

EIGHT

The cool dusk was marked by the first faint flush of stars. In the west, the sky was still bright red where the setting sun had burnt it. Virdon sat on the floor of the cage, pushing the straw around idly. He was slumped disconsolately against a wall; after the clout he had taken from Jason's rifle, he had not come near the bars. His attention was aroused by the sound of a key being placed in the door's lock. He looked up.

Morko, the gorilla guard, was opening the door. Behind the gorilla stood Innar. There was a second gorilla standing guard near the prefect. Virdon looked at them without much interest. Innar entered the cage and walked over to the man. He looked down at him with a sense of compassion. "I'd like to speak to you for a moment, if I may," he said.

"It's your town," said Virdon, shrugging.

"I can understand your hostility toward me," said the prefect. Virdon only looked at the floor in silence. "You say you are from another time, I hear," continued Innar. "You and the other human. This is what Jason told me."

"Yes," said Virdon.

"Is it better than now?" asked Irnar.

"It's different. And it's home."

"Yes, I can understand that. As this is home to me. And that's the reason I—" Irnar broke off sadly. "I'm sorry you ever came to my village. Any of you."

Virdon answered flatly. "No sorrier than I am. We had no choice. From the moment you picked up that magnetic disk and put it in your pocket, I had to get it back."

Irnar looked at him in surprise. "It was that?" he asked. "That little thing? That's why Galen came to—? I wish he had simply told me. I'd have given him the thing with my blessing. It meant nothing to me. Instead, that disk has caused us all an untold amount of grief. So foolish."

"You can still do it," said Virdon. "Just give me the disk and let me go."

Irnar shook his head sadly. "Give you the disk? So that you can be free to search for your home, while I lose mine? I'm sorry. Truly. But the time for free choice is past."

"It never is," said Virdon. "Not for intelligent minds."

"Sometimes," said Irnar, "there comes a time for action."

"Not unreasoned action," said the human.

"What happens now is not the result of whim," said Irnar gruffly. "I can assure you of that."

"What happens now?"

There was no answer from the prefect. Irnar signaled the gorilla guards that he was finished and left the cage. Morko locked the cage again and walked off with Irnar, leaving the second gorilla to stand sentry duty.

Galen and Burke moved stealthily along the street. There were still a few people about, but these were concerned only with getting to their houses and supper. No one noticed the chimpanzee and the astronaut as they moved closer to the cage, walking in the shelter of the huts' shadows. One of Jason's gorillas crossed the street ahead of them. They took refuge against the side of a

building, peering around. "It's impossible," said Burke under his breath.

"It's possible," said Galen, unaware that he was voicing Burke's unheard sentiment. "How can we do it?"

"I don't know," said the astronaut. "But it has to be before night falls. And we can't swing it alone. You're the one who came up with the plan to—" Burke broke off thoughtfully. "Wait a minute. I'll be back as soon as I can." He turned and ran, leaving Galen alone, worried, and watching.

Some time later, Burke arrived at Tolar's house, out of breath from his run. He rushed up to the house and opened the door. He burst into the main room, which was unoccupied. "Dalton!" cried Burke. There was only silence. "Dalton! Tolar!"

He hurried to the drapery that shut off Tolar's bedroom, opened it, glanced in, then went back out to the main room. His idea was in jeopardy; he had not counted on the house being deserted. He looked around in frustration, trying to plan his next move.

There was a small graveyard near the edge of town. The markers stood in rows like sentinels. Near one particular grave, a huge figure was kneeling. It was Dalton, alone. He was lost in thought; anguish and helplessness showed on his face.

After a while, during which Dalton was lost in solitary meditation, another figure approached from behind, standing there for a moment, watching the thoughtful young man. It was Tolar. Dalton was as yet unaware of his father's presence.

"I loved your mother very much," said Tolar finally.

Dalton glanced up at Tolar, then looked at the grave. "What would she tell me to do?"

"A man is not a woman," said Tolar. "Even if she were alive today, she could not do your thinking for you."

"She said there was no honor in killing," said Dalton.

"She said. But she loved me, Dalton. And she would

never have noticed me, except for the games. I would have been nothing, except for the games."

"That's not true, Father," said Dalton earnestly. "You would have made some other life for yourself."

Tolar stared at his hands and shook his head. "Doing what?" he asked. "Have you not lived well, because of my success?"

"How many have *you* killed, Father?" asked Dalton.

"The prefect created the games. They brought peace to the village. That is a blessing."

"That is beside the point," said Dalton. "Do you even know? How many men have you slain?"

"As many as I have fought," said Tolar impatiently. "As you will tonight. In the arena, it will all look differently."

"But I have no reason to kill him," said Dalton, remembering Burke's words.

"It's the way of the game," said Tolar.

"Is it?" asked Dalton, not believing it for a moment any longer.

