to his hips. "I just need to rest." Phallen explained weakly, the rain pounding mud up around her, turning the white linens a ruddy, transparent brown. "I understand that you are afraid, but you must come with me." The girl did not look up as she shook her head. "I can't go in there." He had heard enough. With a disgruntled growl, he bent, fighting to lift her; the obstinance she held granting more girth than she. "You are too difficult!" he grumbled once he had her. Dashing for the tent, the doctor was there holding the doors open, ushering the gorilla in hastily. Phallen, so covered in mud, was unrecognizable, and the doctor wiped at the stark face. A net of black hair clung to her face, lying along every curve, creating a mask of despair. Only her deep brown eyes bore through. A bereaving toss of emotion tumbled in that lost soul... "Oh, Phallen..." the doctor consoled, dipping his head. She had it all wrong. Thade had not died...

Hovering breathlessly over the chair he had sunk her in, Attar pushed off to find himself covered in mud from the girl's outrageous antic. With a disgusted groan, he grabbed several towels which had brought out, and began to clean himself off, rubbing and polishing at his armor. So concentrated on drying himself, Attar had overlooked the bedraggled human curled up in the chair, shivering, and dripping wet. With a guilty offering of dry towels, he caught the disapproving stare from the orangutan doctor. "Sorry..." the

Commander apologized humbly. Dr. Mahq snatched the offering impatiently: "Thank you." he snapped sourly. Draping her in warmth, Phallen still shivered. "It's alright. This is a good thing." the doctor promised, snuggling a towel around her face. He peered into the haunted, hollow sockets and smiled. "It is time for you to see him." 365 - 368

Her breath hitched. Then she held it. A mask of bravery fell over the grief-stricken wasteland of a final farewell she did not want. The pain of knowing she would never see him alive again ached so deeply... She knew there was to be no other... "I'm ready." she spoke strongly. Attar stepped forward to accompany her, but the doctor waved him back, shaking his head slightly. Instead, he only lifted the flap which separated them from Thade. Phallen stood, taking a step on what felt like sponge. She froze in the doorway, glancing over her shoulder to the doctor. "Go..." He urged, prodding her gently. The canvas fell behind and she was left alone. Isolated. One lamp flickered obediently at the far corner of the small room, flickering, softly, flirtatious glimpses of her beloved, reminding her that she needed to breathe, for involuntary movement seemed to have ceased... "What have I done to you?" Her feet would not move, rooting into the floor, holding her in one spot as the past bought her soul, taking immediate possession of the vision she did not ever wish to see again. "What have I done?" whispered again as tears began to fall. Though her steps were silent, Thade heard them. In his slumber, he felt her. Playing dead, the ever-mischievous "boy" played in him. The devil still remained and he smiled within... Phallen stood over him, weeping. Her mixture of guilt and sorrow spilled pathetically together when she tried to speak: "This is my fault. It may as well have been my hand... My beloved, if this is to be, I will surly take my own life to be united with you once again..." Her hands drifted over the down of his forehead as she bent to kiss him one last time.

That was all it took. Her sweet embrace evoked his passion. The flame erupted and Thade could no longer simply receive without a return. His right arm draped coolly over her shoulder as he pulled

her in... "My pet," He said. "Do not weep." Phallen retreated, truly flustered and quite upset as she stared into his eyes. He smiled gently. "c'mon..." He pulled her close feeling the hot tears on his cheek. She was warm and soft and he never wanted to let go. "I dreamed about you." he sighed, running his hand through her thick hair. "You were always here with me." His hand went to the back of her neck and he squeezed reassuringly. "Phallen..." And he gazed into her eyes. "My beautiful..." Upon examining her, Thade stopped in mid-sentence, the rest of his words tumbling from his mouth unconsciously: "muddy pet..." Clearly disturbed by her appearance, he pulled his hand away and with a demeaning tone said, "What has happened?! Why are you so disheveled?!" How to explain how she had sat, willingly, in the middle of an electrical storm, without sounding totally insane, well, Phallen could only shrug, replying; "It is pouring and I fell. I am a mess, I know, but I was in such a hurry to come." Thade studied her lie. He knew it was not that simple, but he played along. It irritated him to realize she had not been treated to warm clothing. That her raven hair had not been washed and brushed... "Take those rags off." He growled. He could not stand to see her so dirty. Obediently, Phallen stood and moved toward the linens folded neatly on a shelf. Dropping her wet clothing, Thade watched. He saw the curve of her hips, the soft lift of a breast in her profile as she reached to wrap herself...the way that thick, black mane fell over her, enshrouding her nakedness... She tugged at the rope of hair, restraining it in her hands, wrangling it back with a sweep before tying a sheet firmly like a sarong. "Bring me your brush," Thade directed. "I want to do it." She went to him apprehensively and reluctantly handed it over. He bade her to sit, and as she turned the chair away, she shuddered... 'He knows I lied...' Phallen sat down. He pulled the tangled tresses across his body before his hand fell on her forehead forcing her head all the way back until it rested against his side. "Close your eyes." He purred, combing the loose tresses back with his good hand. He ran the brush along the cascade being careful not to snap the tangles; releasing them from the bottom until

the brush flowed through the blue/black, trailing his fingers in chase. Entranced, he followed the grooming instrument to the end where her hair flowed over the opposite side of the bed when he suddenly stopped, his hand falling atop the crown of her head. Having her back to him, Phallen looked capriciously back, meeting his cool gleam. "You know, when you kissed me, I could taste your sorrow." He began slowly. "It was sweet. Sweeter than any wine or honey." His big hand softly grazed her cheek as he smiled almost bashfully. "But I have tasted your passionate kisses and those are beyond that sweetness..." Thade took in a deep breath. Closed his eyes dreamily.. "A pure refreshment. I cannot hide these feelings. I will protect you and do the right thing by you if you will stay."

