

DRACULA OF THE APES

Book Two: The Ape

G. Wells Taylor

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Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)

[October, 1894.](#)

[CHAPTER 1 - Goro's Land](#)

[CHAPTER 2 - The Tribe](#)

[CHAPTER 3 - Eeda](#)

[1894 - 1899 - One to five years of age.](#)

[CHAPTER 4 - The Night Ape](#)

[CHAPTER 5 - Grooming Rock](#)

[CHAPTER 6 - Mates and Playmates](#)

1900-1902 - Six to eight years of age.

CHAPTER 7 - Friends and Enemies

CHAPTER 8 - Mystery and Danger

1903 - Nine years of age.

CHAPTER 9 - Special Son

CHAPTER 10 - Omag's Mischief

CHAPTER 11 - The Lair of Fur-nose

CHAPTER 12 - Treasures

CHAPTER 13 - The Shining Fang

1904-1905 - Ten to eleven years of age.

CHAPTER 14 - A Jungle Joke

CHAPTER 15 - The Call of Dreams

CHAPTER 16 - The Pride of Prey

CHAPTER 17 - A Great Killer

1907 - Thirteen years of age.

CHAPTER 18 - Seeds of Ambition

CHAPTER 19 - The Two Trees

CHAPTER 20 - Magnuh

CHAPTER 21 - The Bakwaniri

CHAPTER 22 - Demons, Curses and Crimes

CHAPTER 23 - The Guilty Parties

1907-1909 - Thirteen to fifteen years of age.

CHAPTER 24 - Life Flies Forward

CHAPTER 25 - Strange Apes

CHAPTER 26 - The Lions

1910 - Sixteen years of age.

CHAPTER 27 - Harkon the Huntress

CHAPTER 28 - Lurking Vengeance

1912 - Eighteen years of age.

CHAPTER 29 - Heirs to the Crown

CHAPTER 30 - Skin-stones and Doorways

CHAPTER 31 - The Cripple's Cane

CHAPTER 32 - King of the Apes

[Other titles by G. Wells Taylor](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)

Acknowledgments:

A special thanks to the irreplaceable **Katherine Tomlinson** who edited these books.

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

Bram Stoker

Dracula

&

Edgar Rice Burroughs

Tarzan of the Apes

October, 1894.

CHAPTER 1 – *Goro's Land*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So far, only one of the apes, an adolescent blackback male, had died from an infection that came on after the thunder-hand had put a hole in his arm. Others touched by Fur-nose were more fortunate and had suffered painful wounds but escaped with their lives.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tribe favored meat also, and supplemented their diets by scavenging flesh from carcasses killed and abandoned by large carnivores. Sometimes the apes killed their prey themselves, forming cooperative groups to hunt smaller animals using their claws and fighting fangs, and

using crude weapons of their own design. All members of the tribe might participate in these “hunting” expeditions, though it was a cultural preoccupation of the blackbacks who often bragged about their prowess.

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

CHAPTER 2 – *The Tribe*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet a mother could not be ever watchful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the king thought again that perhaps he should have slain Omag long ago, or sent him into exile. But, Goro felt that his former challenger's mind was damaged like his body, and that on his own his brain sickness would only fester. The king believed that Omag would heal if he were allowed to live with his tribe and since Goro knew no dishonor or weakness in his own heart; he was blind to its existence in others.

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

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

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

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

So the other apes breathed a collective sigh of relief and continued gorging on berries. All except Eeda who was hooting worriedly, searching in the dense brush for her son.

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

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

...that Eeda's little son mimicked.

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

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

And such mockery was punishable with death.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The silverback was first to hear Eeda's cries.

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

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

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

The danger had not come from outside of the tribe.

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

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

A king's work was never done.

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

Omag bellowed, driving her upwards, his rage blinding him to all danger. The branches under him were already cracking from his great weight, but he pushed on, gripping the ever-thinning trunk with his powerful hands and feet as Eeda screamed above him

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The silverback or another male would give her an infant to fill the little one's place after an appropriate period of grieving was observed. Goro paced away, his sadness lifting. He was certain that the apes of his tribe would support the young mother in her anguish. Life would go on as was the way.

