Sasq'ets

An *Alternatives* Series book

By Robert P. Wills

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I have to thank paleontologist Robert T. Bakker for writing Raptor Red; an outstanding third-person account of dinosaurs during the Cretaceous Period as told from the point of view of a female Utahraptor. As with my other story *King Gor*, it helped me write from the perspective of Sasq'ets.



We will be known forever by the tracks we leave

-Dakota Tribe saying

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One
An Archangel in Paris

Anna walked along the sidewalk on the edge of the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, toward the imposing gates at the main entrance. Even though it was not in what would be called a rough part of town, it was still a place to be on one's guard- especially at six AM as it was now for her walk. Anna tried to arrive at the zoo in time for the morning feeding of the apes; before the park was open to the public.

While the menagerie was the second oldest zoo in the world, it was not the largest by far. She had heard Henry Larchmont talking with Justin Trudeau about acquiring a large parcel of land that was about five kilometers east and on the other side of the Seine River in what used to be the town of Vincennes- until it was gobbled up by an ever-growing Paris. The parcel was behind the Château de Vincennes, former fortress and royal residence and over thirty-five acres in all. Considering that the menagerie was fourteen acres, this new zoo would be over double the size. She hoped the two wealthy men succeeded in their plans so that the animals would have larger areas to live in. She also hoped she would be able to continue to care for the apes in their new home in Vincennes even after she was married. While it was almost unheard of that a married woman would have a career, the word that stuck in her mind was 'almost'. Anna planned to have the matter completely settled before they were married in the Spring- five months from now.

Anna was brought out of her introspection as a street sweeper moved directly in her path. He didn't seem to be looking at her as he swept so Anna moved to the other side of the sidewalk, nearer the road to avoid him. As she got closer, he detoured in his sweeping to put himself in her path again. She had walked this same route to the zoo from her home three times a week, splitting her time with the National Museum of Natural History and had seen this man several times, often exchanging morning pleasantries. She had never given him any

indication that was she interested in anything more than just a passing 'good morning'.

When she was ten feet away from him, she moved back to the inner part of the sidewalk putting the Menagerie's large border wall beside her. She casually looked over her shoulder as she made the move. There was another sweeper walking behind her. He was carrying his broom and walking quickly to close the distance between them. Whether he was just joining his comrade-in-work or had more nefarious intentions did not matter to Anna. She had learned from her American friend and cowboy, Colton Maguire that being proactive in a situation more often than not kept it from spiraling out of control. And demonstrating one's ability to defend themselves was the best way to be proactive.

So Anna stopped walking and put her back against the wall to allow the man to pass. As she did so, the man slowed his pace but kept moving directly toward her. She looked at the other man; he had stopped his sweeping and was now standing in the middle of the sidewalk, broom held out blocking the way. At this time of the morning, they were the only three people on this section of sidewalk. Occasional cars and horses passing by paid them no attention - thereby offering her no support at all.

"Good morning." Anna said to him with a smile. She smoothly pulled her Model 1892 pistol from its holster she wore on a belt under her jacket. "How are you today?" She asked as she flipped open the cylinder, spun it then snapped it shut with a quick flick of her wrist. Since her fiancé Pierre had given it to her on the *Monarch*, she had become very adept with it. "Just in case the animals get out of hand." She said with a smile as she waggled the pistol. She let her arm drop to her side. She also dropped her smile and narrowed her eyes at the man still approaching her. "One never knows, correct Monsieur?"

The man stopped. "Yes… One does never know." He said as his eyes fixed on the pistol. "I…uh…was coming to speak with my friend, Michael…" he cringed as he realized he said the man's name. "I… apologize if I surprised you."

"Oh you will find that I am *far* from being surprised." Anna said flatly as she turned and started walking again. She still had her pistol at her side.

The man moved the broom to his shoulder as if it were a rifle. He opened his mouth then closed it, unsure of what to say.

"Monsieur *Michael*. Named after the Archangel, no doubt."

"I…I suppose so." The man stammered, embarrassed.