369 - 371

Feeling so responsible for his downfall, Phallen hushed him. "Don't feel that way. I'm the reason for your pain." "Do you not hear me, woman?!" He charged. He held her strong within that right hand, making her face him. "All of the times when I felt so insecure: you changed all of that! You gave to me a strength I never knew existed in me. My anger; thrown about by dominance, in the faces of my peers... Never was there a twinge of compassion!" His words grew heated with each syllable while he clutched her shoulder. "Until you came. I dreamed for the first time of a paradise. I was not coming back and didn't want to, but without you there it was not where I wanted to stay." He was struggling with all of the emotions sparring for first place when he felt her hand feather across his chest. "Rest." she soothed, gently scratching his hairy jaw-line. Lost in her touch, he raised his chin, divulging in the ecstasy as he recalled more of that dream. "I saw our child." It muttered from his lips without warning and she withdrew suddenly, waking him from total relaxation. Her eyes stabbed fearfully. "We have a girl on the way." He announced, a secret kind of smile creeping over his face. But then his brow quivered and his eyes opened to delve deeply into her, "She was human... She is you..." He could tell she wanted to believe him. The pursuing query purseing just on the tip of her tongue. The way her eyes sought for

more. However, she only smiled sweetly and dropped the stormy gaze. Thade fell back, sighing as he rolled his eyes, "you think I'm crazy." 371 - 373

Phallen cradled his face in her thin fingers and kissed his forehead. "No...," whispered over his skin, her cool hands petting his silver goatee. "it was a dream. They seem so real sometimes." Closing his tired eyes, the troubles seemed to dissolve. Hearing her softly say; "It is over. It is time to take a rest." In a voice thick with sleep, he said, "stay here a while, okay? Just keep your hands on me for a while longer so I know you're really with me, alright?" Deeper he went, his brow creasing in concern... "I love you, Phallen. I can't replace what you have opened my eyes to. I breathe your wisdom." She massaged his brow, easing the tension that fought to grow there. "Sleep, my beloved," her gentle words brushed over his downy forehead. * * *

He was tough. Strong. His goals were relentless in the fight for what he wanted and needed to sustain his new world. A not-so-common thread shared between them would benefit all with wealth and prosperity. All he had to do was accept the fact that he was chosen to rule...Had to believe what that truly meant... "Forget what you think is to be," the voices stirred in his sleep. "Your future does not include that human or the unborn which she carries inside of her..." "It is because of her my faith has been restored. My renovation lies in her hands. I invited her in and I want her to stay. She makes the rain stop. The mere mention of her name comforts me. You have no idea how fair - how perfect she is for me; making me do the right thing...ceasing the fury in me. My cries are quieted by her touch. My demons cast down... She is my savior." Thade shook his head adamantly. "No... I will NOT denounce her! I will not renounce my love."

* * *

It was the last nightmare... He opened his eyes... "It's okay." Phallen soothed as she pressed her mouth to his hollow cheek. "Kiss me, my pet..." Hovering above him, she met his gaze; "when you do, I'll know everything will be all right. I want you

to understand how you are so included in my world. How welcome you are... so kiss me now." As their lips touched, that embrace sealed a deep, emotional bond that neither could ever deny. His love and adoration escaped the boundries of his culture, running free for the first time. Having taken her was instinctive. This, however went beyond that craving for sexual fulfilment and he felt the way he had when his hands first held her; an innocense, a passion burning with pure and uncanny desire. He knew they would stand together forever. She took his breath away... "I have searched for you all of my life." Holding her, Thade felt as tears welled in his eyes, so thankful he had not simply let her go as just a chance-meeting. Breathing her warmth, he whispered in her ear: "We will dance at our wedding..."

Returning to his boyhood home, Thade's health gradually improved. Phallen was in her second trimester and her belly swelled beneath the beautiful clothing he lavished upon her. They spent most of their time up there. The many visitors and houseguests were treated to outrageous parties. Some; just for the evening, while others tended to end up in the courtyard, all highly spirited and feeling no pain, a warm serenade drifting up with the horizon as dawn lit the night. All the while, though, he watched her; his tiny love. She felt his eyes study her...

One night as she prepared the patio for dinner, he insisted she seek assistance; that she hire help. "I can do this, you know," She protested. "I'm not lame." Keeping his temper under control, Thade replied, with as much grace as he could muster, "I understand this, but you do too much. You are too precious to me and I insist that you aquire servents." Phallen waved him off. "Don't be ridiculous." she muttered, going about her routine, breezing past him enroute to the house. Thade bit his lip: 'O-o-h-h! This imp!' He clenched his teeth, counting to himself as he watched her shadow stretch down the hall. "Only you test my patience." He snarled. But a smile soon followed. "I cannot be angry with you." The next day, Thade rose at sunrise, planting a bristleing kiss on her

bare shoulder before heading into the city in search of the best keepers and servents to take care of the house and give Phallen the well-deserved rest she needed - being in such a delicate condition... 374 - 376