The last traces of the sun's rays were vanishing, and the sky was turning from dark blue to black as Dalton arrived at the house of the prefect. Inside, after Irnar admitted the youth, there was an uncomfortable silence. Irnar studied Dalton, not quite sure what to make of him. Dalton was rather uncomfortable at suddenly doing this rash thing.

"I wanted to talk to you, Prefect," he said.

"I know that you have a strange reluctance about fighting in the games," said Irnar pensively. "Strange for the son of the great Tolar."

"That is possibly my mother's influence," said Dalton quietly.

"It is the nature of man to kill," said Irnar. "That is something that has been demonstrated to the satisfaction of every scientific investigator."

"Then why didn't the stranger kill my father?"

"Perhaps there is some unknown explanation," said

Irnar. "These strangers are fugitives and criminals, after all. They are desperate. Perhaps the stranger accepted a bribe, or something of that sort. Not that I'm trying to implicate Tolar, you understand. But possibly there was some illegal contact with another inhabitant of our village. Who knows? Who can tell the ways of humans?"

"I don't believe it," said Dalton.

"What exactly do you want from me?"

It was difficult for Dalton to get the words out, but it was something he had to do. "Prefect," he said, stammering, "I . . . I think the games are wrong. I think maybe that killing is wrong."

Irnar completely lost his patience with the young man. "Not in the games!" he cried.

"Always, my mother said. Always. I never understood until now, Prefect. But the stranger didn't kill, and now I know that my mother was right." He paused for a moment as he gathered his courage. "Prefect, I'm not going to fight."

Irnar stared at him, amazed at Dalton's impudence. "I order you!"

"I can't," said Dalton, his sudden courage used up. He felt weary. "It's wrong. And I have to tell the others in the village. I have to make *them* understand that it's wrong, too."

"You'll do no such thing!" shouted Irnar. "You are directly attacking me and my system of government. You are being rebellious. Be careful what you say, Dalton."

"The people have to know what has been shown to me," said Dalton. "They have to know that the games are wrong, that killing is wrong—"

Irnar was incredulous. In a fury, he rushed to fling open the door and call out. "Sergeant!" he shouted. "Sergeant! This human has broken curfew!" He looked at Dalton. "That's all I need. . . ."

Tolar's main room was no longer deserted. The huge human paced across the floor, raging. Near him stood Burke. Tolar was nearly out of his mind with hatred.

Burke watched and listened carefully; somehow he had to get through to Tolar.

That seemed unlikely, in Tolar's present frame of mind. "Destroyer!" he cried. "Destroyer of me! Destroyer of my son!" Tolar stopped his frantic pacing, breathing heavily. He turned to face Burke. Tolar's hands clenched and unclenched, and he flushed with anger. Burke backed away a step or two, warily, as Tolar slowly moved toward him.

"Easy, Tolar, easy," said Burke in his most conciliatory voice. He was trying to avoid setting the man off entirely. The one thing he didn't need was a rematch of their battle in the arena. "Just relax, Tolar, just—"

Tolar had other ideas. "You tell him killing is bad! What have you done *but* kill? You killed my honor! You killed my son's manhood! You—"

"Wrong, Tolar, wrong," said Burke, frightened by Tolar's intensity. He raised his hands as though to ward off the man's savage emotional outburst.

Tolar had had enough debating. With a snarl he leaped for Burke, his hands outstretched to catch and twist the smaller man's neck.

The door opened and Galen ran in, sizing up the situation as quickly as possible. Burke was going into a defensive crouch, his knees slightly bent, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. "Tolar!" cried Galen. "Tolar, don't!" Tolar stopped at the unexpected interruption. He momentarily halted his advance on Burke to see what the voice behind him meant. "Tolar!" said Galen. "Your son! He was arrested! He's been put in the cage!"

There was only stunned silence from Tolar. He didn't know how to deal with this latest and most unexpected turn of events.

"Tolar!" said Galen, trying to stir the man to positive action. "Your son's been arrested!"

The news finally penetrated. Tolar tried desperately to understand. "Dalton? In the cage?"

"Yes," said Galen. "Because he was against the games."

Tolar's anger and outrage grew. He forgot the fury he

had felt for Burke, now that it was turned in a new direction. "In the cage? My son?" His voice became almost a scream. "*My son?*"

Virдон once again had company in the cage. This time, however, it was neither Irnar nor Jason. It was Dalton, and the young human was a prisoner, also. Virдон was trying to catch up on the activities of his friends, whom he hadn't seen since much earlier that day. "Did they have any kind of scheme or plan?" he asked.

"No," said Dalton. "At least, none that I heard."

Virдон chewed his lip while he thought. The situation in Kaymak, as peaceful as the village had appeared to be, had turned into one of the most perilous the three fugitives had ever experienced. "If they're smart," said Virдон, "they'll just take off."