"Hebrews chapter thirteen verse two, right here on the streets of Paris." Anna said to him as she walked past. "How amazing." Even though she didn't turn around to look, she listened intently to see if the two were following her, but all seemed quiet. When she made it to the entrance a hundred yards away, she looked back. Both men had returned to their sweeping. With a shake of her head she holstered her pistol as she passed through the one gate that was slightly ajar for employees to use.

Two
Jumping Fish

The creature stepped out from its cave and sniffed the air. It was cold and crisp. Colder than it was the day before. He knew it would continue to get colder for a while until the leaves came back on the trees, then it would warm up again. He looked left and right as he smelled the air. There were familiar scents carried on the breeze as it whipped around; a bear and two cubs, a wolf and one other. Then the scents separated; there was a slight difference in them. Two. There were two of them.

They smelled like the Brown Ones. Those he did not bother trying to avoid. If they crossed paths, they crossed paths. The same with the wolf. It was of no concern. The creature had three categories of things in the forest: Enemy, not enemy, and food. Practically every animal it encountered fell into those categories. The bear fit in the 'enemy' category. Especially when it had young with it. And since the bear young did not fit in the 'food' category, it avoided them. Deer young were another matter entirely- they fit in the food category. There were also the Lighter Ones (who smelled differently than the Brown Ones even though they looked very similar) it avoided these because they were firmly in the 'enemy' category.

Rabbits were frustratingly in the 'not enemy' category. They were definitely not 'enemy' but they were also too fast to be 'food'. Several had wandered around his lair long ago and after many unsuccessful attempts to catch them, he decided it was not worth the effort for such a small morsel. And the rabbits seemed to realize that. A while after coming to the realization they were not 'food', several families of rabbits moved into his lair. He did not understand why but they would come and go from it, ignoring him completely. He did not try to eat them now because they were amusing to watch run back and forth. Many times since, he had awoken on a cold morning to find a large number of them nuzzled up against him. He would swat them away but they invariably

came back. Since they did not bite, he just let them do what they had decided to do and just ignore them instead of trying to eat them. They were very much like turtles in that way.

At the moment the creature was more interested in the ones that fit in the 'food' category so it walked in long strides toward the river. As it went, it smelled two of the Brown Ones; males. They were ahead of it. Without worry, the creature pressed on through the forest with agility and grace belying its size at what would have been a run for the Brown Ones. For him, it was a casual pace.

He entered a clearing that the two Brown Ones were in. They had snared a rabbit. He looked down at one as it passed, not even breaking its stride.

"Sa…Sasq'ets." The Brown One said as it backed against a tree and dropped the rabbit. The rabbit scurried off as the Brown One's companion stood fixed in place unable to move, mouth open but unable to speak.

The creature gave them a satisfied grunt as it continued on its way. He had no idea if this rabbit was one of the ones that lived in his lair but since he had decided to ignore them, he didn't care if they were eaten by others or not. Had the Dark Ones attacked, it would have killed them. He would not have eaten them however; while they were more often than not in the 'not enemy' category, they were never in the 'food' one. Without looking back, he continued toward the river. The delicious -and fun- jumping fish were its target.

When the creature arrived at the river, he stood next to several dead trees, looking upstream. He had learned that it could spot the groups of jumping fish far away and then quietly walk into the water and wait for them to arrive. It was a fun game that also provided a full belly. Especially since he had become very good at catching the fish as they jumped. He had also learned that he needed to kill the fish before it swallowed them whole because a large live fish would squirm in his belly making him throw the fish up, which was very unpleasant. So when he caught a fish, he would press its thumb into its head until the fish stopped moving then he would swallow the fish whole. If it would fit, that is. Some of the jumping fish were too big for that. Those he would press his thumb into them then throw them onto the shore to eat later. If he didn't, they would sometimes squirm their way back into the water.