She had no idea what he was up to. She had set the table for themselves and the usual half-dozen guests or so, and went about her daily ritual of lamp and incense lighting. The suns dipped low behind the house. Sitting out under the stars on the patio, Phallen curled into a twin-lounger. It felt good to just sit. But as she looked across at the table set for eight; the taper candles dripping wax over the beautiful center-piece of fruit and vegetation, she began to worry. 'He has a mistress. He finds me undesirable... He has grown tired of my company...' She sighed deeply and gazed out at the driven path that led up to the bridge. It was torch-lined and quiet. "Funny how things work out..." Phallen jumped and turned back around to find Thade standing before her. "I wanted to be alone with you tonight and I am." He smiled shyly, so out of character for the war-worn soldier. The table, once so beautifully set, looked old and tired. "Oh, Phallen, I am so sorry..." he apologized as he slid in next to her. "The work you put into this evening was for nought. While I was in town I told everyone to stay home." Phallen shrugged his hand from her shoulder coldly. "Why would you do a thing like that? It's been party central every night since you came back to your house." "Oh come on now..." and he fell across her lap, gazing dreamily up into her stern face. "It's not what you think. Please, feed me grapes?" His hands went to her head, stroking back the blue/black hair. He read her thoughts as she brought his hands to her breast silently. "Don't entertain such thoughts, my pet." he beseeched with a gentle kiss to the swell. "You are my world." Her head swam as she fell into the caress - his warm breath over her skin took her captive as he spoke his veneration, his lips whispering on her neck... "I love you, Phallen."

* * *

She awakened late. The night before had been so charmed. For the morning to slip away from her; the suns bursting through the stained glass... Their unborn moved inside of her... Swinging her legs to the floor, Phallen felt woozy as she sat on the edge of the bed gathering her senses and stomach. This was the first bout with morning sickness she had to deal with and it made her genuinely sick. Crawling back up among the pillows, she hugged them dearly, tucking them around for comfort - trying hard to keep from throwing up. If Thade found her like this she knew he would panic. He did and he had... Dr. Mahq was there in less than an hour meaning the General had raced, Godspeed, into the city... Falling next to his woman, Thade held her in his arms lovingly, pressing his bristly cheek next to her soft, peach skin... "Tell me she is all right!" he demanded. Escorting the father-to-be from the room the doctor rested a reassuring hand on Thade's back; "She is fine, Son," and he forced Thade down the staircase. "It is a normal occurrence." At the landing, the chimp turned, his eyes daring to search - in case to find the ultimate scenerio, the suns' rays hitting him, showing the grey coming along his hairline. Accentuating the lines in his face. The doctor shivered as he released from the General's grasp. Thade was growing old... "Tell me you can save her life?!" Dr. Mahq gave a queasy nod. "There is progress, Thade." he announced. "Very promising progress, indeed..." Still, the General gave the doctor a wary sort of regard, replying huskily, "I hope you're right."

* * *

Found within his own heart, Thade decided he would propose to Phallen formally. As far as his girl was concerned, it was just another extravagant party as she went about setting things up. Routine set her into motion when the servents he had hand picked arrived along with a five-piece band dampening her motives as the wait-staff pardoned themselves and graciously took over with the explanation that their instructions came from the "General". Phallen fell into a stubborn stance as her task was whisked from her hands; crossing her arms across her bosom disconcertedly... "This is ridiculous!"

she cried. "I'm not helpless!" "No, you're not." Thade interceded, having been standing in the arch-way between the kitchen and dining room. "But tonight you are to be spoiled." He took her gently by the arm and guided her from the kitchen. "Come, Mother." He invited cordially. Pulling her through the lower level of the house, Phallen searched for anything that would stop her from letting him take her from her routine. "Wait a minute!" she exclaimed, digging her heels into the tapestry. Thade let his hand slide from her arm only to catch her hand. "Come, my pet." he cooed as he spun aptly - all ears and eyes; his face aglow in the light of the candles lining the hall. A boyish grin fell upon his lips melting all and any anger Phallen felt. She felt a bit foolish now as she saw how sincere Thade's wishes were that she be free of any kind of task or routine she normally did. Just be with me, was all he wanted.

He had removed the sling allowing full range of motion even though there was some pain involved. "It doesn't hurt too badly," he reasoned as he lifted his arm. What did hurt was the weakness therein. Still, he held no animosity toward anyone or anything. His outlook on life had been changed dramatically; a life which he had come to cherish and love... Slightly sparked from the wine he had drank, Thade had no inhibitions when he clasped Phallen next to his body, sweeping back her thick black tresses, saying; "Tonight is all about you." He wanted to kiss her then and there until he ventured a glance around. Licking his lips nervously, he stood her up as he took her face in his hands. So many eyes were watching... He felt a shiver run down his spine as he gazed into her sagacious eyes, taking a deep, jagged breath, blowing the words over her mouth..."Wait..." whispered shakily. "wait and see..." 377 - 379

Phallen watched him with suspicion. His request, so close she could taste him, had her mystified as to what he had up his sleeve. She followed him out onto the patio where Thade was greeted by many. Numerous hands reached out to take his, those who had served under him, while others could not help but to take him up in a hug, giving a hearty slap on the back allowing Phallen to fall back and observe silently. Without a single blade of jealousy she