But Eeda was incapable of being practical.

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

CHAPTER 3 – *Eeda*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stupid Tobog," he muttered, echoing Goro's sentiment.

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

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

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

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

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

"*Sip-sip!*"

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

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

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

Goro grunted, and the other apes halted in the long grass to sniff the air. The smell of death lurked around the tree-nest, but something else was loose upon the breeze. Past Fur-nose's lair toward the beach came a cold and sickly smell that reminded them of decay and rotten wood—and something else—a metallic taste it brought to mind, of blood.

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

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

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

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

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

Now death inhabited the tree-nest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But for now...leave her alone.

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

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

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

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

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

Baho coughed a warning over his king's shoulder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was something different in that closed place, not death, but life! She smelled blood and breath, and turning feebly in place to catch the scent, her eyes fell upon an opening in the wall like a cave framed by tree trunks. Blackened, it was, with burned wood, but the scent came to her keen nose from inside it. The blood smell and breath wafted from the darkness within, and Eeda hooted quietly when her eyes detected movement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Goro grumbled and turned to challenge her, but Eeda answered him fiercely. She shrieked, and snapped her teeth at the silverback with her shoulders half-turned to him, jealously guarding the infant with her body. Screaming she leapt away, first climbing over the shoulders and backs

of Goro's surprised lieutenants, and then outside rushing toward the jungle through the long grasses.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1894 - 1899
One to five years of age.

CHAPTER 4 – *The Night Ape*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When he wasn't being a nuisance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Goro was not about to challenge the wisdom of his forefathers, and preferred protecting the group against the dangers that he knew, over those that he did not. The silverback like any leader knew success lay in his ability to find food for his tribe, and as long as his territory was bountiful there was no need for change.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eeda had not been prepared for how draining adoptive motherhood could be. She was young, just 12, but she was often exhausted by their daily activities, sometimes lying dazed upon the ground after Gazda had fed—napping in fits and starts as the tribe foraged around her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Something that only a mother could love.

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

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

CHAPTER 5 – *Grooming Rock*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Despite his illness, Omag was still a powerful male with silver hairs on his muscular shoulders and back. His face and chest grew more ravaged by the day, but male apes were judged by their strength, not beauty, and it was clear that the crippled ape's physical deficiencies were compensated by a ruthless mental acuity. So, when Omag was not away hunting and eating the sickly flesh he craved, he'd squat near Akaki and Oluza, and encourage their dreams of power.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Omag would catch the slowest of them in his powerful arms and the rest would run away in terror to hide behind their wall of sticks. The crippled ape would carry his prey to a stone lair he kept nearby where he could eat them at his leisure. Their flesh was succulent around the rosy mounds of purple rot, and their cries of terror and pain pleased him as he gorged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 6 – *Mates and Playmates*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But Kagoon will make an excellent blackback, so long as he does not have political ambitions," Goro grunted quietly before thinking. *Then again, the damage to his head might serve him well in both cases.* The king smiled and panted mischievously at his own jest before rolling from elbow to elbow casting about the long grass for Baho. The old silverback would appreciate the joke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The jungle went quiet...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The young apes listening to Baho shivered as he spoke.

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

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

Was life in the jungle not terrifying enough?

End of this eBook sample.

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G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to complete Canadore College's Journalism program before receiving a degree in English from Nipissing University. Taylor worked as a freelance writer for small market newspapers and later wrote, designed and edited for several Canadian niche magazines.

He joined the digital publishing revolution early with an eBook version of his first novel *When Graveyards Yawn* that has been available online since 2000. Taylor published and edited the *Wildclown Chronicle* e-zine from 2001-2003 that showcased his novels, book trailer animations and illustrations, short story writing and book reviews alongside titles from other up-and-coming horror, fantasy and science fiction writers.

Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include additions to the Wildclown Mysteries and sequels to the popular Variant Effect series.