The creature saw several fish jump at once. There was a group coming his way. Quickly, he stepped down to the water and waded in. Once he was waist deep, he stopped. He was not afraid of the deep water and was a good swimmer; he had crossed the river many times with no trouble. But if he moved too much, the fish would go around him, making him miss his meal. He made a small sideways shuffling adjustment when the fish jumped again, then he leaned forward with its arms out, waiting. The anticipation was the fun part of the game since he never knew where the fish would leave the water.

A fish jumped right in front of him, hitting him in the chest. With massive strong hands, he grabbed the fish as it bounced off. The creature looked around; the fish always jumped in groups. True to their nature, another fish jumped off to the side. With barely a lean, he was able to reach out six feet to the side and grab that fish as well. It was too big to swallow. So he pressed its thumb into it and then tossed it toward the shore almost twenty feet away. The other he killed and swallowed whole.

After a few minutes and several more catches, he waded out to gather the three fish he had tossed onto the shore. He would eat those at its leisure in its lair. After a nap.

Three
Just a Nice Display

Anna ducked into the small area then poured her large bag of fruit and vegetables into the metal basket on the platform. As she backed out, she slid the metal door shut. Once it was latched shut, she pulled a rope opening a similar door that opened into the ape compound. Once that was up, she pushed the platform out, making the basket available to the apes. "Breakfast is ready!" She said through the gap in the metal doors then she hurried up the steps to get to the viewing platform above the compound.

When she got to the top of the platform she looked down at the apes. The two males had already grabbed handfuls of food and moved off. The females were now picking through the fruit and vegetables for their favorites. One of the other zookeepers approached her. "Good morning Miss Garnier." He said as he leaned on the rail beside her. "Everyone seems to be sharing well today." He pointed down into the quarter-acre compound.

There were seven apes in the compound; two adult males, three adult females, and two juvenile apes. The three she and Colton had saved (she did not consider it stealing) in Africa had joined the other apes fairly well. The two youths being the first and the two adult males being the last to decide to get along. *Just like their human cousins* Anna had thought at the time.

"Good morning Mister Guidicelli." Anna answered with a smile. "If only we humans could get along so well, no?" She and Gerard Guidicelli had quickly become friends after Anna started working at the zoo three days a week. Being young and enthusiastic, Gerard spoke with all sorts of employees at the zoo; from the lowliest janitor all the way to Mister Trudeau himself. Because of this, he was an excellent source for gossip. He was how Anna had found out that there were plans developing to build another larger zoo in Vincennes. "Anything new?"

Gerard leaned over the rail to watch the two juvenile apes go through the food basket. "Well, there was some discussion about where the money would come from for the new zoo." He leaned back and smiled at Anna, "and a great deal of discussion on whose name would go first on the plaque dedicating it."

Anna laughed. "If these men could just keep their enormous egos in check, they would do far more good for Paris and France, I would imagine."

Gerard nodded. "Yes, well while their egos are large, it seems they are also frail."

"Oh?" Anna had an idea what had damaged them but pressed on for confirmation. "What bruised them?"

Not wanting to make eye contact, Gerard looked back out over the ape compound and let out a sigh. "Miss Garnier, I hate to say it but it is Pierre Dudas that has cut them to the core. The prospect of a one-of-a-kind giant ape exhibit was very appealing to Mister Larchmont."

"But they have an exhibit." Anna said. After they had released King Gor to the jungle and returned to Paris, Pierre and Colton had spent the better part of a month buying copies of the pictures taken of the great ape. Pierre took the photographs and blew them up and set up displays. He enlarged one photograph of the ape's head to actual size. Even though it was grainy, it was still an impressive thing to see. Pierre had built a display of the dozens of photos as well as samples of its hair and even some blood-soaked rags. While it did generate a good bit of interest, it was nowhere as much of a draw as the actual ape would have been. "It's actually quite remarkable. A nice display."

"A nice display is just a nice display." Gerard said. "A giant ape would have been an earth-shattering display. Now the ape is gone."

"Do they want to recapture it?" Anna's heart sank at the thought.

"No. I think they realize it would be too difficult to keep such an animal securely trapped in the Menagerie." Now he looked at Anna. "But, they do hold Pierre responsible for the loss."