enjoyed his reunion as much as he when she felt the gentle hands of acknowledgement grant her asylum, taking her carefully into their long arms, burying her momentarily there with a vow that she would always be protected. She smiled modestly. Never; not even from her own people had she been accepted. And this took her totally by surprise. Tears fought for control as she wiped at her cheek, disguising it as a loose strand of hair, holding her chin firmly to the vow hitting her square in the heart. She felt her beloved's fingers intertwine with hers and she turned attentively to him waiting to go before everyone saw her break into full fledged tears. "Come," he bade with a wink, leading her away from the crowd toward a more exclusive group, knowing that there she was most comfortable. He felt her hand sweating and he stopped. "My pet, relax. They are all here for us. They came on their own accord." Phallen tried to appear understanding, carrying that same nervous smile as she had before the forest ambush long ago. Thade took her arm, wondering at her gaze before she realized he was examining her, only to stare frightfully at him; 'Help me!' poured from her brow when he brushed her cheek affectionately. "It's okay now." Leading her further out onto the large patio seemed to help clear her head. The torch light and brightly lit ornaments took her thoughts elsewhere as fresh air filled her lungs. Voices mingled and lifted with laughter among the clusters of apes and she realized that she was the only human there who was not a servant. "This is not right." she murmured looking around at the perverted sight before turning to Thade with a shake of her head. "Oh Phallen..." The sound rumbled from his chest like approaching thunder as he pulled her closer. "I did not buy these servants. They are well paid. Don't be so narrow-minded. They are not here by force, my pet." He slid his muzzle along her neck to her ear with a purr where he nipped at her lobe playfully before pulling away, taking on the persona of the undaunted General as he folded her arm over his, bowing graciously to those Senate members who took the invitation unabashedly sent to them all... Senator Lantres was the first to notice the way Thade was treating the girl; so kindly; and he pushed through the

crowd to get to them, grinning openly as he waved for their attention. "Phallen...," he greeted with a great open smile. "Come and sit with me. I have been waiting to talk with you." He took her hands, all-the-while holding eye contact with Thade, letting the General know that that; yes, Phallen would be fine. Their hands slipped away and she was led into the crowd, disappearing with the Senator leaving Thade beside himself as he searched for a stronghold. Guiding the fair human around a line of seats and chaises, Lantres, in all of his grace, was practically waltzing her. This special treatment only upheld Phallen's suspicions. But nonetheless, she played along. As she was brought about, a familiar face stood out, a face she associated with kindness and understanding.

"Omri...!" and she enfolded him in her arms, kissing his cheek. "Oh my sweet Omri." He wrapped his arms warmly around her; "I knew everything would have to be alright." he breathed on her neck as he rocked in the embrace. With a squeeze, he released and turned to the girl-chimp seated next to him: "I have spoken so much of you to my wife. This is Neena." Phallen smiled easily at the sweet young face; "I am so glad to meet you. You have a most wonderful mate." She took the female chimps slender hand and squeezed it firmly. Neenah returned an eager smile with genuine admiration. "You have accomplished what many have failed at. I am honored to meet you at last." Indeed, many had tried to tie the General down, only to be left behind and hurt by his careless love and lust... Phallen tipped her head quizzically to the compliment... "How many were there?" she quizzed, turning to look into the crowd. Both Omri and Neenah shrugged. "It doesn't matter anymore." Omri interrupted, taking Phallen by the arm and directing her to a nearby chaise. "YOU are all that does." The sound from the band gathering on the stage drew their attention and Phallen politely excused herself upon seeing Senator Lantres as he waved for her to join him, meeting her half-way. "Come...!" he called, his golden-robed arm stretching out to take her hand. Their fingers touched and she followed him across to the front near

the band stand, hypnotized by the flow of his robe of gold and royal-blue underlay. Though dressed in a most beautiful gossamer shell of aqua, layered with pearls, Phallen felt very plain and dismal as the Senator escorted her. Sitting, she observed the band members as they ascended the stage, stopping behind their particular instruments; guitars, maracas, drums, harps, and an assortment of woodwinds. Congas were brought out and sat up at the corner of the stage in a tight semi-circle. Just the fine tuning of them all sounded melodic as the guitar player plucked a slow romance, making love to the tune which he exercised upon. Though it was only a practice melody, Phallen saw the deep devotion held for the music they were about to play in the guitarist's eyes. He felt her and glanced from the strings with a smile as easy as sweet honey meade and winked softly. With a subtle nod, the conga drums fell in like a heartbeat, keeping rhythm softly in the background as the others fell in gradually, filling the air with a slangy sort-of Calypso sound. Guests were steadily filling the dance floor, but Phallen remained transfixed. Held by the soft sway of the music. She was far away and could only hear the seduction of the music.

From the shadow of the patio stairs, Thade was watching. He saw their eyes meet. Saw the way he singled her out and held her attention with that certain, casual persuasion as he cast the hooks out and drew her in. Thade felt his hair stand on end. Jealousy reared its ugly head. Heart leading, Thade took a heavy step onto the patio, eyes narrowed on the musician, prepared to fight, when he felt a heavy hand land surly over his good shoulder. He spun defensively. "Take a break, friend." The towering form stood firm. Thade let go with a snort before facing the gorilla; "You were the last person I expected to come." forgetting, momentarily, his plan for ripping the head off of the rival on the stage he provided. Disregarding the statement, Attar jutted his jaw in Phallen's direction, saying quietly, "Her devotion remains for you. It is the seduction of the music. Not the man." Thade gave him a sour look.

