

Broken

by Gryph

The first thing I become aware of is a pair of blue eyes staring down at me. Apes don't have blue eyes. I've noticed that. Brown, hazel, hell, I've even seen one with gray eyes, but never blue. Must be a strictly human gene. Anyway, there is some reason I'm supposed to be frightened of blue eyes, but I'm just too damn tired to care. But it's a different face than the one I expected. It takes me a couple of minutes to connect the eyes and the blond hair to a name. Alan. Virdon. And he looks like his favorite puppy just got run over by a car.

I try to move, to ask what's wrong, but I can't get my limbs to work, and my head feels like it's stuffed with cotton. My entire body feels numb. There's something I need to remember, but I can't wrap my brain around it. Maybe I'll just go back to sleep for a while. I do remember that sleep is something that I want to do.

'Don't die, don't die,' keeps running through my mind like a mantra. When we arrived at the farm and Galen produced the papers showing that one human slave named Burke was his property, the orang named Hoffa didn't look too happy. In fact, he looked about ready to spit nails. Now there's one I need to tell Galen once Pete's back with us. The expression on the chimp's face should be worth a few laughs. Once Pete's back. If Pete every fully comes back to us.

Anyway, the orang examined the papers carefully, eyed Galen with a great deal of suspicion, and finally sent the huge blond guy skulking around behind him to go bring out Pete. In my role as the dutiful servant, I had to remain in the driver's seat of the wagon during the whole exchange between Galen and Hoffa. But when the big man emerged from a small outbuilding carrying a blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms, it took every ounce of self-control I had not to knock the orang to the ground and pummel him into next week.

I must have let a gasp escape because Galen looked at me sharply, his face an open expression of absolute dismay. But the warning in his eyes was crystal clear.

Creating a scene here wouldn't do anything to help Pete. Just get him and get out. I jumped down from the wagon to take the limp body in my arms, raking my eyes over him, searching for any sign of life. There. A slight rise and fall of his chest. A faint fluttering of his eyelids. My eyes started stinging, and I turned away quickly to deposit Pete into the wagon. Luckily, there was some hay left in it to cushion him. I could feel his hip bones through the blanket, and I knew that his already lean body had dropped weight he couldn't afford to lose. My breath hitched in my chest as I knelt next to my friend and began to survey the damage, but my ears strained to overhear Hoffa's plaintive whining.

"Well, I can't say I'm very...upset to turn him over to you. I was beginning to think that he was going to be untrainable. It would have been a shame to have to put him down." It only took me a moment to realize the bastard was talking about killing Pete as indifferently as he would about putting a rabid dog to sleep.

"I've never had a single problem with him. He's one of my best servants," Galen replied tightly. "And if he dies, I will most definitely contact the authorities about reparations." Galen may have sounded cold and heartless, but I knew he was putting on a show for the other ape. Expressing his outrage in a way that was acceptable in this upside-down world.

"Oh, I don't think he's been *permanently* damaged. And maybe he will be at least a little more compliant for the time he spent here." Yeah, like he just finished a visit at one of those fancy spas. Maybe one that was run by the Marquis de Sade. I really wanted to pound this dickwad into the dirt. But I'd try not to do any *permanent* damage.

"I have found in my dealings with humans," Galen told the orang in a tone that could have brought frost to the Sahara, "that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. They *do* have intelligence. They *can* respond to kindness and compassion. Maybe you should try it sometime." Galen cut off any further comments by turning on his heel and climbing into the driver's seat of our vehicle. With a gentle slap of the reins, the wagon began to roll. I fixed the orang and his goon with a piercing stare as we pulled away.

Now, I can't drag my stare away from Pete's battered form. His face isn't too bad off. Spit lip, swollen eye. Bloody nose, but it doesn't appear to be broken. His lips are chapped and cracked in the corners, so I take some water from my waterskin and press

it to his mouth. A few drops seep in, and he moans quietly. I peel away the blanket carefully, and feel my gorge rising in my throat. There isn't an inch of skin on his torso that isn't covered with bruises or welts. He looks mottled black, red, purple, and yellow, new bruises overlapping old, all of them vivid on his pale flesh. A circle around his neck is abraded, raw and ugly, as are his wrists and ankles, evidence of harsh restraints.

I try to roll him on his side without causing any more pain, but he lets out a heart-wrenching whimper and curls into a fetal position. I rub my sleeve across my face to try and pull myself together. Galen glances back at the noise, and I can see that his eyes are shiny. I nod and try to give him some hope that Pete's going to make it, but I wish I could convince myself.

God, there's so much dried blood on his back that I can barely make out the lash marks. Some of the scabs have broken open and are oozing fresh blood, brighter red against the deep crimson. Despite the warm weather and the overhead sun, Pete's body begins to tremble. He's going into shock. I pull the blanket back around him and feel for the pulse point on his wrist. His hand reaches out and I clasp it, trying to convey to him through the pressure of my grip that he's safe now, back among his friends.

Thank the gods that Dumar's house isn't far away. Burke has joked that I seem to have cousins everywhere, but it has come in handy more times than I can count. Dumar is one of the best. I know I can trust him with...well, with our lives. When we finally tracked down who Burke had been sold to and where the farm was located, my relief threatened to, as my friends would say, knock me on my ass. After all, Pete had been separated from us three weeks ago. All we had to go on was that he'd been captured by bounty hunters who were rounding up runaway slaves. We were far enough from Central City that I didn't think he would be recognized as an enemy of the state, but in this western territory, slave auctions abounded. With every day that passed, Virdon's agitation seemed to increase ten fold. Questioning all those apes took so long. When we finally found the auction where Pete had been sold, the auctioneer was less than cooperative.

Much as my human friends hate the idea of playing servant to my master at times, it was Alan who thought of getting ownership papers. Considering the number of scrapes I've had to pull them both out of, it did seem a prudent course of action. Pete called them our little "insurance policy," whatever that means. When I produced the papers for the auctioneer and threatened to contact the authorities if he disputed my claim, I must admit that he suddenly became much more friendly. After all, they were genuine. My father had them drawn up the last time we were in Central City. They even bore the official seal of the council.

The only reason I recognized the name of the village nearest to the farm in question was because my cousin Dumar lived there. Now, he is my third cousin, once removed, on my mother's side. Which meant that he was trustworthy. My mother's side of the family has always been the more liberal of the two. Dumar has no wife or family, but has several very loyal human servants who work for him, which in and of itself is a sign of his progressive attitudes; he actually "pays" his servants with a place to stay and food, but they are otherwise free to go as they please. Dumar was willing to loan us this wagon, since it would not do to have an ape who was prestigious enough to own *two* servants to show up on foot.

I try to keep my concentration on the road ahead of me, but I can't help glancing back to check on my friends. I can tell from Alan's expression that Pete is in a bad way. Sometimes I am ashamed to call myself an ape for the atrocities that some of my brethren commit on humans. I had become so inured to the idea of servants and slaves, that at first, I was relieved when we found out that Pete had been sold as a workhand. At least it meant that he hadn't been turned over to Urko. My blond friend, of course, had been instantly appalled. Obviously, I should have been, too. I've come so far in the last year, but not as far as I thought.

I pull the wagon up to Dumar's house, which is luckily a fair distance outside the village. Dumar is rushing out to meet us, a human female right behind him, and nods when Alan rattles off the list of supplies he needs to care for Pete's injuries. But even my liberal cousin looks to me for confirmation before he sends the female scurrying off to get them. How far have any of us come, really, on a journey that may be impossible to complete?

I lead the way into the house, moving any obstacles out of Alan's path as he carries Pete into the spare bedroom. I don't have any knowledge of human medicine, other than what I've picked up from my friends and a short stint as a doctor at an ape hospital, but all I need to know is written plainly on Alan's face. Pete's condition is grave, perhaps even life-threatening.

"Galen, does Dumar have a bathtub? Anything that we can wash Pete in?" Alan asks me once he settles Pete on the bed. He untangles the still form from the blanket wrapped around him.

"Yes, I think so."

"Go fill it with warm water. We need to get all this blood off of him." With a worried glance at Pete, I leave to go prepare the bath.

Once I get Pete laid out on the bed, the blanket beneath him, I can better assess his injuries. I try to be gentle as I run my hands over his battered body, testing joints, feeling for broken bones, and probing the endless cuts and abrasions. Still, he gasps and moans through the whole procedure. No obviously broken ribs, a minor miracle there, Still, I would bet he's got at least a few bruised ones from the repeated blows to his chest. What I wouldn't give for an x-ray machine right now. Wait a minute, is that a bite mark above one nipple? What the hell...?

Continuing my examination, his abdomen is soft and none of his organs feel enlarged. Hopefully that means that there is no internal bleeding or damage, even though he is shockingly thin. I draw in a sharp breath when I reach his groin, horrified at the amount of swelling and bruising on his genitals. God, what did they do to him? His legs aren't broken, but his inner thighs are covered with welts from groin to knee. Fresh blood is smeared on them, too, even though the marks are at least a couple of days old. Mixed with the blood is another slightly cloudy fluid.

Shit! No, no, please don't let it be.... I roll Pete onto his side, eliciting another pitiful moan. C'mon Alan, you have to do this. At least Pete is still out of it. Grimacing in sympathy, I reach over and spread his buttocks, which are also covered with the bloody mixture. Damn it! A cold fury washes through me over what's been done to my junior

officer and best friend. I ease him back down flat on the bed, and pull a light sheet up over him until Galen returns. Sitting in a chair next to the bed, I lower my head into my hands, trying to figure out what to do next. After a moment, another series of moans draws my attention back to the bed, and I see glassy brown eyes looking at me with an unfocused gaze.

“Hey,” I say softly as I move to kneel next to his head, so he can see me better. “It’s going to be okay, Pete. You’re safe now. We’re going to take good care of you.” God, he looks so young and scared. I reach up to feel his forehead to make sure he’s not developing a fever, but he flinches away from my touch. “Pete, it’s me, Alan. How do you feel?” Okay, that was a stupid question. I’m sure he feels like he’s been run over by a truck...several times.

After blinking a few times, he seems to focus on me. I try to give him my best smirk as reassurance, but he still looks like he’s terrified. He opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, then manages to croak out, “Alan?”

“Hang on, let me get you some water.” I retrieve my waterskin from the heap on the floor and put my hand on the back of his head to lift him up a little. He flinches again, but doesn’t pull away. He drinks a few swallows, but then starts coughing. And from the look on his face, that must hurt like hell. Exhausted from the exertion and the pain, he slips back into unconsciousness.

When Galen comes in a few minutes later, he finds me with my head bowed, still kneeling on the floor. My hands have curled into fists as I imagine all the nasty things I’d like to do to that orang. “Alan?” he calls softly, “the bath is ready. Has he woken up?”

I swipe my sleeve across my face and look up at him. “Just for a minute, yeah.” I swallow hard to keep my composure. “Can you make sure we have plenty of clean linens?” I stand and gently pick up my friend. “And get rid of that damn blanket, will you? It stinks.” That came out a little harsher than I intended, but I can see in Galen’s eyes that he understands my anger.

Luckily, Pete remains unconscious through the entire bath. Under all the blood, his back is a mess. He’s obviously been whipped severely many times. Some of the blows broke the skin, but they don’t look infected. I’m more concerned now about the blood still oozing from his rectum. I can’t even begin to imagine how to treat the torn and

battered tissue. Who knows how many times he was violated, but the latest one must have occurred not long before we got there. I'll have to deal with my own guilt over that later.

Once he's dried and back in the bed, I treat and dress as many of his injuries as I can. He remains limp and unresponsive the entire time. After tucking some soft covers around him to prevent him from getting chilled, I pull a chair close to the bed and begin my vigil.

Where the hell am I? I know I'm on a bed, but it's too soft and comfortable to be that pathetic cot in Phelan's quarters. Not to mention that my arms and legs aren't tied down. I force my eyes open, even though they feel like they have been glued shut. Everything is blurry at first, but after blinking rapidly, I start to take in my surroundings. Someone is nearby, and I can feel my body tensing as I catch sight of the big guy sitting just a couple of feet away. But when the blond head snaps up, I just about cry with relief. Alan.

I thought maybe it was a dream, like I had so many times during the past three weeks. Alan and Galen come to the rescue and take me away from my tormentors. Only this time it's real, he's really here, and I'm finally safe...I think.