"But if they realize that, they should know there was no way they could keep it alive. So why…"

"Because if it *had* been killed instead of taken out of their grasp, a stuffed 25-foot ape would have been just such a magnificent display."

"Magnificent?"

"That is the word Mister Trudeau used." Gerard looked back out over the compound. "And I'm afraid they are planning on ruining Mister Dudas because of it. I don't think even his father could protect him. They are very upset."

"Well they can't do that! It's not his fault." Anna said, even though deep down she knew that ultimately Pierre's over-promising was the issue. "That's not fair at all."

"Fair isn't a word they use very often."

"I will talk to Pierre this evening to let him know. Forewarned is forearmed." Anna said.

"I'm not sure it will help. These aren't the kind of men who handle disappointment well. And reasoning with them is difficult. I've seen that first hand."

"Well I have to do something."

"I understand." Gerard pushed off the railing. "I need to get over to the aviary to deal with a netting issue." He smiled at Anna. "I'll see you in the cafeteria at noon?"

"Yes." Anna said even though her mind was racing on what she could do to save Pierre's -and her- future. "If I haven't left early to speak with Pierre."

Gerard chuckled. "Then I will see you tomorrow, Miss Garnier."

"Yes, that is probably the case." She smiled at the man. "You are a good friend, Mister Guidicelli."

"Ciao." Gerard gave a wave as he walked off toward the aviary.

Four
Folk Lore

"But Pierre, it's the same mistake all over again!" Anna said. The two had been arguing for the better part of an hour over a dinner that had long since gotten cold.

Pierre shook his head. "No, this time it will work."

"This time? Can you *hear* yourself, Pierre?" Anna picked up her fork and pushed around the peas on her plate yet again. "This time."

Pierre sighed. "Anna. You have to understand that these people won't be appeased until they get what they want."

"And how are you going to do that?" Anna put her fork down.

Pierre smiled at her. "I never realized you didn't like peas."

Anna picked up her fork and scooped up a bunch of peas and ate them. "Even cold, I like peas. But this idea of yours *I do not like*. You are making all the same mistakes again."

Pierre shook his head. "No. The problem with King Gor was he was too big to contain. I see that now."

"And you think this… thing will be easier to contain. This beast?"

Pierre shrugged. "If the accounts are accurate, it is seven to eight feet all. That is a far cry from twenty-five feet."

"Pierre my darling, these so called accounts you are referring to are folklore."

"Folklore has a seed of truth to it." Now Pierre picked up his fork and jabbed a piece of pork chop. "The talk about a giant ape was folk lore and you saw how that turned out."

"Yes; it was a disaster."

"But this time…"

Anna slapped her fork onto the table. "Pierre, I want to get married and start a family. With you. And…"

"*And*," Pierre interrupted her, "and this will let us do that." He held his hands out wide, the meat still on his fork. "How do you imagine we will be able to build any sort of life with the likes of Henry Larchmont and Justin Trudeau breathing down our necks? How can I have any sort of career? How?" He put the piece of pork in his mouth and put his fork down. "I'm listening."

"But Pierre." Anna's voice was almost a whisper. "If you fail them again, they will kill you."

"Not this time. I've been speaking to Frank Wiswell."

"Oh, please don't drag Frank into this. He lost so much and is just getting back to a normal life." Anna pleaded. "And poor Jeanne doesn't need to be involved."

After the group returned to Paris, Frank had stayed behind and helped Pierre and Colton put together the King Gor exhibit at the Expo- after it had been there three months, it had been moved to where it was now; the Menagerie. While working on the Expo exhibit, he and Jeanne DuPont had gotten very close. When he decided to leave two months later, he had asked Jeanne to marry him and accompany him back to his business office in Constanta, Romania. While he had been away, two employees had been keeping his Big Waters Adventures business solvent, running tours along the Black Sea coasts of Romania, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire as well as trips into the mountains of Transylvania.

"No, no; I have been *talking* to Frank about how to do it right this time. I am not enlisting his aid." Pierre lied.

"This time." Anna interjected.