"Aren't we the poet tonight?" he gnawed. "I gather you can suddenly read minds now?" The rumble of a chuckle, and the gorilla shook his head. "Stop and watch. Watch how her face changes. Every note reveals a different emotion. I have seen this before and I can tell you what each furrow means. Where she goes when she wanders from focus. I saw this already. I was there with her." He shook his mighty head. "There is something about her, and no doubt in my mind anymore of how much she loves you." The chimp followed Attar's gaze into the gala event. Past the mingling guests and swaying dancers and onto his intended's profile. At times, it seemed as if she were on the verge of tears, covering her face with one trembling hand only to blink back those tears to shake her head and release the long blackness surrounding her face. His face grew thoughtful. He understood now. Yes, the musician held her. But it was his translation of her past through his songs that did. Not he, himself... Thade's hands ran nervously across the front of his satin tunic, smoothing it down before tugging at the high-buttoned collar which seemed to choke his trembling adam's apple. Oh, he felt foolish! A tittering laugh leapt from his lips. Torchlight glowed off of the black satin as Thade stepped out into the crowd, his shoulders back and proud. Even he could not help the way the music made him feel as he relaxed among his peers and friends, a benign smile overcoming his recent hostility. "Have ONE...!" A drink was shoved into his hand; by whom, he had no clue as they sashayed off into the crowd. Two. Three. How many after that went quickly and easily. The rhythm of the band had everyone moving either on the dance floor or into groups of lushing weekend warriors. It was loud and hedonistic... Staggering down the winding stairs along the patio into the front courtyard, Thade faintly remembered how he had felt... had it been a few minutes before? His head swam from the concoctions he had been sipping on. Torches surrounded a comfortable seating arrangement in the middle of the courtyard. The hedges had been pruned back revealing a beautiful sphere of grass and flora. Cushioned chaises and Adirondack-style chairs were scattered along its outer edges. In

those seats sat the lovely courtesans-in-waiting dressed in silk and lace. "I have you." Thade threw his arms around their shoulders and turned dizzily face-to-face, touching lips.

380 - 384

Phallen sat next to Senator Lantres. She watched enviously when Omri took his wife gallantly by her hand and whisked her out onto the dance floor, wishing that someone would take her like that. She sighed sadly and sunk into her seat. Thade had surly fallen back into his wicked ways. She began to slide back into her own tightly woven little world... "Where is that warrior of yours?!" Lantres addressed, lightly patting the girl's hand. There were no words that would not condemn their ever meeting. Phallen's brow rose as she shook her head questionably. A loud shriek resounded from the courtyard and she rolled her eyes slowly toward it. "That's where he is, Senator." "I need to leave." Phallen went to stand when Lantres stopped her. "Not yet." he requested gently.

What had transpired below shook her. Thade had taken his lover!

Phallen threw the Senator's hand aside and left him sitting alone as she made her way through the crowd. The tempo of the music had changed to a more bluesy beat. "May I have this dance...?" Her head shot up and she found herself facing the guitar player - his hand out for hers... "I'd love to." He swept her out onto the dance floor, creating a space as they took over. He, spinning her like a top to stop her, dip her, only to continue on with the sweeping moves of the music. Dropping her low, his bronzed face was inches from hers as he bent over her, his hand sliding down her back to bring her up slowly against his lean body fluidly before strolling her backwards, their feet sweeping closely together; toe-to-toe... "You know your steps," he whispered as they fell into a new move. Resting her head in his hand he curved sensuously over her in a lover's embrace. Phallen stiffened. This was only a dance. Not a mating ritual. Their final steps ended perfectly as he brought her up to face him. Her mouth hung open, waiting for his kiss. Her eyes slits...

* * * He heard the heavy applause and looked up. Shadow dance flickered above and he knew something dramatic had occurred. "That's it. I have to go now." Adjusting his clothing, Thade made his way to the real party as he fastened the ivory buttons of his tunic. * * * "Thank you, Phallen," the bronze-faced young man bowed, his twisted locks tumbling over as he did so. "No," she corrected, taking his face in her tiny fingers. "thank YOU." Tilting her head, she kissed him softly on the mouth. "You are a breath of fresh air." breathed on him, and he slowly pulled away. The thick brocade jacket he wore prevented her from touching his skin. Instead, she ran her hands along his jawline. Along the smooth beige line of closely shaved beard and moustache. "Tell me your name." "Darlin, you can call me anything you want." "Can I call you to my quarters?" One brow rose as the other dipped evilly. "There's no time like the present." She laid her hand against his cheek and shoved him away. "You're too eager." "Now wait a minute!" He pulled her next to him. "Didn't you just invite me to your tent?" Phallen breezed into his vision with a husky voice. "No. You did." She broke from his hold only to grasp his hands. "I did not say when." They smiled secretly to one another before all hell broke loose. Everything ceased except the percussion from the congas. Phallen sent her new friend backstage with a finger to her lips before heading to the patio wall where she leaned precariously over to look down. He was still there and looking like the cat that ate the canary. She dipped back. But he had seen her. In a single bound Thade leaped straight up. Perching on the edge of the wall. His eyes lit up in the torchlight when he spotted her. But the dark return set him on fire. Lightly touching down, Thade raged across the patio losing sight of Phallen as she ducked away into the bowels of the house, beelining for the staircase where she knew a door with a lock awaited. "Phallen?!" "Just go back where you came from!" she snarled before slamming the door. The turn of the lock sent a chill up Thade's spine as he stopped at the sound. Taking a deep breath did not ease the tension building in his gut. "Don't do this, my pet.