Oh, god, everything hurts. I can't decide which is worst, the ache in my ribs, the pounding in my head, the fire in my back, or...no, don't go there, Pete. I try to lick my lips, but my mouth is so dry I can't work up the spit to do it. Then I feel cool liquid on my lips, and I drink. Much better. It soothes my throat, which feels raw. Why does my throat hurt so much? Oh, yeah, the screaming.

My eyes lock with Alan's for a moment, and I can see the worry there. I wonder if he knows. Please, god, don't let him know. I don't want anyone to know. I can feel a flush rising in my cheeks, and I can't face my friend anymore.

"Pete?" he asks softly. He reaches over and puts his hand on my shoulder. But the touch sends a wave of panic crashing over me. I make a noise deep in my throat and try to move away.

“Don’t touch me,” my voice is quiet and hoarse, but Alan pulls away like he’s been slapped. Damn. Did I actually say that to my best friend? Yeah, but I really can’t deal with being touched by anyone right now, especially another guy.

I bring a hand up to push the hair out of my eyes, and my wrist is encased in bandages. I actually have to think for a minute before I remember why I’m covered in bandages. Someone hurt me. Badly. But the details elude me like shadows in the sunlight. And that scares me even more.

I have to get away. It’s the only way to escape the pain. Before I even realize it, I have the covers off and I’m getting out of the bed on the opposite side from the guy who wants to touch me. Who wants to hurt me. Who wants to...shit! I barely get my feet under me when my knees give out and I end up sprawled on the floor. Damn, it hurts. The world starts to fade to gray around me, but I look up to see the blond guy sprinting around the bed toward me, and I know there’s going to be more pain. Have to get away! I scramble backward, but my back hits a wall and I know I’m trapped. All I can do is curl into a tight ball against the blows I know will fall. No, please, no more. Don’t hurt me anymore; I’ll do whatever you want. I’m barely aware that I’m saying the words out loud before I can feel the darkness rise up to claim me again. The last thing that flashes through my mind is that I’m wearing pants and no longer naked.

The thump from inside the guest bedroom startles me while I am talking to my cousin and his servant. I rush into the room to find Alan trying to lift Pete’s limp body back onto the bed. “Oh, Alan, what happened?” I ask as I help hoist our unconscious friend.

Alan’s voice is low and gruff as he answers, “I don’t know, Galen. He woke up and seemed fine for a minute, there, then he freaked out. I don’t think he even knew who I was. He...he begged me not to hurt him.” He arranges Pete on the bed, smoothing his hair from his forehead, and gently pulls the covers up under his chin. He clears his throat and whispers, “God, Galen, what did that bastard do to him?”

I don’t have an answer.

“Why don’t you take a break? Dumar has some food prepared in the kitchen. You haven’t eaten anything all day. I’ll stay here with him,” I offer.

“What if he wakes up again? Galen—”

“If he wakes up, I’ll call you right away. Dumar knows of some local herbs and roots which may help Pete, but he wants to talk to you about them first.” Alan’s face is haggard and drawn. The past three weeks have been hard on him, and it looks like it isn’t going to get any better in the near future. “Go.”

His lips in a tight line, he nods and turns to leave. I fetch a basin of cool water and a cloth to place on Pete’s brow. Even in sleep, his expression is pained, his body tense. Oh, my friend, what happened to you in those three weeks we were separated?

I sit staring out the window as the world slowly turns to shades of gray. Alan returns, and I convince him to get some sleep. Not wanting to leave Pete again, he spreads out a blanket on the bedroom floor and lays down to rest.

I’m back in Phelan’s quarters in the barn, and he’s just returned from his daily rounds of the fields. I can hear him moving around. Getting things ready. My head is resting on my bent knees, and I don’t even bother to raise it. It’s not like I’m going to be able to see anything besides oblivion. Even the noises from outside are muffled by the thick wooden planks that enclose me. I desperately want to get out of this box, to be able to stretch my legs, straighten my aching neck and back, to be able to breath without feeling like I’m going to run out of air at any moment. It’s not the darkness that bothers me so much as what I can’t see in my inky surroundings. Occasionally I can feel a small furry body brush up against me, or the thin, spindly legs of an insect crawling across my skin. With my wrists and ankles bound so tightly, I can’t even squirm in the tight confines of the box. The first day he put me in here, I didn’t realize at first that it was going to be for the entire day. I stoically held onto my calm for about two hours, then I panicked. I screamed my head off for the next hour, stopping only when my throat was so raw that I couldn’t make a sound above a whisper. By the time he returned in the early evening, I was so glad to be out of the box that I would have done anything. Well, almost anything.

Much as I want to escape from the box, I don't want to face what will be waiting for me. Pain, humiliation, violation. At this point, though, my body has been trained to obey and to take my lessons without protest. But not without fear. The cold lump in my gut has been my constant companion for the past three weeks, but even more frightening is my nascent willingness to do anything to please. Anything to hold off the pain and the isolation. Anything to be worthy of the comfort and solace that is held in front of me like a carrot. Well, almost anything.

The lid to the box opens, and I squint against the sharp sunlight that slices through my vision, like an iron needle driven straight into my brain. My arms rise instinctively to shield my eyes, but the movement twists the leather straps binding my wrists, causing the scabs to tear open and ooze. I try to get my feet under me, but with my ankles lashed together and my legs cramped from disuse, all I can feel is a burning ache in my thighs and calves.

Next thing I know, I'm hauled out of my prison and thrown over Phelan's broad shoulder. All of my bruises and welts start singing in agony. Damn, everything hurts. When he sets me down on the packed dirt floor, my knees start to fold, but he is there, holding me upright with surprising gentleness.

"Well, mouse, are you ready to submit?" His voice rumbles deep in his chest, even when he speaks quietly. Of course, he doesn't need to raise his voice to scare the shit out of me. He easily stands at least six inches taller than me, and his arms are bigger than my thighs. If he wanted to, he could crush just about every bone in my body. And he asks me the same question, every morning and every evening.

I look up into those icy blue eyes and can feel my soul freeze. "Yeah. Just please don't hurt me any more," I whisper, horrified at the words even as they pass my lips.

His eyes narrow as he considers whether I'm deceiving him. He kneels down to untie my ankles, the entire time watching my face for any sign of resistance, which I have learned is completely useless. The first time I tried to escape when the bindings were undone, I pulled some of my best judo moves, and the next thing I knew, I was sprawled in the dirt with Phelan's knee in my back and his enormous hand around my throat. And as punishment, that was the first time he...

So I don't even try anymore.

He stands, and I am again amazed by the cat-like grace of someone that big. No one that big should be able to move as fast as he does. He trails his hand up my flank in an obscene caress that sends a shiver through me, which I hope is revulsion, and not something else. With a final warning look, he unties the thongs holding my wrists together. He releases me completely and steps back, watching me to see what I do. I know what he expects from me now.

I slowly sink to my knees, and bow my head, a posture of total and complete submission. I close my eyes, and feel them start to sting. The words taste like bile as they come out of my throat, "Yes, Sir. Whatever you want from me, Sir."

He looks a little better the next morning. From my place on the floor next to the bed, I heard his restlessness throughout the night. I heard the whimpers, and Galen's murmured platitudes, but can't even imagine the nightmares that must be haunting his sleep.

When I can't sleep anymore, I relieve Galen from his vigil, and take his place in the chair next to the bed. It's a hard wooden chair; I don't know how Galen slept sitting in it all night. In the background, I hear the two cousins conversing in the kitchen, and the domestic noises that signal breakfast being prepared. Gerta, the human female who works for Dumar, is brewing a tea from a flower the locals use to help pain. Might be a distant mutated relative of the poppy, so I'm hoping it's got some serious opiates in it. She has some other herbs she's making into a poultice to put on the open wounds on Pete's back. I can't believe how much I've learned about folk medicine in the last year.

The other urgent need is to get some nutrition into him. He's so thin. So...gaunt. As if on cue, Galen returns with a mug and bowl. "The tea is ready, Alan. And I've brought some broth to start him on. Do you think we should wake him, if we can?"

"Yeah, probably should. He needs to eat." I start to extend my hand to lay on Pete's shoulder, then remember his reaction to being touched yesterday. So instead I decide to just try calling his name. "Pete? Pete, can you wake up, buddy?" I try, in what I hope is my most soothing and reassuring tone. "Galen's here, and we've got something for

you to try to eat. But you need to wake up for it.” It’s so hard not to reach out and comfort him.

After another moment, he answers with a small groan, and his eyelids start to flutter. I try to encourage him further, “C’mon, Pete, wake up, sleepyhead. That’s it.” One hand comes up to try to scrub at his face, but he winces at the movement.

“Where...?” it comes out as a croak. His throat moves as he tries to swallow, and I know I have to help him sit up to drink. He was okay with that yesterday, before he freaked out, so hopefully he can tolerate it again.

“I’m going to help you up so you can drink,” I warn him as I slip one hand behind the dark head and Galen puts the cup of tea in the other. “It’s a tea we hope will help your pain,” I continue my narration, praying it will keep him in the here and now, and not wherever he went last time he was awake. “Take small sips.” Although the struggle to sit up even the little needed to drink is obvious, he manages to swallow down enough of the tea to satisfy his thirst, and it should take some of the edge off the pain. I wonder if we could rig some sort of reed or something to use as a straw.

He seems lucid; at least, he doesn’t have that glazed, unfocused look at the moment. I hand the mug back to Galen. “Hang on, I’m going to see if I can make you more comfortable,” I tell him as push another pillow behind his shoulders for support. As I step back, I can see him visibly relax at even the little distance I’ve put between us. I hold the mug out for him to take, and after a moment, he wraps a shaky two-handed grip around it, and continues to sip.

“As for where, we’re at the house of one of Galen’s endless cousins,” I relay with a smirk. I know it’s a running joke between him and Galen. I hear Galen make a huff of mock outrage behind me. “Dumar. He’s willing to let us stay here as long as we need to. And it’s far enough off the beaten path that we shouldn’t have any unwanted visitors.” I’m really biting my tongue, measuring my words carefully, trying *not* to ask the swarm of questions buzzing in my head. My instincts tell me I need to let Pete control the situation as much as possible.

Galen, unfortunately, continues to be less tuned in to human psychology. He starts forward to sit on the edge of the bed, and Pete’s head snaps up from the mug, eyes wide and wild. Thank heavens Galen notices Pete’s expression, and stops in his tracks.

His eyes take on that sad puppy-dog look, and he reaches furtively toward Pete, but doesn't get any closer. "We're so glad to have you back with us, Pete," he says in a very subdued voice. He offers the bowl of broth he's still holding, as if supplicating a dangerous and skittish animal. "You should try to eat something. It's just some broth, but it is very tasty, if I do say so myself," he finishes with a twitch of a smile.

Pete glances around the room, and I could swear he's casing the place to determine if the whole thing is a trap. Moving very slowly, he hands me the mug and reaches out to take the wooden bowl. He clears his throat a couple of times, like he's trying to remember how to respond, and finally mutters, "Uh, thanks, Galen." The room is awkwardly silent except for occasional slurping noises. Galen and I exchange a look that says, 'What now?' We are both lost and grasping at straws. Last night, I confided my fears to him about the type of trauma that our friend has been through. Galen doesn't understand the effect that kind of... thing... can have on the human psyche. But then, he's never been through Basic Training.

The purpose of military training, the intense, grueling, sometimes incredibly cruel training recruits go through in their first months, is to break them. Yeah, the physical fitness component of it is necessary, and obvious. Hiking 20 miles in a day with a 50-pound pack on your back builds stamina and endurance fast. The kind of stamina and endurance that is going to keep a soldier alive in combat. But the psychological aspects of it are not always so obvious. Those who come out the other side of basic training are broken and rebuilt into stronger personalities, with the character it takes to kill someone, to lead others, and even to sometimes lead others into situations where they will almost certainly be killed. Part of the techniques used in Basic are about control. Every aspect of the recruit's life is controlled by someone else. Every decision he might ever need to make is taken away from him. It sounds cruel and arbitrary, but it builds trust between the soldier and the one in control. Which is absolutely essential in combat situations.

I'm starting to get a sinking feeling in the pit of my gut that some terribly twisted rendition of basic training is what my junior officer has been through in the last three weeks. I've seen that same confused, terrified look in his eyes before—in recruits who washed out. But what differentiates Basic from just plain torture is that Basic is done in an environment where after he is broken down, the soldier is rebuilt. He is nurtured and

praised, encouraged to do the best he can, to be the best he can. I hope that part hasn't happened, because if it has, the ultimate result is bonding to the person in authority. And I hope for his sake, Pete has not "bonded" with whoever did this crap to him, especially if it was that orangutan.