"In any case," Pierre pressed on. "Frank said that the best business model is to be able to deliver what is promised then have unexpected results as a bonus. That's how he and Rick ran their business."

"So what will you promise that you know you can get?"

"Giant alligators."

"Giant alligators? Pierre, please." Anna took her plate and started to get up.

"No, listen. This is completely achievable." Pierre gestured for her to sit. "There are massive alligators in the American swamps. *Massive*."

"What exactly is massive?" Anna asked. She had seen the crocodiles that the Menagerie had from Egypt and they were mostly about six to ten feet long. "We have one Nile Crocodile that is twelve feet long."

"Twenty to twenty-five." Pierre said flatly. "And keep in mind that while Nile Crocodiles are long and sleek, American Alligators are bulkier. A similarly sized twelve foot alligator would weigh seven to eight hundred pounds while that particular Nile crocodile you mentioned weighs five hundred twenty-two pounds." He smirked. "I was at its weighing last month. A twenty-five foot American alligator would be close to three thousand pounds."

"Twenty-five feet and three thousand pounds?" Anna gaped. "And *that's* not too big to contain?"

"Consider the adult Nile Crocodiles we already have here in France, keeping one of those contained is far, far easier than keeping an adult ape or chimpanzee contained." Pierre said. "They are completely different animals. Crocodiles cannot jump. They cannot climb. A simple wall will keep them enclosed. They are not as smart as primates so they won't be working on how to escape. They are a completely different thing all together."

"But…" Anna hesitated. While a crocodile or alligator that was fifteen or twenty feet long would definitely be something no one in France had ever seen, it still seemed dangerous. "Do you think they will accept a reptile over their lost ape?"

"Reptile-sss." Pierre drew out the 's'. "We will bring back two or three of the giant crocodiles as well as some smaller ones that can be used for breeding. Plus they have giant turtles as well."

Anna rolled her eyes. "America; the land of the giant beasts. And the streets are paved in gold, I imagine."

"According to Colton, he has personally seen turtles that are four feet long and weigh three hundred-fifty pounds in the swamps of the state of Louisiana. They call them Snapping Turtles."

"They sound dangerous." Anna scooped up some more peas. "I like cold peas a lot more than I like dangerous animals, just in case you were curious."

"Dangerous but easier to handle. Again, turtles cannot jump or climb and are considerably dumber than other animals."

"So where does this eight foot tall creature come into it?"

"That will be the unexpected results. We will endeavor to capture that creature ourselves while we have a locally hired team hunting the giant crocodiles and turtles. At the very least we will have those creatures if anything goes wrong."

"If anything goes wrong." Anna shook her head. "Pierre."

Pierre picked up his plate as he stood. "Anna, this plan will work. I am sure of it."

Anna stood as well. "How can you be sure?"

Pierre crossed the room and took Anna's plate. "Because there are people whose business it is to hunt alligators. They do it all the time successfully. The same for the turtles. People eat them you see. So I will be hiring people to do what they do every day. There is no way it can fail."

Anna picked up her glass and then moved around the table to retrieve Pierre's. "And this giant creature? What is it called?"

"Sasq'ets is what the natives call it. And I believe we will be successful in that endeavor because we will hire those natives as guides to help us."

Anna walked around the table to Pierre again. "Natives? How are we going to deal with natives, or even converse with them?" Anna made sure she said 'we' because she did not plan on letting Pierre go alone and wanted to test the waters.

"*We* won't have to; Colton Maguire told me he deals with these natives that live in and around Texas and they get along just fine. They will help us find this Sasq'ets and bring it back to France."

"We?" Anna raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, love of mine, I fear you more than any giant crocodile or turtle. It is definitely 'we' that will be going." He hesitated. "And I might ask Frank if he wants to come along. He is after all a big game hunter."

"Pierre Dudas, it would run contrary to your very survival if you invited that newlywed to come along." She pointed toward the kitchen with one of the glasses as she started to walk. "Now let us put these plates away so that you can take me out for a proper, hot meal."