Open the door." He reasoned calmly through the jamb. "Go fuck yourself." she replied just as smoothly. His thick fingers curled around the french-style handle and he tried it. A fraction of an inch was all it moved and he pressed his shoulder against the thick wood. "I really don't want to break my father's door in, but if you don't unlock it now, I will have no choice." Phallen paced just on the other side. With an angry turn of the key she flung the door wide bringing the startled ape along with it. "You got your way again didn't you?" she chided, side-stepping his groping advances. "You're a spoiled little brat and I can't believe I allowed myself to fall for you..." "Now wait just a minute!" Thade shot, shaking an angry finger in her face. Wrong move. His howl transcended through the whole house as Phallen took hold of the digit and bent it back - a gross pop in the knuckle denoting dislocation before she released. "You...wait - a - minute..." she corrected breathlessly. Cradling his injured finger, Thade lunged for her when he felt the sting from her slap on his cheek. Phallen spun from the exertion stopping surefooted as she shook her head. "Look at you, Thade. Look what you have done to us!" Her eyes stung as tears fought for release, only to be denied when she blinked them back. She glared up at him. "I waited for you. I sat up there and WAITED for you to come! My knight in "shining armor." she scoffed to herself. Shook her head with disbelief. She could not stop her tears now as they fell to the floor; her reddened face hidden behind the cascade of pitch hair. Thade felt his due guilt. Dammit!, she's crying! Cautiously he made his way to her side. "Please..." he beseeched; "Don't cry, my pet. It's not what you think." Her sobbing made him anxious. All he wanted to do was ease her pain. "I did not do anything. I swear to you." With a swollen hand, he swept the curtain of black back and bent to her: "I have matching cheeks now." he jested, a boyish grin spanning the concerned expression. "I did..." and she timidly peered from the corner of her eye...

* * *

Now there were five...

* * *

Thade stormed from the room. His face a mask of fury while his mind raged... "Get that human out of here now! Send him packing before I do something I'll regret!" His orders were marked and short. Precise and concealed as he pointed out the sandy-haired guitar player. With a half-dozen armed sentries, the man was roughly escorted to the edge of the premises where he was warned never to show his face again. "Whoa! What gives? What did I do?" Mattheszar puffed his chest out. "Just forget what happened tonight. You don't want to be here anymore." The man raised his hands in surrender: "Alright, then..." Hurriedly, he collected his instrument and hastened along the darkening path, sweat breaking in his pits as he hustled down the incline...

* * * 385 - 388

Neenah met Phallen at the top of the staircase. There was no hostility or judgement when she took the girl's hand and squeezed it. "Come on. Let's have some fun." Silhouettes gelled in the dim light of the torch-lined patio as she and Neenah made their way through the crowded hall. Breaking out into the night air, Phallen searched for Thade in the clumps of blackness. He was there. She could feel his eyes on her. Just where...? Everywhere... He heard her sigh. Quick-silver gleamed in his eyes as he watched from across the floor. Hidden from view in a cluster of well-to-do citizen apes. He clenched his teeth. Grinding them terribly as his fingers throbbed: "There's no talking yourself out of this one, my pet." In a single bound, Thade leaped from his hiding place - eyes aglow as he stalked her. Lumbering toward her, Phallen caught the form out of the corner of her eye and quickly turned to face them only to be ran up against the wall. "Phallen...?" he called menacingly. The flash of his fangs. The dead-on stare. She quivered beneath him. Her hand fluttered to her throat and she bowed away. Thade fell to one knee: "Phallen," and he took her hand. "My pet..." It disappeared in his... Apprehension waned when he searched her eyes. Though she had tried, the truth could not be hidden. She loved him. His touch relaxed her. "Come and dance with me now..." he requested, drawing her away from the

wall. Lantres stood back. He saw what was coming and gestured for everyone to remain silent as Thade drew Phallen out among them. "I saw, in the mirror, someone I did not want to know before you. Now, I see how much I am needed here because of you... To be what you discovered..." Holding her close to his breast, Thade inhaled deeply... "I "Am" because you wanted me to be - even without trying." He held her gaze steadfastly. Entreating... "I am incomplete without you." Cupping her face in his hands, Thade raised her eyes to his and looked; "Marry me, Phallen?" She was the only thing, it seemed, worth fighting for. And there she stood, accepting him, once again, in all of his faults... And hers... "My beloved, I...," Thade rested his hand against her lips as he shook his head; "You did nothing..." Secrets well buried would never come to haunt as he smiled upon her. All of the guests seemed to rise and congregate upon Lantres' signal when Thade bowed to Phallen's hand, kissing it tenderly before he stood - his chin jutting proudly forward... In the grace of royalty, the General took her tiny hand in his and led her through the crowd, displaying her in a revolution before taking her up in his arms with deep seeded passion. "May I have this dance?" He asked huskily, tugging her close. "It's what I've been waiting for." Her beaded gown sparkled like starfire in the soft glow of the fire light as he glided her across the floor - and in her left ear she heard him speak softly: "What may be, I know not, for to find a love as rich as ours, fools rush in where angels fear to tread... I am wealthy in knowing that you will always be here..." Rising from the softness of an ivory shoulder, Thade pressed his forehead to hers. His eyes centered. "You did not give me an answer, my pet." All of the words she wanted to say sprang up in her mind, wanting to say all of the reasons why she should not accept... "I...They..." she sputtered, looking about helplessly. "This is no ordinary love we share." Thade confessed, sheltering her in his arms. "You know it. I know it. And they know it." "I don't know what to say." Thade smiled easily. "Just say yes!, and that you love me." Her wide-open grin spanned her face when she looked up at him; "If I say yes to those

things, what..." "Shut up and kiss me..." Shocked, Phallen stiffened from his last statement only to feel his hands creep up along her jawline and lift her head coming face-to-face ; eye-to-eye... His expression softened under the innocence and he quivered... "Yes..." Thade's heart leaped into his throat : 'She just said YES!' She fell into his embrace - her hair cascading over them. Lantres smiled to himself, squeezing his mate around the waist as he watched everyone. "This is it. This is where it starts." Whether or not Thade accepted his new role, it had been laid in his lap. He had no choice. * * *

Their bodies were swallowed by the rest in a slow, rhythmic sway, lost in eachother. Caring less about what awaited. This romance bloomed. Uninterrupted this night beneath the stars...