As I'm reviewing my command psych training in my head, trying to remember the right things to do, I notice the brown eyes staring at me, the empty bowl held loosely in his lap. He looks like he doesn't know what he's supposed to do now. Shit. It's almost as bad as I feared.

"You done, Pete?" I ask casually, trying not to let everything that's begun to dawn on me show on my face. "You want some more?"

"More?" he repeats. "Yeah, more." But he makes no move to hand me the bowl. I slowly, gently reach out and take it from him, and hand it to Galen with a small nod. "Why don't you drink some more of the tea, I think it'll help with the pain." I hand the mug back to him again, and he takes it. I'm hoping if he can get enough of the potent tea into his system, what I have to do next won't be so bad. Galen heads for the door with the bowl, and the brown eyes follow him over the top of the mug, then snap back to watching me.

"Listen, Pete, I know you are hurting, buddy, but I really should change your bandages. The nearest pharmacy is a little too far for us to be calling in the middle of the night for antibiotics if you get an infection." I'm hoping making light of it won't alarm him about how serious a threat an infection is here in Backwater, US of Apes.

Shit. He freezes, the mug partway to his lips for another sip. His breath hitches a little faster, and I'm worried I'm about to experience another grade-A freak out. But he turns his head slightly to look at the opposite wall. "Okay," a whisper so soft, I barely catch it.

"Okay," I repeat. "Keep drinking that tea, I'll be right back." I head for the door to gather what I'll need, and hope Dumar has finished that poultice.

I'm just ladling more broth into the bowl when Viridon emerges from Burke's room and soundlessly closes the door. When he turns to me, I can tell he's distressed. I

would have though he would be happy that Pete was sitting up and eating! Humans are so confusing.

“It seems like his appetite is coming back. Do you want me to take this in to him?” I ask, hoping Alan will share whatever is bothering him. But the blond man pauses in the kitchen with his hands on his hips and his lips pursed. I know this look. “What is it, Alan?”

“I don’t know, Galen, but something isn’t right,” he whispers. “I told him I needed to change his bandages, and he just said ‘Okay’. No arguing, no complaining, no sarcastic comeback, and I know *he* knows how much it is going to hurt. And when have you known Pete *not* to argue about something?” He raises a hand to brush the hair back from his forehead.

“He’s weak, Alan. Maybe just too weak for arguing and smart comments. But at least he’s awake and talking. That’s a good sign, right?” There is just so much I don’t understand about humans, and how they think. Of course, it’s only been about a year since I was convinced that they *could* think.

“Yeah, but it’s still touch and go, physically. If he gets an infection.... Speaking of which, is that poultice Gerta was making ready?” Alan goes to the table; we have ripped some of Dumar’s old bed sheets into strips for bandages. He gathers up the rolls, and I hand him an earthenware bowl filled with a nasty smelling paste.

“Yes. She finished it this morning before they went out to do the farm chores. Dumar said that when he came back he would have some fresh milk for Pete.”

“Okay,” Alan replies absently. “Galen, I’m going to need your help with this. I need you to hold Pete up while I work on his back, especially. Just move slowly, he seems easily startled right now. And I don’t know how he’s going to react to being held, or... or touched.” I can see this is probably going to be as hard on Alan, and me, as it is on Pete.

I put my hand on Alan’s shoulder to reassure him. “I understand. But it needs to be done, you said so yourself. You *know* that.”

The blond head dips in another quick nod, and we turn to head back into Burke’s room. Even though Alan knocks and opens the door slowly when there is no answer, Pete’s expression is what I can only describe as terrified. He is clutching the mug, which

seems to be empty, to his chest. Oh dear. Yes, I think Alan's concern is not misplaced. Something is most definitely not right with our friend.

Viridon deposits the medical supplies on the chair, while I move around to the other side of the bed. The whole time Viridon is explaining to Pete what we are about to do, to try to calm him, I can see the way Burke's eyes shift back and forth between us, like a trapped animal. The way his entire body tenses when we reach to pull the covers back; for a moment, I think he's going to push past me and try to run away. And his answer to every question Alan asks is "Okay" or "Yes". I've seen similar behavior in other humans, who have been slaves for years, who have given up.

But we manage to get him into a sitting position. The only sounds from him at this point are sharp inhalations, almost like hiccups; no protestations, no exclamations. I can feel my own anger rising. He leans on me, and I feel the small flinches that accompany the removal of the bandages. The sheet under where he has rested has little red spots on it. Some are in patterns of lines, and some are just blotches. I can't drag my eyes away from those crimson stains. About half way through, I feel Pete go limp, and Alan senses it, too.

"I think he's passed out, Alan." My quiet voice is hoarse with the tears welling up that I refused to shed while Pete was awake.

"Yeah," is the only reply. A few minutes later, Viridon finishes with the other man's back, and starts to lower him back into the bed. "It's for the best, anyway; what we have to do next is worse. Roll him up on his side." I help roll Pete toward Alan, and avert my eyes when he starts tugging down his trousers. Alan told me about Pete's... other injuries.

I admit, I don't understand. How could an ape do something like that? It goes against so many taboos in our society, I don't even know where to begin. I know that there are other species of animals that mate with the same sex, but that is done from instinct. But this... this just is so wrong on so many different levels; the concept just eludes me completely.

Alan finishes poking and prodding around Pete's groin, and with a heavy sigh, pulls the trousers back into place.

"Well?" I ask as we arrange the limp body back on the bed, and pull up the covers.

“No sign of infection, and most of the bleeding seems to have stopped. I think if we can keep everything clean, he should heal. Right now, I’m actually more worried about his mental state.” Alan looks down at his friend, who looks like he is resting peacefully. “I don’t think we should leave him alone. I’m worried what he might do if he wakes up confused and afraid.”

I nod and move back around the bed. I had brought in another chair, and motion to him to sit down. “Alan, I don’t understand. What are you not telling me? What are you worried will happen? Please, I want to understand so I can help Pete.”

Alan sighs gustily again, and pushes his bangs from his forehead. I have noticed he does that when he needs time to think, when he doesn’t know what to say right away. So I wait.

“Galen,” he starts slowly, like he’s looking for the right words. “Do you remember when Wanda had Pete, and she found that brainwashing book? The things she did were intended to break Pete’s mind so that he would tell her everything she wanted to know. But her methods were actually fairly refined and subtle. She used sleep deprivation, sensory overload, confusion as her methods. And we were lucky we got to him when we did, she only had him for a few days.”

“I think Hoffa did something similar, tortured Pete, although I’m not entire sure to what end. What was done to Pete at that farm was far more brutal that what Wanda did, and it was done for weeks. I don’t know how that orangutan knew about these methods—maybe he found another book, like Wanda had. I just don’t know, but whatever he did, it looks like it was very effective. Pain and the threat of pain can be very persuasive, especially the type of torments Pete experienced. For human males, that kind of... violation... is very powerful. It makes the victim feel helpless and humiliated. It attacks the very basic foundation of our self-image.” He pauses, and notices that he is wringing his hands, and forces them flat on his legs.

“And those are the things we know about, that we can tell from his injuries. I don’t know yet what other types of torments he was put through, and we won’t, until he is able and willing to talk about it.” He sighs again. “When we got Pete back from Wanda, he told us that he didn’t remember a lot of what happened to him, which is a sign that she came closer than I want to think about to actually breaking Pete. The way he’s acting

this time, the way he's so quiet, the way he reacts to having other people around, I— I think they broke his spirit. I'm worried that Pete may never really be his old self." With that admission, he seems to deflate, like he's already failed his best friend. I know he still feels a strong sense of responsibility for Pete, because he is "in command". So now I have to worry about Alan as well.

I think I understand all the things that Viridon talked about. The more I hear about the humans of his time, the easier it is to understand their downfall. That they would do these things to each other. That they would write books telling others how to do it. Sometimes I think maybe their particular brand of deprivation is a disease, and now we apes are following right in their footsteps.

"Alan?" one more thing nags at my curiosity, but we've been too busy dealing with Pete's injuries to talk about it. "Why do you think this happened, though? Pete was sold as a farmhand. I thought when we got where he was, he'd be fine. Worked hard, tired, yes, but he's worked hard before. But I didn't imagine...this. What happened?"

"All right, mouse," Phelan's deep baritone rumbles above my head. My heart starts to pound. I know what's coming. "Go get on the cot."

I want to obey, I really do. I know that obeying is the only way to avoid more pain. I try to will my legs to move. But they stubbornly refuse. I know what will happen there. I swallow against the rising fear.

"Please, Sir. I can't. I won't fight you, if you make me. But I can't do it willingly. I just can't," I plead with him, completely disgusted with myself.

Silence. When I open my eyes, I can see his feet in my peripheral vision, but I know I dare not look up to read his expression, to see if he is angry. I know the blows could start any time. Instead, he takes a different tact.

"I'm disappointed, mouse. After all this time, you still won't trust me. You say you will do anything I ask, that you won't resist, but you still don't understand. Your will is irrelevant." I can hear the implied threat in his seemingly reasonable voice, the fist inside the velvet glove. "You still aren't ready. You need more lessons."

At that, my head snaps up, and my whole body tenses, as a surge of adrenalin starts my nerves singing. A huge hand descends to grab my upper arm, and hauls me roughly to my feet. The other hand clamps onto the back of my neck. I'm starting to beg, an incoherent stream of appeals that I don't even remember. But I didn't lie. I don't fight him, mostly because I know there is no point. He's just too damn big, too strong and fast, and I'm too worn down at this point. Then I see where he is steering me, towards the hitching post right inside the barn.

No. NO! I start to struggle then, completely involuntarily, digging my heels in, trying to twist out of his grip. Without letting go of my arm, he effortlessly backhands me across the face with the other hand, rocking my head to the side and flooding my mouth with the coppery taste of blood. The world starts to fade to grey. Next thing I know, I'm bent over the hitching post, arms secured to a ring on another post a few feet away, and my legs spread and secured to rings on both ends, so that my groin is pressed painfully into the rough wooden rail across the top, and my torso is parallel to the ground. I know what this position is for. For some reason, the blood droplets that drip from my face to splash in the dirt fascinate me.

The first lash of the whip across my back drives a scream from my already raw throat. He takes his time, drawing out the punishment and the pain while ensuring that I stay conscious for every moment of it. Between the blows, I hear myself pleading again, and I can't stop it. And even though every kiss of the lash is agony on my torn and well-covered flesh, I pray that it doesn't end before I pass out. Because when this punishment is done, the real pain begins. And in this vulnerable position, there is not a damned thing in the wide world I can do to stop the bastard from raping me. Again.

Pete wakes up again mid-morning, with a stifled gasp. He's been dreaming, and I can tell from the whimpers and moans that they haven't been pleasant. I've been sitting in the chair, whittling, just to have something to do with my hands. Galen is helping Dumar with some of the work around the small homestead, in exchange for everything he's done for us. And Gerta is in the kitchen preparing the mid-day meal. I put my work down on the table and turn toward the bed, but don't make any move to get closer.

“Hey, Pete,” I call softly. I wait while the brown eyes close once and slowly reopen. He draws a deep breath, with just a hint of a shudder to it. I have a cup of water ready, and even managed to jury-rig a straw from a hollow stem I found while I was scoping out the stream behind the farmhouse.

The dark head finally turns toward me. “Hey, Alan,” he replies hoarsely.

“Do you want something to drink? I’ve got water, or some more of that tea.”

“Okay.” Great, we are back to one-word answers. It also brushes the edges of my mind that he didn’t say *which* drink he wanted. So for now, I’m going to assume water.

While he’s drinking, I press on. “There is some food in the kitchen, how about getting up and around?” I gesture toward the doorway. After all, he hasn’t left this room since we arrived yesterday.

He finishes the water and puts the cup down on the table. “Yeah. Sure.” He starts to push the covers off himself. “Can I have a shirt?” Most of his torso is covered in bandages, and I would think the rough fabric of a shirt would be painful against his injuries, but considering the state we found him in, I’m not going to say no. And it’s the most he’s said so far, at least coherently.

“Yeah, of course.” I open a chest at the foot of the bed where Dumar said there are some spare clothes, and fish out a shirt that looks like he’ll probably swim in it, but it will do. Everywhere I go in the room, the brown eyes follow me, still looking awfully anxious. He gingerly swings his legs out from under the covers and rests his bare feet on the wooden floor. He’s hugging his arms around his chest, and before I can get too close, holds out a hand to take the shirt from me.