"Yes, dearest." Pierre said as he fell in step behind her, unsure how to bring up the fact that he had already sent a telegram to Frank asking him to join the expedition.

Five
A Foolproof Plan

Pierre sat in the waiting area outside of Henry Larchmont's office. He felt like when he was back in school and had been called to the Headmaster's office for climbing the bell tower yet again. He had been perusing the hundreds of books on the shelves for almost twenty minutes when a buzzer on the secretary's desk went off. He turned to look at her. "Miss Demongeot? Is my time up?"

The older lady smiled at him- despite Mister Larchmont's opinion of him, she liked Pierre. "I sincerely hope not, Mister Dudas. However you can go in now."

"I will keep you apprised of my success." He said as he went to the large ornately carved wood double doors. He tugged on one of them and the large heavy door swung open on well-oiled hinges smoothly. With a final smile to Miss Demongeot, he ducked in and pulled the door closed with his back to the room. When the door clicked shut, he took a deep breath and turned around, expecting to see Henry Larchmont sitting behind his imposing mahogany desk.

When he saw that the desk was empty, he looked to his left and right. In the right corner of the room at a round table, Henry was sitting with two other men; Justin Trudeau and André-Jacques Rovère; the third man was at the first showing of King Gor when the large ape had thrown up. Of the board members, these were the most powerful, and richest.

"Gentlemen, I did not realize this would be a board meeting," Pierre said as he approached the table. He was relieved to see there was a fourth chair; at least he could be seated and marginally be an equal instead of having to stand in front of the table when he spoke. He pulled out a chair and sat in it, placing his leather attaché in front of him. "I appreciate you all taking time out of your busy schedules, Mister Trudeau and Mister Rovère."

André-Jacques gave Pierre a smile. "No matter what the others think of you Mister Dudas, I find your energy and boldness refreshing. And entertaining."

Of the three André -Jacques was the friendliest.

Pierre smiled back. "Well, I have a proposal that I believe you will find both entertaining and profitable. And of very low risk as well." He opened his attaché and pulled out several sheets of papers. "So what I have…" He was interrupted by Henry Larchmont clearing his throat. "Sir? I did not expect opening remarks." He gave the man a smile.

"I just want to let you know that I was not amenable to this meeting." He gestured to his left. "It is only because Mister Rovère finds you entertaining that I agreed to it." He raised an eyebrow. "Low risk, you say?"

Pierre nodded. "Yes. But first I in fact have an opening remark. I do fully understand the debacle of King Gor and the mark it placed on the Menagerie. And I would like to make amends."

Henry Larchmont leaned forward on the table and crossed his fingers.

Pierre hesitated expecting him to say something and when he didn't he continued: "An exhibit of a larger-than-life animal is something that draws crowds. The increase in attendance at the Expo for the two days that King Gor was there was staggering."

"Until he climbed the Eiffel Tower," Justin Trudeau said. "And the Army had to be brought out to stop him." He looked at Henry Larchmont. "I'm glad that no lives were lost beyond the one handler."

Now Pierre leaned forward, toward Henry Larchmont. "Except of course for the sailors who died while they tried to kill me and my friends out in the middle of the Mediterranean, that is."

Henry Larchmont leaned back and crossed his arms. "Yes, well… sailors can be unpredictable."

"Unpredictable? I think it's more following…"

"Young man, let us not get off track; you were speaking of larger-than-life creatures," André -Jacques said quickly. "And I for one am interested in what you have to say."

Pierre took a deep breath then leaned back as well. "Yes, all right then." He took another deep breath. "Larger than life creatures. I have a proposal to acquire several gigantic animals… reptiles for display at the Menagerie. Even now, the reptile and snake areas receive the largest amount of visitors. Mainly because youngsters want to see them which then obligates their parents to go as well. These are animals not found in Europe so they create the biggest excitement among patrons."

"Where would you be acquiring these gigantic animals?" Justin Trudeau asked. "Africa again?"

Pierre shook his head. "No, in America. The swamps of America to be specific."

"And you know these creatures are there?"