Dalton didn't understand Virдон's words. "Take off?"

"Go away," said Virдон. "Leave. An expression from my time."

"In your time," said Dalton. "If there had been no killing then, men might still be important now. That's true?"

Virдон glanced at Dalton. In all of his travels about the ape empire, Virдон had met very few humans or apes who understood that simple truth. "It's possible," said Virдон after a moment.

Dalton thought for several seconds. "It could still happen," he said. Virдон looked at the young man, realizing that there was more depth to Dalton than he had first guessed.

Two gorillas stood on guard outside the cage. One of the apes nudged the other and pointed down the street. "Look," he said. His companion looked and saw Tolar striding down the street toward them. His bearing and quick pace indicated that he was in a dangerous mood.

"No closer," said the first gorilla, raising his rifle as Tolar came near them.

"I want to see my son," said Tolar, his voice almost a growl.

"Nobody sees the prisoners," said the guard. "And no humans are allowed on the streets."

"He's my son," said Tolar. "I want to see him!" He stepped even closer. The other gorilla moved up, confronting Tolar with another rifle. "Don't do it, Tolar," said the second gorilla. "You were a great fighter. Go back to your home."

"Please," said the man. "All I ask of you—both of you—is a little pity. Pity on a poor human whose son has been condemned to—" By now, he had gained the attention of both apes, who had known and appreciated his superior talents for many years. They listened to him in a way that was generally reserved for their ape friends. Tolar had won a grudging amount of respect, even from these most ungenerous gorillas.

It was while Tolar was speaking that Burke and Galen leaped out from their hiding place. They both attacked the first gorilla, knowing that neither of them could tackle a gorilla one-to-one. Together they dragged the guard to the ground.

The second guard turned toward them with a roar. Tolar struck him on the side of the head, sending the ape to the ground with one blow. He dove for the gorilla even as the ape tried to get to his feet. Tolar clasped his hands together and clubbed the gorilla unconscious. The human got to his feet, not even breathing hard. He looked toward Galen, Burke, and the first gorilla.

The gorilla was struggling with Burke. Galen had rolled away from the conflict. It was clear that Burke was having difficulty at close quarters with the massive gorilla. Tolar jumped in, grabbed the ape, and knocked him out with two punches. Galen quickly bent down and got the key to the cage.

While Galen hurried to the cage, Virdon and Dalton anxiously encouraged him. Galen unlocked the door and the two human prisoners both hurried out.

Dalton rushed to his father's side. "Father, I—"

"I don't understand you," said Tolar, "and I never will. But no one should put you in the cage for that."

"I don't think that I could ask more from you than

tolerance," said Dalton. "I don't expect to have your approval."

Burke came over to them. "I hate to break up this reconciliation," he said worriedly, "but we'd better move, and *now*."

"What are we going to do?" asked Dalton, who, like Virdon, was in the dark about any plans Burke and Galen might have formulated. Before Burke could answer, a shot rang out; a cloud of dust was kicked up near their feet. The small group looked down the street to see a sergeant of the gorilla garrison with his rifle pointing directly at them. He was preparing to fire again. Once more the crash of the rifle split the air as the four humans and single chimpanzee jumped for cover. The bullet bit into the floor of the cage. The gorilla sergeant ran toward the escaped prisoners.

Burke led the way as they rushed away from the sergeant in the direction of Innar's house, by way of the back alley along the huts' rear sides. Once more the rifle shot was heard, although the gorilla was being left further behind every second.

The gunfire aroused the curiosity of Jason and Innar, who were arguing in the prefect's living room. They rushed outside, Jason drawing his pistol as he did. The four humans and Galen suddenly appeared in front of them, dashing across the street toward the astonished apes. "Stop!" cried Jason. "Stop, before I shoot!" Burke raised a hand and the party came to a halt. They hesitated in front of the prefect's house.

Tolar pushed his way to the front, coming close to Jason. He was intentionally blocking the gorilla's view of the others. "No! No!" he cried. He turned to look over his shoulder. "Run! Now!" Jason fired. Tolar was hit at close range but he would not be stopped. After hesitating another moment, the others ran off down the street, Jason turned to fire at them, but Tolar, badly wounded, blood covering his chest and abdomen, grabbed him. The human and the ape struggled wordlessly, Jason still holding his pistol.

The gorilla sergeant came running up on his short legs.

He raised his rifle, then lowered it. Irnar grabbed the gorilla's arm and silently shook his head. The sergeant looked up at Irnar, clearly puzzled, unable to understand why the prefect was preventing him from aiding Jason.

Tolar and Jason still battled, grunting and panting from the heavy task of trying to control the weapon. Tolar's grasp on Jason's wrist tightened. The pistol fell to the ground with a dull clatter.