He gets the shirt on, but the sharp hiss between his clenched teeth tells me that raising his arms to get it over his head tweaked his back. But once it’s on, he seems to relax a bit. I stand at his side as he pushes himself up, ready to grab him if he starts to topple. I’m mildly surprised when he reaches out to hold onto my arm to steady himself. But he seems okay.

“Ready?” I ask. He nods, and we start shuffling toward the open door. He’s going slowly, but at least he’s moving. We get out to the table, and I pull out a chair for him, and I can tell from the way he delicately lowers himself to the seat, that maybe I should have made sure there was a cushion on the hard wood.

I ladle out two bowls of the soup on the cooking hearth, and add a hunk of bread on the side. I pour a mug of the fresh milk that Galen mentioned and put that on the table in front of him as well. I lower myself into the chair catty-corner from his.

For a few moments, we eat in mutual silence. Gerta must have gone back out, so we should be alone for a while. I know I have to get him to start talking about what happened. The healing of his mind is at this point at least as important as the healing of his body. I know what to do to help him physically. Keep the wounds clean, get food and liquids into him, get him walking around so he doesn't get sick. But I'm lost when it comes to helping him mentally. Get him talking, that's all I know. It seemed to be very big with the therapy-on-a-couch set back in our time. Last time, when he was recovering from his ordeal with the chimpanzee scientist Wanda, we stayed at Galen's parents' house in Central City. His mother, Ann, turned out to be quite the amateur psychotherapist, and worked wonders with getting Pete to talk about what was bothering him. I wish she was here, now.

I start talking about the chronicle of our search for him. How Galen and I met back up where the chase had started, and waited for two days for Pete to appear. That is the protocol we've established, if we get separated. Go back to the last place we were all together, and wait two days. It might not always be feasible to get there sooner than that, if one of us has to take a circuitous route to avoid pursuit or detection. But if it's more than two days, it's a good guess that there is trouble.

So when Pete didn't show up, we went to the nearest town in the direction we had last seen Pete heading when trying to escape from the gorillas who had forced us to split up. We thought they were part of Urko's patrols, and it was only when we got to the town that we found out that there were roving groups of bounty hunters in the area, chasing down runaway slaves. Why they had chased us when they stumbled on us, I don't know, since we obviously had a chimpanzee with us. The best guess that Galen and I had been able to piece together from rumor is that this particular band was mostly interested in collecting a bounty, and if that meant stealing slaves from an unsuspecting ape and selling them on the black market, well, illegally gained money was still good. And they took Galen for a stranger to the area, unlikely to garner much sympathy from the authorities, assuming he could even prove that he had owned the "servants" who

were pilfered. After all, possession is still nine-tenths of the law, even in the thirty-first century.

But Galen has papers, for both of us. And so when he reported the crime to the local authorities, under his assumed name, of course, they gave him a list of auctions likely to accept humans under shady circumstances. It took us a while to find the one that Pete has passed through, and by then, he was long gone. And one human looks pretty much like any other to most apes. The best the auctioneer could do was give us a list of the humans he had gotten from the bounty hunters, and who they had been sold to. Even winnowing it down to males, it still took a while before we were able to narrow it to the farm of the orangutan named Hoffa.

Pete looks up at me when I say that name, and I can see a lot of different emotions warring behind his eyes. Crap. Maybe that was a mistake. He's been so quiet, slowly eating all the food I put in front of him, barely even acknowledging what I was telling him until now.

He looks back down at the table and rests the spoon in the empty bowl, and just sits there. I'm hoping that he'll pick up the conversation with what happened to him, but he doesn't. He just sits there, waiting.

What did that animal do to him?

"Pete, do you want to go back to the room, rest some more?" I try as a suggestion, hoping he'll tell me what he wants to do next.

"Yeah. Sure." I don't understand why he's being so damned...agreeable. Meek. Like he's afraid to contradict me or express an opinion of his own. I'm trying not to get frustrated, but I've got a lot of pent up anger that's coloring my judgment. And I while part of me knows it's not Pete I'm angry with—that would be Hoffa, those gorillas, the world in general, and even myself—right now, he's the only target in front of me.

I try to cover my annoyance by clearing the dishes from the table, watching him surreptitiously while I do. The slumped shoulders, the unwillingness to look anyone in the eye, scream an attitude of someone who has given up. And that isn't my friend.

"Need some help?" I try to ask with forced conviviality, as I start to reach for his arm to help him up. I wait until he gives me a small nod before I actually touch him. The walk

back to the bedroom isn't as painfully slow and awkward as it was coming out, and his color looks better, less pale.

Okay, Pete. I'll wait until you are ready to talk. And I'll be here when you are, buddy.

"Galen, you know you are my favorite cousin," Dumar begins as I'm helping him collect eggs from his chicken house. Oh, dear, I sense a "but" coming. "But I don't understand your attachment to these humans. You say you gave up everything to travel with them, your future, even your freedom. Now, I don't agree with a lot of what our kind do to the humans, but do you really think of them as equals?"

I sigh loudly, and hold the bucket out for him to deposit the eggs he just plucked out of a straw nest. "Yes, Dumar, I do. Virdon and Burke aren't like *other* humans, although I think all humans have the potential to be more like them. It's not just that they are smart. Smarter than some of the Elders on the Council, I can tell you! But they have so many qualities that we only associate with ape-kind. Compassion, courage, affection. *Morality*. They think about what is the right thing to do, not because it will benefit them, but because it will benefit others." We move on to the next section of the hen house.

"But here's the thing that is truly amazing, Dumar. When Burke and Virdon interact with other humans, they bring out those traits in them, too. It's like, if you take the average garden variety human, and treat them the way you want *them* to behave, they rise to your expectations. I never noticed it before I met them, but now I see the best of them reflected in other humans. And I think, maybe it was there all along, and I was just too blinded before by my prejudice to see it."

Dumar goes quiet as he continues to root through the nests gathering eggs. He's going to a local market tomorrow, and will trade some of the eggs. Eggs are the one animal protein that many apes will eat, although some won't. I don't mind them, but I know Burke and Virdon will be very grateful for the chance to have some. I hope his silence is thoughtful and not disapproving.

I'm finding my own thoughts troubling since my talk with Virdon this morning. I am still truly puzzled how Burke's circumstances turned so terribly, terribly wrong. Much as I care for my friends, both of them, Burke is definitely the more challenging of the two to

get along with. He is often what Alan calls “a smart alec”, which I gather has something to do with the sarcastic comments that slip so glibly from his tongue. And stubborn pride! Much as I’ve just extolled my friends’ virtuous traits to my cousin, they are also not without their faults. They can be quite exasperating at times, even Alan. But Pete’s attitude can sometimes try even Alan’s seemingly boundless patience. I can’t help but wonder if what happened on Hoffa’s farm started with Pete’s insolence. Why couldn’t he keep his head down, his mouth shut, and wait for us? Didn’t he trust that we would find him, that it was only a matter of time until we got him out of there?

Well, it’s all water over the rocks now—no wait, that’s not right, the water goes under something. Anyway, I need to keep all these doubts to myself, because right now, getting Pete better is our only priority.

Damn. Alan knows. The way he tiptoed around during lunch. The way he talked about everything but what he so obviously wanted to talk about. I could feel him *not asking* the things he wanted to ask. I could see in his eyes that he’s put two and two together, and there’s no way the good ol’ Colonel could come up with anything but four on that one. Which means my best friend in this or any other world knows the worst about me, the one thing I would really like to have taken as a secret to my grave.

Damn it all to hell.

When we get back to the room, I tell Alan I’ve gotta go. Luckily for me, he’s already thought about that eventuality, and has an empty jug handy for me to use. He does leave the room long enough for me to have some privacy. Thank god. Taking a piss hurts, but mostly it’s the stinging of acrid fluid coming into contact with abraded flesh, and the ache of muscles that have been bruised and abused, but not that deep hurt that signals kidney or bladder problems. That’s one small relief.

After that, I climb back under the covers and curl up on my side facing away from where Alan is now sitting vigil. I get the distinct impression that he’s not going to leave me alone, except when absolutely necessary. Hell, it’s what I would do if the situations were reversed. But what I really want more than anything right now is to *not* face Alan. I don’t want to see the pity, or worse, any hint of revulsion. So the best I can do right now

is to turn my back on him while I try to figure things out, and let him think I'm asleep. I can tell he wants me to talk, to tell him everything that went on while he and Galen were galavanting around the countryside, taking their sweet time in coming to get me out of that hell hole. Nope, buddy, ain't gonna happen.

I hate this. I mean, come on, I even have to depend on Alan to take a piss! And every time he comes near me or talks to me, it's like I go into total shut-down mode. I keep flashing back to that walking hulk that's been controlling my life for the last couple of weeks. I can't get my brain to acknowledge that this is *Alan*. He's not going to hurt me. He's not going to lock me into a claustrophobic grain box. He's not going to chain me up, tie me down, beat the crap out of me, or shove... nuh-uh, Pete, don't go there.

While I was listening to Alan brief me about what he and Galen had been up to since we got separated, I tried to remember what all was happening to me at the same time. I'm a little scared that so much of the last three weeks is so fuzzy, like a memory dancing just beyond my ability to grasp. I remember the gorilla patrol, and how I took a bad turn from the others and got trapped in a box canyon. I remember the auction camp where they took me, and the chimp who ran the place. He didn't ask too many questions about the merchandise, as long as the humans he received were healthy and sellable. He definitely saw me as prime stock. When Hoffa's nephew came around on a buying trip for his uncle, he was also willing to overlook the lack of proper documentation, since I was being offered at a relatively bargain price. And that's about where the clear recollections end. I have a general idea of the things that happened to me—unfortunately—and that somehow Hoffa got pissed because he didn't think I was sufficiently... submissive for a slave. Yeah, big surprise there. Me and authority figures have never exactly gotten along.

So he turned me over to Phelan to be "properly trained". Oh boy, even thinking about that guy is making me break out in a cold sweat. And when I try to sort out what happened when, it all ends up a jumbled mess in my head. The whole thing is totally FUBAR.

I know I've been dreaming about him. The last couple of times I've woken up, I don't remember *what* I dreamed, just that it scared the shit out of me. And *his* face hovering over me. Doesn't help that Alan's got the same blond hair and blue eyes, that same

quiet tone in his deep voice, which might be part of why I keep freaking. But how do I tell my best friend that I would really rather not have him near me for a while, and even if I could, would he listen?

Yeah, he's not sleeping. I can *hear* him *not* sleeping.

Okay, Al, leave the guy alone. You are hovering like an old mother hen. He doesn't have to sleep if he doesn't want to.

I hear Galen and Dumar come in the house for lunch. Maybe I need a break for a while. And it's not fair to Galen that he's doing all the work of helping Dumar in exchange for our keep. I slip out of the room and close the door quietly behind me.

Galen looks up from the table where he is hunched over his food.

"How is he doing, Alan? It looks like he's eaten some more." Galen asks hopefully.

"Yeah, he came out to the kitchen and had a fairly decent lunch, considering."

"Galen helped me gather the eggs from the chicken house, and he said that you might like some to cook," Dumar offers. I notice the bucket of eggs on the floor by the sink. Great, that's just the kind of food Pete needs.

"Thanks, Dumar, I think I will, later. Pete likes a good omelet. Galen, how would you like to swap for the afternoon? I can help Dumar, and you can sit with Pete. I can use some fresh air and exercise, and I know how much you just *love* farm work."

Galen scoffs at my sarcasm. "Yes, I'm afraid I'm a city boy, still, through and through. You'd probably be a much bigger help to Dumar than I will be. Is Pete sleeping now?"

"He's resting," I answer Galen evasively. "He's still going to be sleeping a lot while he's recovering. But he should get up and walk around when he can, and just keep pushing the fluids on him, okay?" Galen's look gets quizzical at that last remark. "Make sure he gets plenty to drink, and eat, too, if he wants it," I clarify for him.

"Sure, Alan." Galen wrinkles up his muzzle, the ape equivalent of lifting the corner of his mouth. "Um... has Pete, um... said anything yet?" he stammers out.

“No,” my reply is tinged with disappointment. “I filled him in on where we’ve been and how we found him, but he didn’t have much to say in return. I’m not going to push it right now.”

Galen nods and returns to finishing his lunch. I putter around the kitchen, cleaning up some of the dishes, eating a little more food myself, and then follow Dumar out when he’s ready to return to the fields. Galen, my friend, I wish you better luck than I’ve had.