Pierre nodded at the man. "Yes, Colton, Colton Maguire the American who was with us on our expedition to Africa has confirmed that there are crocodiles upwards of twenty-five feet in the swamps of the state of Louisiana."

"Twenty-five feet? That seems unlikely."

"The saltwater crocodiles of southeast Asia and Australia also get as large. There is precedent."

Justin Trudeau leaned back. "That's ten feet longer than what we have already, Henry."

Henry Larchmont folded his hands on the table again. "And you are assured you can find these creatures?"

"Yes." Pierre said. "Mister Maguire is confident we can capture at least two crocodiles that are twenty-five feet long as well as several smaller ones closer to fifteen feet. And I have it on the same authority that in the same swamps are three to four foot turtles and we will be able to bring back several of those specimens as well." Pierre had waited until the crocodiles and turtles were mentioned before bringing up the real reason he wanted to go to America. "And perhaps another creature as well. An extraordinary one."

"Another reptile?"

"No." Pierre shook his head at Justin Trudeau. "And I am hesitant to mention it because I am not confident we will be able to capture it. It is only a possibility that it even exists and then only a chance that we can capture one."

"Are there unicorns in America?" Justin Trudeau said with a laugh. "What sort of creature is it?"

"It is a large… humanoid creature."

"Another ape?" This time it was Henry Larchmont.

"No. We do not believe it is an ape." He took a breath. "Have any of you heard of the Yeti?"

"I have," Andre-Jacques said. "On an expedition to Nepal a couple of years ago. But they are just folklore."

"A what?" Henry Larchmont said.

"It is supposedly a large hairy creature that walks on two legs like a man but it is not a man." Andre-Jacques said. "The natives spoke of it often. Several claimed to have even seen one."

"Large like that ape?"

Pierre shook his head. "No, seven or eight feet tall at most."

"But this Yeti is in Nepal." Henry Larchmont looked at Andre-Jacques. "Yes?"

"Well, yes it is." Pierre said. "But the natives in America also have these legends. Colton says he has spoken with several different Indian tribes and they all have the same legend."

"So it is just a legend then."

Pierre shrugged. "That is why it is a possibility only, Mister Larchmont. But if natives who are completely unrelated and totally separated from each other have the same legend…" Pierre's voice trailed off.

"Then there may be some fact to it." Justin Trudeau finished. "Mon dieu."

"As I thought as well," Pierre said.

"So what is it you need from us then?" André -Jacques asked.

The door to the office opened and someone entered. Pierre saw Henry Larchmont gesture to whoever it was but resisted the urge to look. "We would need a ship to bring us there. A cargo ship of sufficient size to hold these creatures below decks and in separation from each other. It would need to wait for us to capture our

specimens." He looked at Henry Larchmont and finished: "And bring us all safely back to France."

"I do not appreciate your continued aspersions."

"And I do not appreciate gun fights in the middle of the Mediterranean."

"I believe…"

"*Gentlemen*," Andre-Jacques interjected. "As I said earlier let us not get off track here."

"I apologize, Sir." Pierre said. The person that entered finally came into view- he was carrying a chair to join them at the table. It was one of the engineers on the *Monarch*. He was also one of the men he had seen shooting at them at one point. He stood quickly, pushing his chair back. "What are you doing here?"

"This is my son, Daniel." Henry Larchmont said. "*Please sit down* Mister Dudas."

"Well, it's nice to finally get your name, *Daniel*," Pierre said. "I guess I couldn't hear it over the gunfire the last time we met." He started to put the documents he brought back into his attaché case. "Unbelievable. I think I am done here."

"Please Mister Dudas," André -Jacques said as he put his hand on Pierre's hand. "Let cooler heads prevail. Believe me when I tell you I was unaware of the other matter but I am now dealing with it."

Pierre looked at the man. Of the men at the table he was the only one that seemed genuine and trustworthy. "Fine, Sir." He looked at Henry Larchmont. "We need a ship to acquire the specimens."

"I can have the *Monarch* at your disposal by the end of the week if that is satisfactory. And we will fund the expedition. I just have one request."