* * * * *

Alone...Thade stood before the Council in the bellows of an empty courtroom. There was no one to hear him. No one to defend him. It was his choice to stand alone. Phallen was a part of his life and his mind was made up. Her image lay in his mind as he tilted his head to stare up at those judging, and he smiled. "So...?" he quizzed, crossing his arms. They leered down smugly to the moot argument, obstinant to rearrange a law that had been laid some forty years prior. Disallowing Thade and Phallen. They could not remain together... "WHY?!" He cried, throwing his arms wide. "For the good of the common people, that's WHY! You come waltzing back and expect it all to be as you left!," Nado exclaimed. "Well, naive, you have a lot to learn!" and the orang rose from his seat to lean over the bench. "You're NOTHING! You hold no more rank than a commoner! Your best..." In the heat of passion, a hand reached out and forced him back. Straightening his robe after settling his peer, Senator Sandar stabbed a leery eye down on Thade. "Please, Thade," he began. "This is so far fetched I cannot even begin to defend, myself." Watching it fall, Thade broke as his shoulders fell. "I do not care..." He let go with a snort of disgust as he wiped his eyes. "You know, it doesn't matter what you have to say anymore. I'm not ashamed of my attraction to Phallen: YES!,

that's her name! Not "The Human" or "That Sprite"! She is my life... My love...!" His eyes darted from one discriminating eye to ... One... "We are leaving the city." he concluded with a snarl... His teeth gnashed as he turned to leave, disheartened, yet elated in his release... "WAIT...!" The chimp's head swung around hazardously. "What?!" he sneered. Lantres stood; his hand outstretched... "Wait for me, Son..." he repeated gently, a clear smile breaking over his aged features. Gathering his pipe, along with a few simple papers, Lantres shuffled over the toes of his "former" peers before pointing an arthritic digit back up into their faces... "All of you have caused this!" he pointed condescendingly. "You have driven him out!" Lantres spat on the floor. "You will reap what you sow." The remaining members gawked, wide-eyed, their mouths dropping open from the retribution... Lantres hobbled up next to Thade and took his arm, hiding his angst behind tightened lips... Turning back, Lantres' finger condemned: "He IS the Chosen One! Both, He and Phallen! Whether YOU choose to believe it or not; that will be your loss." With a disgruntled growl, Lantres pressed his hand against Thade's back as they went for the double doors together, grumbling beneath his breath of the "narrow-mindedness" therein. "We're out of here." the former Senator proclaimed, pressing blindly against the doors... Before he could get a grasp on the knobby brass handles, they swung away. The "denounced radicals" swayed back instinctively. Faces - some they recognized ; others, well, just residents of Derkein ; flowed into the courtroom and forced Thade and Lantres back as they filed in - falling into the seats... The rest simply spilled out across the open floor in a mass. Lost among the many bodies, Thade and Lantres stood strong. Was this the end for them both? The silence stung their ears.

"What's going on?" Thade queried from the corner of his mouth. For sure, they figured this was a lynching as the duo backed along with the entourage - the crowd growing; encircling them... It was hard to breathe. There was no air. "You did not answer me, Godfather...!" Lantres counted as many as he could -

the heads - losing count when so many milled... "I do believe they stand in your favor, Son." he quipped. "But let's make for the door anyway." A group stopped them. Encircled the duo, leaving the "rebels" to believe that this was truly their downfall, when one voice uttered : "Stay..." , while the others in this gathering either reached out to touch them or outright embraced them... From there, they soon came from everywhere. Yet nowhere. Commoners melded with the elite along with farmers, along with the wives of the remaining Senators. They Stood along side the two who would bring a new freedom. A freedom of choice... Thade felt the pang of panic strike. "Get me out of here." he cautioned. The low rumble among the people settling sent a shiver up his spine. "Stay...?"

The request - again...

He serched the crowd, a slight curve of a smile graced his lips...

"I am confused." The General confessed, turning to Lantres.

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Lantres turned. Beaming. "They are here for you." The chimp looked up at the segacious ape emphatically and shook his head: "Not really." he snorted in laughter. Why did all of these people care about what happened? Had he changed their lives so significantly by simply caring?

Thade sought information from his superior ; "It can't be this simple...?"

Swallowing hard, he soon understood, feeling cool, slender fingers wrap around his securely. He spun abruptly. Beyond his dreams, Phallen stood beside him - Commander Attar backing her protectively...

Words fell silently...

This was not a good place for her to be, he thought, clasping the tiny form before him...

Unease filled him before any idea of redemption entered. Even after the warm reception, he could not quell his apprehension... Protecting her became top priority as he positioned himself between she and the oncoming crowd. "Why are you here?!" he snapped close at her ear. Phallen found his hands and held fast befor him,

coaxing him back: "Please...", she spoke. "This is a good thing. I would not be here if it were not." Thade leaned over her shoulder, studying her face. Looking for that certain indifference for which she could translate. But there was no warrant for vengeance. His brow rose. "They came for you." Phallen revealed with a smile. The chimp glared at the Council, anger pulsing in his temples. "They're trying to break you..." Leering back, Thade saw Corporal Omri nodding. "I can't take them lightly." the General replied through grating teeth. Omri's chest rose with a breath. "Yes you can." Period...