I am actually a little surprised that Alan proposed trading places for the afternoon. The way he’s been hovering around Pete’s bedside, I didn’t think wild horses would drag him away. Well, Pete is curled up in the bed, sleeping away. If I go out to the kitchen and leave the door open, I should be able to hear if he stirs. I was thinking that I’d wash the bandages we took off of Pete this morning that have been soaking in a bucket in the kitchen. I’m sure Gerta would do it if I asked, but I want to do what I can to help. I can get some water boiling to sterilize the cloth strips, because I’m sure we are going to need them again.

I check on him one more time, and hear the quiet, regular breathing of someone soundly asleep. Then I slip out to the kitchen.

I pump some fresh water into a pot and stoke the cooking fire. While the pot is set to boiling, I start washing the bandages. I take the strips out of the soaking water and put them in a fresh bucket. The dirty water gets emptied outside. My heightened sense of smell can detect the blood in it—Pete’s blood—and I shudder.

Back inside to the kitchen, and I start attacking any remaining stains with a rough bar of soap. When I’m satisfied that they are clean, I wring them out and take them over to the pot on the fire. Boiling them for a good long while should make sure they are sterile.

I’m just finishing cleaning up when I hear my name called from the bedroom. I rush in, and find Pete sitting up, dangling his legs off the bed.

“Pete?” I stop just inside the door, remembering what Alan said about not startling our friend with quick movements. “Are you okay?” I really want to smack myself. Of course he’s not okay.

“Galen?” he turns to look at me, his expression bone weary. “I was just wondering where Alan went.”

“He went out with Dumar to help. Do you want me to get him?” I start turning to head back out.

“No! No, that’s okay,” comes the insistent answer.

Oh. I risk moving closer, slowly, until I can sit on the far end of the bed. “Is there something I can get for you, Pete?”

“Nah. I, um—I had a bad dream, Galen,” he stammers, his face flushing slightly with embarrassment. “I just wanted to see a friendly face.” He gives me a half-hearted smirk.

We sit in amiable silence for a few moments, but since my friend seems in a talkative mood, I decide to press on.

“Pete,” I begin hesitantly, “I—I’m sorry for what you went through. Apes like Hoffa make me ashamed to be from the same race. What he did to you is unconscionable.”

Pete looks up at me sharply, the flush on his face a deeper crimson, but also sketched with a trace of confusion. His voice drops to a husky whisper. “Hoffa didn’t do this. Well, not directly.” He clears his throat, and fixes his stare at a point on the far wall. “That big goon of his did it. The one who looks like Andre the Giant on steroids, with a bad blond wig.”

Oh. It takes a moment to sink in. I have no idea who this “Andre” person is, but I get the general idea of what he is saying. Not the orangutan, but a fellow human? I can feel my mouth hanging open, and close it with a snap. Oh. Oh my. A human. A *blond* human, who, from what I remember of the quick glimpse of him in the courtyard, could be a distant relative of our own dear Viridon. Oh my.

I open my mouth, not exactly sure what I’m going to say next, but Pete cuts me off, still looking anywhere but at me. “Look, Galen, I know you and Alan know things I wish you didn’t. So lets just leave it at that, okay?”

“But Alan says you need to talk about... what happened and—“

Now he does look at me, and I can see the anger snapping in his eyes. “No!” he cuts off any argument. “No, I don’t *want* to talk about it, Galen! Alan can take his psychobabble and peddle it somewhere else. Who the hell died and made him Sigmund Freud?”

I raise my hands in a placating gesture. “Okay, okay. No one is going to make you do something you don’t want to do, Pete,” I reassure him. “We just want what’s best for you to get better.”

“Well, I’m fine. Or I will be when everything stops hurting so damn much.” But I can see his anger crumbling, and I’m not sure I like what I see beneath it. Hmph. If Alan thinks he’s out of his depth dealing with the troubles of the human mind, how in the world am I supposed to know that the right thing to do is?

“I’m tired, Galen. I’m so tired, I feel like something the cat dragged in. But every time I close my eyes to sleep, I just—it’s just not good. Can you just sit here with me for a while, and talk to me? Tell me a story, read me the dictionary, recite the ABCs, I don’t care. I just want to hear a friendly voice, and know I’m not—back there. Can you do that for me?”

I reach out touch his arm, and give it an affectionate pat. “Of course I can. Just let me take something off the fire in the kitchen.” I get off the bed and start for the door. I remember something Alan said and ask Pete over my shoulder, “How about some more of Dumar’s tea? It should help with the pain, hmm?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. Thanks.” I hear the blankets rustling as I hurry out the doorway.

Well, fuck. Of all the jacked-up, dumb-ass, whose-coffee-did-I-piss-in-to-deserve-this situations. What, is Alan telling the whole monkey-fucking world? I lean back into the pillows and close my eyes. And now Colonel Virdon thinks he’s gonna psychoanalyze me? Well, he can just stow that shit in the circular file where it belongs. The good Lieutenant Colonel may be a whole rank above me, but I went through the same 90-day-wonder officer’s training that he did. I thought the psych classes were a bunch of hooley then, and I think they are a bunch of hooley now. All I need is some rest and for all these damn bruises and welts to heal, put back on a little weight, and I’ll be five by five.

I hear Galen returning, so I sit up a little straighter so I can drink the tea he’s brought. The tea does help; the warm liquid spreads a pleasant numbness, and makes

me sleepy. When I'm done, I curl back down under the covers, and Galen settles into the chair.

"Well, I don't think I ever told you about the time I was a little chimp, and my best friend Felix and I accidentally started this fire..." Galen's voice washes over to me, and I start to drift off to sleep.

The situation started going horribly south pretty much as soon as I arrive on Hoffa's farm. I tried, I really did, to just play the part.

There are four of us that arrived at the same time, so I think I'll be fine if I just do what the others do. But when the first thing Hoffa does is tell everyone to strip and kneel so he can "inspect", I know it isn't going to be that easy. Alan isn't there to keep me in line. Still, I swallow my pride and bare it all. My—um, altered physiology earns me a strange look, but Hoffa must not have breeding stock in mind, since he doesn't comment on it, luckily for me. I'm still not sure exactly what it is about me that Hoffa decides is "insolent", whether I don't bow my head fast enough, don't have the proper tone of subservience, or maybe he is just a bit more perceptive in reading human body language than other apes; he starts talking to Phelan over my head, saying I need to be "properly trained".

When Phelan grabs me from behind and throws me on my back on the ground, I'm so stunned that he has the leather cuffs on my wrists tied together before I can react. I try to kick out, aiming to connect with his head, but he snatches my foot out of the air—damn, he's quick—and slams an elbow into my solar plexus. My breath whooshes out, leaving me gasping and unable to fill my lungs. Everything turns black.

When my head clears, I'm stretched out, standing on tip-toes, with my hands pulled above my head and tied to a rope thrown over a beam in what looks like a barn. And, shit, my clothes must still be out in the courtyard. Great. I wonder what I'll have to do to get those back. I look up when a shadow falls across me, and Phelan looms over me. This is the first real chance I have to suss him out. The shaggy blond head is massive, but then again, so is the rest of him. Now I know how Han Solo must have felt whenever he was standing next to Chewbacca. Okay, I definitely don't want this guy pissed off at me. I start trying to smooth talk him.

“Look, I’m sorry, whatever I said wrong. I’ve always been a little—slow,” I do my best dumb human act. “If you just tell me what you want me to do, I’ll do it.”

He shakes his head, and a crooked smile slowly spreads across his face. “It’s a good act, mouse. But I’m not fooled.”

Uh oh. The confused look is genuine. “I—I don’t understand.”

“You aren’t that stupid, so you can drop the ‘aw-shucks’, boy. Something tells me you haven’t ever been anyone’s slave, either, mouse.”

“My name is Burke,” I grind out reflexively, still trying to process what he’s saying.

“No, your name is what ever I say it is,” he grabs—no, engulfs—my chin with one huge hand, and gets his face within inches of mine. He’s searching my expression for something. “You aren’t stupid, but you definitely lack understanding right now of your situation. You may have never been a slave before, mouse, but you are one now. And by the time I’m done with you, you *will* understand that deep in your bones.”

“I have a Master, he’s a chimp named Proteus,” I remember to use Galen’s alias that was put on the papers.

Phelan lets go of my face with a little shove, and walks away. I try to follow him with my eyes, but he’s gone behind me, and I can’t turn my neck that far in my current position. My heart starts thumping a little faster, then takes a major jump when he comes back in front of me, swirling around a bullwhip.

“No, your Master is Hoffa.”

Unfortunately, the more nervous I get, the more my tongue tends to flap. “So what’s that make you, the head cat herder?”

With a sideways flick of Phelan’s wrist, the whip lashes out to wrap around my side. Fuck! I won’t give this dickwad the satisfaction of crying out. I can take a few lashes. Been there, done that. Why do I always seem to be the one who attracts all the sadistic psychos on this crazy planet?

“I am your trainer,” Phelan informs me when I’ve recovered my composure. “You will address me as ‘Sir’. And until you learn your lessons well, you will do nothing without my permission. I will tell you what to do, where to go, what, if anything,” he rakes his eyes up and down my body pointedly, “you can wear. You’ll eat when I give

you food, you'll sleep when I let you. You'll speak only when required to give an answer."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it, you're the big poohbah."

Another flick of the wrist, and another stripe of liquid fire wraps around me. God, shut up already, Pete!

"Obviously, you *don't* get it." He flashes that twisted smile at me again. "Not yet. But you will."

I clamp my mouth shut on another patented Pete Burke smart-assed comment. Deep breaths. The only chance I'm going to have of getting out of this situation is to stay frosty. Keep my cool, and grab any opportunity to get away when it comes.

"See, you *can* learn." I swallow hard. Too much more of this kind of tongue-biting, and the stupid thing is going to fall out of my head. Phelan starts ambling out of my sight again, around behind me.

"Now, we still have the little matter of your disrespect to deal with."

Whoosh... SNAP! Oh fuck oh fuck oh FUCK! Now he means business, not giving little flicks anymore. A line of pure agony is burning down my back. Nine more hard blows come in rapid succession; at the end, I'm groaning loudly, sure that all the skin has been flayed off my back. I'm trying to get my feet back under me to take some pressure off my numb hands, but my legs won't seem to work. I'm still waiting for more lashes to fall when Phelan grabs a handful of hair and pulls my head back. I try to focus my eyes, but they are being uncooperative, too.

"Hey, coach, I don't think I want to play anymore..."

Dumar and I return to the house late in the afternoon. Gerta is in the yard, taking laundry off of a drying line. When we enter the kitchen, Galen comes out of Pete's room, closing the door behind him, and rushes up to me. "Alan, we need to talk." I look around him toward the door. "Pete's asleep; we need to talk—somewhere else."

"I'll sit with your friend," Gerta offers. "Dinner is just about ready, though, so don't be too long."

“Thanks.” I turn to Galen. “Let’s go down by the stream, I want to see if there’s anything down there worth trying to catch, since Dumar has said he doesn’t mind if I bring some fish in his house to cook.”

Galen and I head out behind the house. He’s quiet during the short walk to the water, and sits on a rock a good distance back from it, while I walk closer to the stream and squat down to see if there is anything swimming in there.

“Okay, Galen, spill it. What’s on your mind?”

“Alan,” he starts, and I can hear the uncertainty in his voice. “I think we have a bigger problem.”

“Oh, how’s that?”

“I, uh, I think Pete... that is, uh, he told me—“

“What, Galen? Spit it out already!”

Galen gives me an exasperated grunt. “Pete said Hoffa didn’t abuse him. The other human we saw at Hoffa’s farm did it... all of it. Do you remember him, the large, *blond* human?”

I turn to Galen, eyes wide. “You got Pete to talk to you? What else did he say?”

“No, Alan, he didn’t tell me anything else about what happened, and got quite angry when I suggested to him that he *should* talk about his... experience. Alan, what is psychobabble, and who is Sigmund Freud?” Galen waves his hand dismissively. “On second thought, that’s not important. You are missing my point, my friend. I think one of the reasons Pete seems to be more comfortable with me right now than you is that *you* remind him of the human who abused him. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be harsh.”

So Galen thinks Pete’s afraid of me. Of me. His best friend for the last five years. I shake my head, not because I don’t believe him, but because I *do*. And it makes me angry as hell, not at Pete, but for him.

“Okay, Galen.” I pick up a few rocks and start to throw them into the water. “What do you suggest?”