"Now, Prefect? Shall I shoot him?" asked the worried sergeant.

"No," said Irnar.

"But—"

"No," said the prefect again, coldly.

The villagers were drawn out by the commotion, as well. Disregarding the curfew, they gathered in a mob around the struggling pair in the street.

Tolar scrambled for the pistol. Jason pushed him aside, sweeping up the pistol as Tolar staggered toward him again. The human wrapped the gorilla in a tight bear hug. The pistol fired, and after a moment Jason slumped in Tolar's hold. The human moved his arms apart, no longer supporting the gorilla's dead body. Jason fell into the dust at Tolar's feet, shot fatally through the chest. Tolar turned, his eyes filled with pain, and looked toward Irnar. The man reached out one hand beseechingly; then he, too, collapsed to the ground, dead.

Irnar stared at the scene impassively for a long moment. He knelt beside Jason's body and saw that the gorilla was dead. Then he glanced toward Tolar's bloody corpse, feeling a genuine sense of loss. "Nobly sacrificed, my friend," he murmured.

The sergeant moved to kneel beside Irnar. He made a quick examination of his own. He was shocked when he looked up at Irnar. "He's dead," said the gorilla.

Irnar was calm, secure in his superiority and greater intelligence. He was also pleased that everything about the matter had been tied up, more or less neatly, by this unexpected turn of events. There was the matter of the escaped prisoners, but only Jason and Irnar knew of the importance of Burke, Virdon, and Galen. As for Dalton, he

was imprisoned merely for "breaking curfew," and no humans had actually seen the young man in the cage. "Umm, yes," said Irnar. "As you saw, he died a hero's death, fighting a crazed human."

"But I could have—"

Irnar raised a hand calmly. "Sergeant, your bravery is not in question. I will see that you are properly mentioned in my official report."

"Thank you," said the sergeant, confused but willing to be honorably cited.

"We must not let unfortunate incidents like this interfere with our normal routines," said Irnar. He made a gesture of dismissal to the gorilla, then glanced up. Around them, watching, were the human villagers of Kaymak. There was an audible "ahh" passing through the crowd, a collective sigh. This was the climax they had been denied in the arena. Tolar and Jason were the deaths they had needed to witness.

The next day, Virдон, Burke, Galen, and Dalton were walking along the trail that led to the clearing where the fugitives had first seen the youth and his father wrestling. They moved silently through the late autumn woods until they reached the clearing. Gradually, from the distance, the sound of a galloping horse grew louder. Galen heard it first, but soon the others could make it out as well. Virдон stopped them. "Someone is in a real hurry, riding that fast along a trail this bad. Come on," he said. They hurried off the path, into the underbrush where they could be out of sight. They hid themselves and waited. After a few moments Dalton grew nervous. The horse's hooves were coming closer. He made a decision, rose, and started out into the clearing. Virдон tried to grab one of the young man's arms. Dalton looked at him. "No," he said quietly. "Please, no."

Virдон let the young man go. Dalton stepped out into the clearing; the others remained where they were, watching him.

Dalton waited as the sound of the galloping horse was

almost upon him. Suddenly, Innar emerged from the trees, into the clearing. He pulled his horse to a halt when he saw Dalton, who walked up to him.

"What of my father?" he asked.

"He was a brave man," said Innar simply.

Dalton studied the prefect's face. "And the games?"

Innar sighed deeply. "I'm afraid they died with him. Perhaps there is a better way to govern."

"There must be," said Dalton.

There was a long moment of silence as they looked at each other. "Tell your friends that I have never met them, and they have never met me," said Innar.

"Yes, Prefect."

Innar reached into his pocket, extracted something, and handed it to Dalton. "And wish them good luck for me," he said. He suddenly wheeled his horse around and rode back down the path. Dalton stood watching him go and then glanced down at the object in his hand. Resting in his palm was the magnetic disk on its leather thong.

Later, after some walking through the woods guided by Dalton, the party stopped at a fork in the trail. "You sure you won't go with us?" asked Burke.

Dalton nodded. "There's so much for me to think about. So much I still don't understand," he said.

"It could be dangerous here for you," said Virdon.

Dalton paused, thinking hard. "That isn't important," he said. "What *is* . . . important . . . I think . . . is that killing should stop." He paused again, having difficulty articulating his feelings. "People should know that. Killing should stop. Well, I guess I won't be seeing you. Good luck."

"You never know," said Burke. "We may pop back in on you sometime."

"I hope so," said Dalton. He turned and walked off in the direction of his home. Virdon, Burke, and Galen watched him go.

"A beginning, I guess," said Burke.

"Who can tell?" asked Virdon, smiling. "The world seems to be able to use all it can get." He pointed off

down the right fork, which Dalton said went on almost due south. With an audible sigh from Galen, the three fugitives shouldered their packs more comfortably and continued their march.

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