In a last ditch effort, Thade turned to his beloved : "You really love me, right?" and he held her firmly. The whole room stopped. The puzzled look on Phallen's face... She searched the room. "You should know," she consoled, lifting up on her toes to his furry ear. "Say it! Say you love me!?" That great, broad, hidden smile spanned her face as her arms flew around his neck... "I love you, General Thade... I love you forever...!" Thade's hands rose in surrender. "There you have it." he announced. "and guess what? I don't give a damn what any of you think." Bringing his hands down, a choice finger arose.

The quill, prepared for annulment, clattered to the benches desktop as Senator Nado's jaw dropped... "Oh-h-h, now you're asking for it..." he warned. Before the orang could utter another word, he felt unease as his peers cautioned him to observe...

The gathering crowd was in Thade and Phallen's favor...

"They really want them together don't they?" Sandar nodded through teary eyes. "Yes."

Sick, Nado folded his thick fingers and rested his forehead there.

He could not sign the document.

Nor could the others.

Without one there was nothing. They were outnumbered.

394 -396 Quills were repositioned back into their wells and the Council all folded their hands, as if in unison, and pressed forward. "Very well..." Nado soothed, swallowing his pride

along with those presiding. The drone of voices buried the submissive acquittal before erupting into a seclusive buzz. The gavel fell for a good several seconds before silence was regained...

"SHUT UP AND LISTEN ALREADY!"

Thade, Phallen, Lantres, Attar, and Omri felt the finger stab them... EXILE... Right?

From the judges quarters a slim figure appeared. "If you condemn them, I'll never forgive you..." Stepping to Lantres' seat, their eyes followed... Sandar sucked in a deep breath; "Ari! You wouldn't!?" Brushing a loose hair from her eyes, she narrowed in. "You know me, father. I'm a rebel. Don't lift that quill." Sandar suddenly felt sick. Holding his head in his hands he nodded slowly. "Very well." Dragging his hands down his cheeks the Senator looked out at the mass. He sighed hearing the gavel crash repeatedly thanks to Nado's steady hand. "ORDER!!! Please regain order!" he bellowed before dropping the gavel to throw his hands up. There was no reargining it. "This sanction..." Senator Nado began, and the whole room fell silent. He cleared his throat. Peered stealthily about. "This sanction, along with Thade's reinstatement as General of the Derkein Army has been accepted." The whole room erupted with a tremendous roar. Voices praised along with claps, hoots, and whistles... Thade smiled triumphantly, winking at Ari before sweeping a supporting arm around Phallen's shoulders as she began to weep. "It's all good, my pet." and he nuzzled her cheek. All eyes focused on Thade. After making sure his mate was all right the warrior-ape raised his chin. Looked the Council square in the eye... He had what he wanted plus more when a cynical grin flashed its fanged glory. "I'll think about it." he replied coolly, squeezing Phallen's hand in concealed excitement. "At the moment, I have more important matters to attend to." Before the Council could lay an evil eye on Phallen, Thade, along with Lantres and Omri, blocked her, their bodies concealing her completely, joined by the Corporal's wife, Neena. Never allowing the bench to get a good look at just who or what had taken their General from notorious to glorious... Placing Phallen in the middle,

the six headed for the double doors. They opened wide with the help of the petitioners, casting condolences like rose petals when they passed. Head down, Thade headed straight for the exit. The outpour of concern for his welfare and his decision hit him hard creating a struggle withing to retain a neutral emotion; an air demanding respect and space now felt restricted. He was alpha-male, yet now he did not want it. Did not need it now that it had been returned. It was simply waiting for the healing hands of his tiny human companion - along with her healing nature to come alive. Had they known it would have been she to send him along a spiritual path... Would they have accepted him back? He burst through the main doors and took a deep breath. Composure shaken. The General glared over his shoulder. "I do not care." he swore. Catching the doors, Lantres and the others soon caught up. "This is the way it was meant to be." Lantres assured, concluding, " what you have experienced was a true acceptance for you and all that you love." Thade stopped in the middle of the street and stared up at the aged chimp. "Do I have assurance for her?" Waiting for Lantres' answer, the courtroom began to disperse. Thade gave his familiar half-nod. "I really don't want to be General again." Lantres brow wrinkled with disbelief as he read his Godson's lips: "No more..." Thade shook his head slowly. By then the majority had ventured from the House. Those brave enough to touched the couple, felt the satin fabric on Phallen's back or stroked the human's raven hair before being driven away by a threatening growl from Thade. Their interest was not in malice. It was an open accepting invitation into their world. Lantres broke from the emerging swell, his robes gathered as he caught up again. "Come, Godfather. Tell us stories of the past." Thade then turned to Phallen and raised her tiny hand to his lips. "Phallen," he purred. "we are for evermore..." Those around smelled the chemistry. Saw the love they held for one another in their eyes... Taking Phallen by the arm, Lantres interrupted. "Come...Walk with me and tell me how you've been..."

The troupe walked together, met by the people.
Congratulated. Supported in whatever endeavor was to arise.
"You know," Omri surmised, catching up with Thade and Attar,
his hand tightly holding Neenas; "There will be festivities?" Thade
nodded. "I did get that feeling..."

What was to become of Thade and Phallen? Phallen carries
Thade's child - A child, when due to enter their world meant an end
to hers... And Thade? So wrapped up in Phallen, to lose her would
send him into madness... What of the remaining Trident? Is
Acadia dead? Something was about to happen.....

FUTURE EPISODES