“Just... let me tend him for a while. He seems to do better with me around, and even though I’m grasping at straws trying to understand what he’s gone through, maybe that’s for the best, too. He won’t feel... pressured.”

It makes a strange sort of sense. The fact that Galen *doesn't* have a common frame of reference, won't over-empathize with what he's been through, yeah, that might actually be better.

"Fine," I know I'm being more terse than I should be, but I hope Galen understands it's not personal. "We'll try it your way for now. Go ahead back in. I'll be there in a few minutes."

I feel horrible. I know I hurt Virdon's feelings, but he had to know about what Burke told me. Even with me talking to him, it took a long time for Burke to rest quietly. At first, he seemed to be having another nightmare, but then he settled into deeper slumber. But when I go back in after talking with Virdon, Pete is awake again, and sitting on the bed's edge.

"Hey Galen," he greets me. "I told Gerta she didn't have to babysit me." He looks better physically; although the bruises on his face are starting to turn mottled yellow and green, they don't stand out in such stark contrast on pale flesh. But he also looks decidedly nervous, chewing on a fingernail.

"I, uh—where's Alan?" He crosses his arms over his chest and attacks the fingernail again with gusto.

"He's out back, seeing if there are any fish in the stream." I'm very confused. Now he *wants* Alan here?

"Oh." Or maybe he *doesn't*.

"Look, why don't you come out to the kitchen and have dinner. You haven't even met my cousin yet..." I nod my head toward the doorway. "Come on. You have to eat."

Pete nods, and I indicate for him to go ahead. He still has his arms wrapped around himself, but he's moving much better.

He's settled at the table and eating with the rest of us, when Alan comes in from outside.

"Hey, Pete," Alan says brightly, if a bit forced. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, S—, um, yeah," he replies, as suddenly his entire body language changes. Where a minute ago, he was...well, if not chatty, at least *interacting* with the rest of us.

Now his head is down, looking only at his food, which he's stopped eating. And I can feel the tension like unspent lightning in the air.

Alan notices the strange behavior, too, but gives me a knowing glance and turns to the cooking fire. He starts loading up a plate with food. "Gerta, this smells wonderful. I'm starving. Nothing like some good old farm chores to work up an appetite."

Pete turns toward me, "I'm getting really tired again. Can I go back to my room now?"

I can feel my draw drop in surprise at Pete's tone; why is he asking my permission? But I try to recover before he realizes. "Oh, of course. Do you want help?" I start to stand, reaching toward his arm. I notice Alan's back stiffen, and can sense his conflicted desire to rush to the aid of his friend.

"Yeah, thanks."

As I'm helping Pete shuffle back to the bedroom, I catch a glimpse of Alan's face, and his expression of hurt mixed with concern is heartbreaking to see.

This routine continues for the next couple of days. Pete sleeps, badly, then wakes and eats. When Alan isn't around, Burke is restless, nervous. And when Alan is present, the younger man withdraws. So Alan mostly stays away, helping Dumar. Pete seems like he's getting better, physically, but I can feel the entire situation drawing tighter and tighter, like a rope stretched to its breaking point.

I have to get out of here. Galen is being so god damned obsequious, if he suggests going for a walk one more time, I'm going to scream. *Do you want some food, Pete? Do you want to rest, Pete? Do you want me to hold your dick while you take a piss, Pete?* I'll do what I fucking want, when I fucking want to do it. But I can't turn around without tripping over the big monkey.

As opposed to the good old Colonel, my supposed best friend, who is so fucking disgusted to be around me that has become a total ghost. He shows up in the evenings, barely says two words to me, then disappears again for the rest of the night. There's this... thing... out there, between us. He wants me to talk about it, which I am sure as hell not going to do. So he's punishing me by not talking to me at all. We used to have

all sorts of things to discuss, and now, nada. Well, shit. I'm a little surprised he hasn't tried to pull fucking rank and *order* me to tell him all about the big mean man who beat the shit out of me.

Fine. That's the way he wants to play it? Fine. Fuck it.

If I could just get a decent night's sleep.... But every time I close my eyes, *he's* there. I know I've woken up screaming a couple of times, I can see it in Galen's eyes. And of course, he runs and tattles to Virdon, who then gets this look of—pity that I just want to smack right off his face.

WHY CAN'T EVERYONE JUST LEAVE ME THE HELL ALONE?

Yeah, you know what, Galen, I think I would like to go for that walk after all. Alone. No, I don't want you to join me. I turn on my heel and walk out, leaving him standing there, gaping. Yeah, he'll run and tell Virdon, but I don't care anymore. I just want to have a little bit of privacy, to figure shit out. Is that too much to ask?

I duck out the back door of the house, figuring I'll head down to the stream, see what's out there. Hopefully, that's the direction I'm least likely to run into anyone. My back still aches, but it's not the mass of fire and agony that it was. Most of the open wounds have scabbed over, so there are only a few bandages left protecting them. Not like the mummy's cousin I was when we first got here. My wrists and neck, where the leather cuffs and collar dug in, are also still bandaged, but the itch of healing flesh is getting maddening. The only thing that's really still bothersome is how much it hurts to... walk. There are a few copses of trees further upstream, so I head that way, hoping to find a nice cushion of moss to park myself on while I think. But that constant reminder of what was done to me is just one more little indignation that chews on my nerves.

I find a tree and delicately lower myself down in the soft patch at its base, resting my back against the smooth bark. I tilt my head back and close my eyes, just soaking up the solitude and peace.

One of my biggest worries with this whole thing is that I would start hallucinating. When I was in the clutches of that ape-bitch Wanda, I started to doubt my own sanity, when it got to the point that I couldn't figure out what was real and what was illusion. I'm told that I even pulled a knife on Galen's mother Ann one night, thinking she was Wanda. God, I miss Ann. She'd know the right thing to do, how to make the nightmares

stop. And she'd read Galen and Virdon the riot act for the asinine way they've been acting, too.

Thinking about Ann and her sense of humor, the way she seemed to know just what I needed, I am just starting to actually relax for the first time in who knows how long, when I hear a twig snap. The adrenaline rush has me on my feet before even realize it, and I hang onto the tree as everything starts looking like I'm in a tail spin back in my jet days.

"Pete?" I hear Virdon say, in *that* tone. A string of expletives that would have made my drill sergeant proud all fight to be the first to leave my tongue.

Instead, I swallow them, and manage to grind out, "What do you want?" I finally look up, and there's my buddy, my pal, with that concerned look on his face again. Oh yeah, and right behind him is his little butt monkey, Galen.

"Galen said you took off by yourself. We're worried about you."

I pull myself up straight, and stride over to Virdon. I want to get in his face. "Well, I also told Galen that I'm fine. And I just want a little time to myself. Why won't anyone just let me do what I want to do for a change?" I'm suppressing an urge to just punch Virdon, I'm so pissed.

And he looks really shocked at my vehemence. Good. "We just think maybe you aren't in good shape to go wandering off on your own yet. We're worried that you might—" he pauses, and I can tell he really wants to say something else, "that something might happen to you."

"Oh, like getting sold as a slave? Like being beaten and abused while waiting for my friends to come get me?" I know I'm carefully choosing words to wound them, but right now I want them to hurt as much as I do. "Yeah, well, you're a day late and dollar short on that one, pal."

"We did the best we could, Pete."

"Your best wasn't good enough." C'mon Virdon, take a swing at me. I can slug a superior officer in self-defense without getting court-martialed. Not that I really believe we're ever going to get back, but the training is so ingrained, I just can't do it, at least, not yet.

But no. Instead Virdon decides he's going to be reasonable, and tries rolling out his psych training. "Pete, I know you are angry, and you have every right to be after what happened to you. But it's not us you're really angry with, don't you see that?"

"I'm warning you, Alan, don't try to head-shrink me. Just back off."

"Pete, I've been leaving you alone, hoping you would maybe talk to Galen if you won't talk to me. But you need to get this out."

"What I need to get out, Colonel, is out of this chicken-shit outfit. To stop traipsing around the countryside on a fool's errand, and decide what I want to do and where I want to go. It's bad enough I have to take orders from every god damned monkey on this planet, but I keep finding the only humans who think they can boss me around, too. Well, I'm done; I fucking quit." I know I'm pushing his buttons; mister straight-laced, mom-and-apple-pie never did tolerate dropping the f-bomb, never mind the blatant insubordination. But part of my brain is also gibberingly terrified of making him angry. Which I've done. I can see by his darkening expression as I go on with my tirade.

"That's enough, Major!" he barks. Oh shit. The rational part of me is suddenly a powerless bystander, watching myself as my knees hit the ground, my head and neck bowed, and I utter the two words that are my only defense against being punished for what I've done.

"Yes, Sir."

What the hell? A second ago, he being insubordinate as anything, looking like he wanted to punch my lights out, and now my junior officer is on his knees acting like a slave that I'm about to whip. What did those bastards do?

I do the only thing I can think to do; I squat down so that we are at least face to face. "Pete, what's going on?" I ask softly, and reach out to lay my hand on his shoulder.

Oh crap. Big mistake. His head snaps up, and I can see in his eyes the realization of what he's done. He violently shrugs off my hand, and scrambles to his feet. I rise also, trying to keep my eyes on his face. I can see a jumble of different emotions battling there—anger, confusion, shock, even fear... no, make that terror.

“Just leave me the hell alone!” he shouts, and shoves me in the chest with all the force he can muster. Well, I’m certainly not prepared for that, and land hard on my ass, with the wind knocked out of me. I hear Galen’s exclamation of shock behind me, and feel his hands on my arms, trying to help me up. But before I can take in enough air to say anything, Pete takes off full tilt back toward the house. He’s moving fast for someone who’s got to be hurting as much as he is.

I struggle to my feet, and start after him at a painful lope; even when I’m not sucking wind, he can still beat me in a flat out foot race, so I know I’m not going to catch him. Galen ambles after me with his shuffling stride.

I see Pete cut around the house, and then lose sight of him. By the time Galen and I round the front of the house a minute later, he’s nowhere to be seen. Dumar has a small barn where he keeps his milk cows, and Galen points to it, where the door is pushed open enough for a person to squeeze through. I know I closed it all the way when Galen came to get me a short while ago. I nod at my friend and head cautiously in that direction. I’m not sure what kind of state Pete is going to be in, but I don’t want to exacerbate the situation by rushing in blindly.

I push the door open all the way, both to let light into the dim building and to announce our presence with the creak of the old hinges. “Pete?” I call. “C’mon, buddy, where are you?”

“Alan, maybe he went—” Galen begins, but I shush him with a gesture. I hear a rhythmic pounding coming from one of the empty stalls. I start forward and wave Galen behind me.

“Pete, is that you?” I ask again as we reach the opening to the stall. I look inside, and my heart drops down into my feet.

My dark-haired friend has jammed himself into a corner of the stall, his knees drawn up to his chest, and he’s slowly banging his head backward against the rough wood of the barn wall. His hands are frantically tearing the bandages off his wrists, carelessly scratching open his healing skin in his haste to remove them. I can’t help it; I rush across the straw, practically sliding to a stop on my knees in front of my friend, and grab his hands with one of mine, and another behind his head, to stop him from doing further

damage to himself. “No, Pete, stop. Please stop,” I try to hard not to make it sound like an order, but more like a desperate plea.

I can hear the hitch in his labored breathing, but his hands still, and he finally looks at me, his brown eyes swallowed by pupil, “Al, something’s wrong with me. I can’t... I can’t...” his voice is quiet and hesitant. He swallows loudly. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing that we can’t fix, buddy,” I tell him with more optimism than I really feel at the moment. I glance back at Galen, who is still standing on the threshold. “You’ve been through a lot in the last year, all of us have, and I gotta tell you, there are times when I feel like calling it quits, too. But one thing I know for sure about Pete Burke, he’s not a quitter.” I give him a half-hearted smile.

“But why do I always get the psychos? You got shot, Galen broke his leg, but I’m the one who seems to always get the sadistic psychos who want to screw with my head. I don’t think I can do this any more, Al. You don’t know—“ he bites off the last, but despite his reticence, I think he’s on the verge of a breakthrough. I still have one hand on the back of his neck, which he hasn’t shrugged off. I’d really like to get him back into the house and get him cleaned up, but I don’t want to lose this moment.

“So tell me, Pete.”

He squeezes his eyes closed and ducks his head, like he’s afraid to look at me again. “I... I don’t want you to hate me...” he murmurs so quietly, I have to strain to hear him. Even so, I’m not sure I heard him right. Hate him?

“Why would we hate you, Pete? That’d never happen!” I can feel the tension building in him again, and my hand moves slowly rubbing the back of his neck.

“Because I’m so damn weak, because you’re disgusted to even be around me.”

“Good god, Pete, where did you ever get that idea? You are the last person I’d ever call weak.”

“I couldn’t... I couldn’t stop him, Al. He did... whatever he wanted to me, and I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t. I didn’t. It’s like I... let it all happen. All of it.”

“I saw that guy, Pete. I don’t think a Mac truck could have stopped him. And the shape you were in when we got there; you didn’t ‘let’ anything happen. What was done to you was criminal, it was sick. And it looks to me like you fought like hell.”

“I did at first, but then after the first time he... god, Alan, I can’t even say it, how am I supposed to deal with it?” ‘First time’, is all I hear. First? Oh hell. Pete takes a deep, shuddering breath, and finally looks up at me, like he wants to watch my expression, to see how I’ll react to his admission. “The guy raped me, Al. And I let it happen.”

“Pete, I don’t believe you just let it happen.”

“He pinned me down at first, yeah, and he threatened to break my neck if I didn’t cooperate.”

“Good god...”

“Y’know, Al, before this, I swore I’d rather die than let another guy do that to me. But when it’s real, when the guy is there with his hand on your neck, threatening to kill you if you don’t let him do it... it changes your whole perspective.”

“Pete, it’s still duress! Just because you recognize the futility of fighting doesn’t mean that you are giving your consent!”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Let me put it this way, if it were a woman, and she didn’t fight because she feared she be killed if she did, would you think it was still anything less of a violent act? Would you think any less of her?”

His brows knit together as he considers this. “No...”

“Then don’t think less of yourself, either. Just ‘cause you’re a guy doesn’t mean that you are invincible. Personally, I’m just glad you got out of there alive, pal.”

“Me, too, Pete,” Galen pipes up softly.

“And it’s tearing me up inside that we didn’t get there sooner,” I admit, finally coming to terms with my own guilt. “I’ve felt so bad, like I let you down; that’s why I’ve been scarce. I’m sorry.”

“I thought... that because you knew, you couldn’t stand to be around me. Most guys would be disgusted, I think.”

“That’s what you thought? Hell, Pete, if I was disgusted, it was with myself. Not you. I don’t think I could have survived what you’ve been through. You’re the bravest person I know.”

His snort of mild derision says he disagrees with me. But I won’t let him forget that it’s true.

“Alan, I’m so scared. I don’t understand why I reacted the way I did when you pulled rank back there, why every time someone asks to me decide something, it’s like my brain just locks up. I feel like I’m not in control, and that scares the hell out of me.”

Something from my psych training tickles at the back of my mind. “Do you remember our SERE training?”

“Yeah, better than you imagine. That shit saved my bacon back with Wanda.”

“What this guy did to you, did it remind you of any of that?”

“Not really, he never asked me any questions.”

“No, but he still wanted to break you. I’m guessing he stressed you pretty hard, physically and mentally. It’s just a different type of brainwashing, Pete, except the goal wasn’t to get information, but to get your obedience, right?”

“Yeah, he locked me in this grain box during the day, it was a lot like being in a really confining solitary cell.” I try not to wince at the imagery that evokes. “And actually, he did ask me a question. The same one over and over again. If I was ready to... submit to him, and to my master.” Another shudder runs through him. “In the end, I think I did. I did things he asked me to do... things that I can’t even imagine doing now.” He looks up at me with a desperate expression. “How do I live with that, Al?”

I’m grasping at straws, like a drowning man trying to save another. “By remembering that it wasn’t really you. They turned you into something you aren’t. Now we figure out how to get you back to yourself. I’ll just take some time, but you’ll get there.”

I follow my friends when Alan convinces Pete to go back into the house, to get him cleaned up and re-bandaged. I have to admit that right now, I feel a bit like, what does Pete call it... a third wheel? It is obviously Alan’s opinion that Pete is most concerned about, and whose reassurances are most meaningful.

Once Pete is settled back in the bed, with fresh bandages on his bleeding wrists, I go out to the small porch on the front of Dumar’s house, and sit in one of the chairs to stare out at the darkness. I listen to the small sounds of the night, trying to let that fleeting peace replace the broken sound of Pete’s voice.

Alan joins me about an hour later, and I see briefly in the light from the open door that he looks wrung out. We sit together in the darkness.

Finally, Alan lets out an explosive sigh. “Tough as that was, Galen, it’s actually a very good sign.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, the fact that Pete got mad at all, means he’s starting to exert his own will again. And that he started talking about what happened is a huge step forward.”

“So will he be all right now?”

Alan scoffs. “He’s still got a long way to go, Galen. And even though he’s taken a step forward, there are still going to be bad days. We have a saying for situations like this, ‘Two steps forward, one step back.’ Means that he’s still got a long way to go.”

Finally, a human saying that makes sense! “What do you mean by ‘bad days’? How bad?”

“Well, I’m worried about all these other things he feels ashamed about, that he says he can’t tell me about.” I hear Alan shift in his chair. “There’s this... thing... that happens sometimes with people who are held captive, even more so when they’ve gone through things like Pete went through. The docs called it ‘Stockholm syndrome’. The captive develops an attachment to his tormentor. It can vary from making excuses to forgive what was done to him, to something that the victim mistakes for affection.”

“You think Pete could have this Stock... Stock...”

“Stockholm syndrome. I don’t know, Galen. He’s already half convinced that what happened to him was somehow his fault, that he asked for it. It’s worrisome.”

I think on this for a few minutes, as Alan lapses into silence, lost in his own thoughts. “What now?” I finally ask.

“Try to get some sleep. I hope Pete’s out for the night, and we should try to get some rest to. It’s been a hell of a day, and it’s not going to get any easier for a while.”

It happened before he started putting me in the box for the day. Instead, I am hogtied in this kneeling position, with my hands bound behind my back, and tied to my feet. One rope runs around my neck and up over one of the barn’s beams. That one

keeps me from just laying down to take the pressure off my knees and hands. The other rope around my neck is tied around my bent knees, and pulls my head down into the proper subservient bow. I can't move it much in either direction. Hell, I can't move much, period. But Phelan says that's the idea, that I need to learn the proper position for a slave before his master. All my muscles really start to burn after a couple of hours.

He comes back a bit after dark, and lights a lantern that lifts the gloom in the big space only a little. From this position, I can only see his feet when he comes to stand in front of me.

"Well, mouse,"—oh, how I've come to despise that name—"are you ready to submit yet? Are you ready to serve your Master?"

One thing being alone like this all day has done is given me plenty of time to plan. And I've decided today is it. It's been over a week since I've seen Alan and Galen. For whatever reason, they aren't coming for me, and I can't wait anymore. Between the beatings and the long periods of being immobilized, I'm soon going to be too weak to try to escape. It's going to have to be today, and I have a plan. So I say those two words I've resisted saying up to this point, and even though I don't really mean them, they still stick in my throat.

"Yes, Sir," I croak.

The big man is quiet for a moment, and I'm afraid that he sees through my deception. He's incredibly good at reading body language, rival to some of the best from my own time. I have to be very careful in monitoring the pitch of my voice, the tension of my muscles, even try to keep my frenzied heart calm and slow. Stay frosty until it's time to actually spring into motion.

"All right, mouse. I'm glad to hear that." I feel his hands on the back of my neck, starting to untie ropes. When I can move my head freely again, I resist the urge to stretch my screaming neck muscles, or to sneak a look at his face to see if he's buying my act. I can't move until he gives permission, so I stay stock still while he finishes releasing the rest of my restraints. When he's done, he walks around me so very slowly, whether inspecting to see if I've actually moved, or just to see how long I'll hold this pose while he delays, I don't know. But I'm not blowing it now.

Finally, he stops in front of me again. “Very good, mouse. Do you need to relieve yourself before we eat?”

Oh, hell yes, asshole. You try kneeling here like this with a full bladder. But I have to ask the son of a bitch for permission.

“Yes, Sir...please?”

Another long pause. Damn. I hold my breath, hoping I got the tone right.

“All right. You can get up now.”

Yeah, easier said than done. I struggle to get my numb and tingling legs under me, and almost end up flat on my face. Phelan grabs my arms as I stumble, and holds me upright while I flex my legs to work out the pins and needles. Not yet, Pete, not yet.

Finally, I’m steady enough that he lets go of my arms, but takes up the tether to the collar and leads me over to the pot in the corner that passes for a toilet in this place.

After that, I know what comes next in the routine. I’m supposed to follow him back to the little table and chair where he eats, and kneel again beside it. Then take whatever scraps of food he gives me to eat. Walking around even this little bit, I’m feeling about as loose as I’m going to get. Not sure where I’m going to get some clothes, but I’ll worry about that later, when I’m far, far away from here.

We get to the table, and he stands there expectantly, still holding onto the tether. I start to bend my knees, like I’m going to kneel, but instead, drive forward, turning to take him in the midsection with my shoulder. Damn, it’s like hitting a brick wall, but he goes down, and I land on top of him. I pummel him with a double fisted blow across his face. Then I’m up, and about to take off at a full sprint for the door, but a hand darts out and grabs one ankle, pulling my feet out from under me. I land hard, and this huge mass lands on my back, I flail my arms and legs, trying to connect with anything I can, while trying to roll and buck, hoping to throw him off. A huge hand encircles my neck, pinning me in the dirt like a bug.

Phelan growls in my ear, “Stop it now, mouse, or I’ll break your neck.” Just to let me know he’s serious, he gives a little squeeze of my windpipe. Just enough to restrict my ability to breathe. When my lungs start burning from lack of air, and the world starts to turn gray, I go limp beneath him, signaling my surrender. I loudly suck in air when the

hold on my neck loosens slightly. His bulk is still stretched out covering me, so it's hard to get a deep breath, harder still to fight back my despair at being thwarted.

I can feel his heavy breath on my cheek, and out of the corner of my eye, see the blood as it drips from the end of his nose onto my face.

"I can see I'm going to have to take extraordinary measures with you, mouse." He pauses long enough for me to start imagining what that could mean. "Just remember, you brought this on yourself."

With my face mashed into the dirt, I can't turn my head to see what he's fumbling with, but I feel his weight shift slightly as he leans toward the overturned table. My mind is really racing now, making my heart thump even more painfully in my chest.

I yelp when he uses his knees to push my legs apart, and something cold and slick starts probing around my ass. Fuck, is that his finger? Oh, HELL NO. I start cursing and thrashing anew when he finds the opening back there and starts pushing at the entrance. His finger slips inside past the ring of tight muscle. Damn, it hurts.

He leans his elbow into my spine, pushing down on my neck again. "I *will* break it, if you don't stop fighting me," he hisses in my ear. I believe him. I stop trying to throw him off, but can't cease my hands scrabbling in the dirt, trying to find something to hold onto to ride out the pain.

The finger withdraws, and I actually have a momentary sense of relief, that it's over, that's the worst he's going to do, when he shifts again, and I feel something bigger pressing into me. My entire body tenses, and I guess he takes that for a sign that I'm going to start struggling again, and he exerts a warning pressure on my neck.

"No, please don't do this. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll do whatever you want, just please don't," I can hear the pleading, vaguely aware that the rasping voice is mine, but it's like I'm watching the entire scene play out from a distance.

"Yes, mouse, it will happen. Stop fighting it. It'll be easier if you relax."

I squeeze my eyes shut against the pain, as the pressure builds, and when his dick finally breaches the battered muscle, I howl in agony. My entire being is focused on that pain, the feeling like I'm about to be ripped in half. He's slowly forcing his way further in, sliding inside me with short grunting thrusts. My whole body starts trembling, from trying to endure the pain that won't end. His dick feels like it's the size of a fucking bazooka.

He stops when he's all the way inside me, and hisses in my ear again. "You need to learn that you are *property*. You are a piece of *meat*. Your body doesn't belong to you; its only purpose is to serve your master. Until you accept that, you will never submit."

To drive home his point, he pulls back and slams in again, drawing another scream from my raw throat.

"Quiet now. Just take your lesson, mouse."

The only noises for the next few minutes are the slap of flesh on flesh as he pounds his dick in and out of my ass, and my labored breathing as I try to quell the shuddering grunts forced out of me in rhythm to his violent thrusts. Then I feel him stiffen and let out a satisfied groan. His dick pulses and twitches inside me as he orgasms. In my ass. I'm trying really hard not to think about having another guy's spunk in my ass. At this point, I'm trying really hard not to think at all.

Maybe I should have just let him break my neck after all.

I think he's talking to me, but it's like trying to listen to someone shouting in an echo chamber. The words all blur into one another. The pressure on my neck and back is gone, but I really can't think of any good reason to try to move. So I just lay there.

From my skewed line of sight from the ground, I see Phelan's feet walking back and forth, hear what sounds like him moving furniture. Some time later, the world tilts crazily, and my body starts to float upward. No, wait, he's picking me up. I close my eyes against the nausea the movement causes. I taste something bitter in my mouth; I must have already thrown up at some point. I don't remember and don't care.

I'm lowered onto a lumpy, narrow bed, hardly more than a cot, barely noticing that my hands and feet are immobilized again. A huge warm mass settles in behind me, pressing up against my back, and drapes an arm across my chest.

And that's when I wake up in a cold sweat.

I know what I have to do.

Something startles me out of my light sleep. I listen for a moment, thinking maybe it was Pete calling, but I don't hear anything more. I sit up from my makeshift bed on the

floor, and look to see if Pete is stirring. The covers are pushed back into a pile, and the bed is empty.

Shit!

“Pete?” I call, softly for now, and climb all the way to my feet. A quick scan of the rest of the room tells me he’s not here. I try to convince myself not to panic, maybe he just went out to the kitchen for something, but I can feel the adrenalin fueling my fear. I reach over to the chair where Galen sleeps, and shake him.

“Galen, wake up. Pete’s gone.”

“Wha—“ but I don’t stick around to hear the rest of it. Two strides, and I’m out the door, into the empty kitchen. Galen’s there a moment later, and I still his hand as he reaches to light the lantern. Night vision is going to be more useful for searching right now. “Check the back,” I snap, as I head over to the front door and yank it open. The moon has risen, but its meager light shines on an empty porch and courtyard.

I follow a hunch and ghost across the courtyard, pushing open the barn door quietly this time. The inside is inky, but I can make out rough shapes, the cows sleeping in their stalls, the other walls that define smaller spaces. I go past the first two occupied stalls, to the last one in the row. Why does he keep coming back here?

I stand in the opening, a joke on the tip of my tongue about how we have to stop meeting here, but suddenly my mouth is dry and my heart about leaps out of my chest. He’s in the corner again, but this time he’s got something in his hands, turning it over and over. I can’t see clearly, but I’m pretty sure it’s a knife.

“Pete?” I whisper. His grip shifts on the knife, and now he’s holding it underhand, in front of him.

“Go away, Alan.”

“No can do, Pete.” And even though we both know the answer, I ask the question anyway. “What are you gonna do with that knife, pal?” I hold my hands out in front of me, and start edging toward him.

“Go away.”

“No.” Slide. Another couple of inches.

He holds out his right arm, the pale, exposed flesh of his forearm toward me, and presses the knife against it. “Stay the hell back, or I swear to god, I’ll do it.” That’s when I notice the blood dripping from his outstretched fist.

“Okay,” I hunker down right where I am. “I’m not going to get any closer. But I’m not going to go away, either, Pete.” I consider for a moment if I can get away with ordering him to give me the knife, but my instincts tell me that right now, any orders would send him further over the edge. “So what are we gonna do now? You’re calling the shots.” And because I’m not sure he’s even aware of it, I add, “You’re bleeding.”

“Doesn’t matter. Just meat.” His voice is distant, and now I’m really frightened.

“It sure as hell does matter, buddy.”

“Nope. Brought it on myself.” He raises his head, and even in the gloom, I can see the wet trails running down his face. “All my own fault.”

“No! No, it’s not!”

“I’m a liability now. To you and Galen.” His voice hitches, and I can see his hands start to shake. “What happens the first time an ape orders me to do something, Al? What happens the first time *Urko* orders me to do something, and I just do it? I could get you guys killed.” He takes a shuddering breath, and I watch the resolve solidify on his face. “It’s better this way.”

“No.” Oh god, he’s trying to rationalize this. “You’re going to get better, Pete.”

“And what if I don’t?”

“You *will*.”

He scoffs, “And what if I *don’t*? I won’t have your and Galen’s blood on my hands.”

I decide to try a different tact. “Pete, you are worrying about a hypothetical that may never even happen. We haven’t seen Urko for weeks. And when we leave here, we’ll go west. Further away from Central City, find some place to go where Urko won’t follow.” I swallow with a dry click in my throat. “We *need* you. I—I need you. You’re the only connection I have to home in this crazy world. If something happened to you, Pete, I don’t know that *I* could keep going.”

“No, you’ve got a family to think of. I got nothing. Nothing. Just property, someone else’s property.” He tightens his grip on the knife, and I can see it starting to press into his flesh. “Don’t want to be property anymore.” His breath is coming fast and ragged,

both his arms raised like he's about to do some serious damage. I know I should try to rush him, try to get the knife away, but I am transfixed, frozen in place by the surreal scene.

He fingers the knife again, and moves the blade minutely, repositioning it. His chest is heaving, like he can't get enough air. I watch as he makes another abortive attempt to cut into his arm, and another, and another. An anguished cry escapes from his throat as he flips the knife into an overhand grip and plunges it into the dirt between his outstretched legs.

And I'm next to him so fast, I don't even remember moving. I yank the blade out of the dirt and toss it across the stall. Then I pull the dark head against my chest and wrap my arms around him while his body is wracked with silent sobs.

When I don't see any sign of Pete behind Dumar's house, even down by the stream where he went earlier this evening, I go around front looking for Alan. The courtyard is quiet and empty, but I notice the door to the barn is open again. Would he go back there again?

I pause with my hand on the door, and I hear voices coming from inside—my friends' voices. They are talking quietly; I don't want to interrupt, so I sit propped against the wooden divider outside the stall.

I can't believe I'm blubbing on Alan like this. Damn. But I'm just so tired of everything being so fucking hard. This planet, the last three weeks, trying to deal with what Phelan did to me, and... what I did.

I wanted to do it, I still do. Anything to make the pain stop. But I fucking can't. I can't even do that right. When I manage to pull myself upright and wipe my hand across my face, I end up leaning against Alan, and he will has his arms wrapped around me. That should be freaking me out, but right now, it just feels comforting. I'm still trying to recover enough to breath, but all I can manage are little hiccupping noises. God, I'm pathetic.

Alan's chest expands behind me, and he lets out a long, tired-sounding sigh. "Pete, you gotta promise me you won't scare me like that again...."

I try to chuckle at him, but it comes out sounding like something more like a sob. "You think *you* were scared?"

I feel more than hear the rumble in his throat.

"Why am I such a screw-up, Al?"

"You're not a screw up. Talk to me."

"I meant what I said, I'm terrified that I'm going to get you and Galen killed. Maybe it would be best if you guys just left me here or something. Dumar seems decent."

"No, we stick together. No matter what, we stick together." He sighs again. "What else, Pete? What got you so wound up?"

Aw, hell. More Colonel Viridon shrink time. But I'll be damned if maybe he isn't right. Because keeping mum about it has obviously worked so well up to this point. I try to swallow past the big lump that's suddenly settled in my throat.

"I—uh, I had a bad dream. Honestly, Al, there was a lot of the last three weeks I just didn't remember. I thought that was for the best. But now it's starting to all come back. Sometimes in dreams, sometimes it's like a flashback. And the more I remember, the worse it just keeps getting."

"So you need time to deal with it. What was the dream tonight?"

"It was about the first time that he...raped me. I tried to escape. So he told me it was my fault, I brought it on myself."

"Pete, you know—" he starts.

"Yeah, I know, it's not my fault. I get that, at least on an intellectual level, okay? It's things that happened later, especially the last night before you and Galen got there. I hadn't really remembered it all, but it's like the dream shook it all loose." I take a deep breath, glad I've got my back to Alan, so I can't see his face, because otherwise I'm not going to be able to get this out. "Just let me say this, Al, okay?"

"After the first time, which just hurt like hell, it's like he got...affectionate. It just got fucking weird. He made me...enjoy it, if you know what I mean. Almost like in his twisted imagination, he was making a sick kind of love to me. He even put it that way a couple of times. I didn't want it, but I still got off. Makes me wonder if part of me *did* like it." My

hands are starting to sweat, and it's stinging the cut on my palm, where I tested to see how it felt to have my flesh part under a knife blade.

"That's part of why I wanted to...do this tonight. I just want some peace. But I couldn't do it. I don't know if it's because I would feel bad about leaving you here by yourself, or just because if I...die here, no one back home will ever know. Hell, I don't know. But I just couldn't do it. Guess that's a good sign, huh?"

"Yeah, I think that's a good sign," Alan agrees, his voice low and husky. "You're stronger than you think you are. I'm going to keep reminding you of that, even if I have to knock it into that thick skull of yours. And we aren't leaving you behind, either. Let me and Galen worry about me and Galen. You aren't going to get us killed.

"As far as the other stuff, Pete, you know, it's just the way guys are wired. Something feels good, even if we don't want it to, and we...ahem... respond accordingly. Doesn't mean a damn thing about you, pal, other than you were abused by this guy. He can think of it any way he wants in his sick head, but doesn't change what it was.

"Look, you take as much time as you need. Right now, we seem to be safe, and we aren't in any hurry to get anywhere. You can yell at me when you need to, although I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't knock me on my ass again, talk when you want to, just don't do this again, okay? And no going hotdog with the first gorilla you meet, and try to get them to do the job for you. You gotta promise me that, okay? No more. Never again."

"I'll try, Alan, I really will. 'Cause if we ever do find a ship to get home, you're gonna need a hotshot pilot; you can't fly for shit."

"Well, I guess that'll have to do for now." He shifts uncomfortable behind me. "Now, if you think we're up to it, do you think we could go back inside? My legs are both asleep, and you are still bleeding."

"Yeah, sure thing."

"Galen, you think you can give me a hand?" I call to my chimpanzee friend. I know he's been there for at least the last ten minutes, and I wasn't kidding when I told Pete that my legs were asleep.

He ducks around the wall into the small space, giving Pete a sheepish glance, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

"S'okay, Galen. Saves me having to say it all again, much as Dr. Virdon here would love that," Pete smirks and climbs off of where he has me pinned. As Galen is helping to haul me upright, my heart takes a quick jump when Pete walks over to retrieve the knife out of the straw where I threw it. But he wipes the blade on his pants and holds it out for me to take. It's my knife.

I'm just glad my hand doesn't shake when I reach out to take it. "Thanks."

We look quite the sight, the three of us, as I hobble along until the pins and needles work out of my legs, when we get back to the house. Galen lights the lantern, and I hold out my hand once Pete and I are sitting at the table. "Let me see that."

He lays his bloody hand in mine, revealing the long gash on the palm. "It's not that bad. I think it's stopped bleeding." Galen brings me a bowl of water and some clean cloths, and I start wiping away the blood. Pete hisses at the touch, but doesn't pull away. It's not so deep that it would need stitches, not that we have the ability to really do that anyway. Not for a simple cut, at least.

Once he's all bandaged up, he looks like he could fall asleep standing. Not surprising given the adrenalin he's been running on today. I help him back into the bed, and settle into the chair, letting Galen have the blankets on the floor. My brain is still going on overdrive, so I just lean my head back and close my eyes, knowing sleep is going to be a long time coming. But I'm a little relieved when I hear Pete's breathing even out into quiet sussurations.

Then I hear a sleepy, "Hey, Alan?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

Sometimes I think I'm making progress in understanding my human friends. Alan says that Pete getting angry is good. He even says that Pete trying to kill himself, and stopping on his own, is good. I don't understand. But he says it means he's getting better.

And the lengths that Alan goes to when helping Pete... I didn't think one being could care that much for another. Some days, when Pete still rages, Alan stands there and takes it. And some days, when Pete sinks into depression, Alan makes sure he knows how much he's needed.

But slowly, the good days are more frequent than the bad ones. What was that saying Alan used? "Two steps ahead and one step behind"? Something like that. Pete says Alan is a "worry wart". I still don't understand that one, but it's good to hear my friend revel in my confusion, even if the joke is at my expense. I don't mind.

I know Alan wanted to go north, along the coast to see if we can find some more of those secret hidden vaults that we found in the abandoned city. But Pete is still afraid of running into Urko, and betraying us. So now we plan to keep heading west, toward something they call "Hoostun". Pete says that if there is a ship anywhere around, that is where they might find it.

But whatever happens, we'll make those steps together.