"And what is that?"

"That my son accompanies you on this voyage to ensure my interests are safeguarded."

"Do you think we will take your ship to America then sell it off?" Pierre glared.

"With the amount of money I have spent sending ships to and from Africa *twice*, I believe a modicum of protection is not asking too much."

Pierre looked at the young man. "Mister Larchmont, you will be accompanying us as part of the team, *not* the head of the team."

"I assume you are in charge then?" Daniel Larchmont asked.

"No, of course not; Colton Maguire will be in charge. He is a native, knows the area, and is able to speak with the natives."

Daniel smirked. "I believe my English is good enough to deal with Americans."

"Oh? And how is your Creole and your Cherokee, Mister Larchmont?"

Daniel's smirk faded from his face. "I see."

Pierre looked at the older Larchmont. "I have no issue with your son accompanying us on our expedition as long as he pulls his own weight and follows the guidance of our expert; Colton Maguire."

"Agreed." Henry Larchmont said. He frowned. "And I apologize for my… actions earlier; they were uncalled for and completely misguided. My… greed blurred my common sense."

Pierre noticed that Andre-Jacques nodded as the man spoke as if this was a rehearsed apology. "Apology accepted, Sir." Pierre said. "Let us get this endeavor underway and put the Menagerie in its rightful place among the world's zoos." He stood and picked up his attaché case. "We will be ready by Saturday, in five days' time."

"I will walk you out." Andre-Jacques said as he also stood.

The other three men at the table stood.

"Then it is settled," Daniel Larchmont said. "We set sail at noon on Saturday, Mister Dudas."

"Noon it is." Andre-Jacques gestured at the door. "Mister Dudas."

Relieved the meeting went as well as it did, Pierre walked toward the door, Andre-Jacques close behind.

When they got on the other side of the door, Andre-Jacques pulled it shut. "Mister Dudas, I did not know anything *anything* about the orders to assault you and your friends. I hope you believe that I would never have stood for such a thing."

"I do, Sir. My father speaks highly of you, for good reason." Pierre said. He had known the man since he was in his early teens thanks to his father's dealings with him.

Andre-Jacques extended his hand. "I appreciate that. Now please take care on this trip. From what the natives told me, the Yeti was nothing to trifle with; strong and unpredictable. If this creature in America is the same, you will all need to be on your guard."

Pierre shook the man's hand. "We will be."

"When you say 'we' I am almost afraid to ask if it includes Miss Anna Garnier."

"I'm afraid it does, Sir." Pierre let go of the man's hand. "There really is no way to tell her no."

Andre-Jacques laughed. "She reminds me of my wife; strong of will and spirit. Your marriage will be an adventure." He raised an eyebrow. "And the wedding is still on for the Spring?"

Pierre nodded. "We shouldn't be gone more than two months so we will be back in plenty of time. Anna would kill me if we didn't make the date."

Andre-Jacques nodded. "That is good to hear. Maxime has already picked out a dress. You would have *her* to deal with as well." He patted Pierre on the shoulder. "Take care my young Pierre. We will have you both over for dinner when you return in two months' time to hear about the adventure."

"It is a date, Sir." Pierre said with a smile.

"Excellent." Andre-Jacques said, then reentered the office.

Pierre turned around.

Miss Demongeot was staring at him wide-eyed. "Well?"

"The expedition is fully funded." He said with a smile. "We leave in five days."

She waggled a finger at him. “That is good; leave now so you’re back in plenty of time for the wedding.”

Pierre laughed. “With so many people planning for it to happen, what could…”

“Don’t say it!” Miss Demongeot pointed at him. “Do not say it. Now go.” She swiveled her finger toward the door. “And make sure you don’t miss the boat.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Pierre said as he moved to the door. “See you in two months.” He finished as he left.

Six
The Lazy S Ranch

Colton pulled his scarf up around his ears and tied it over his mouth and nose.

"Cold little brother?"

Colton continued to look straight ahead. "Maverick, I do not have the words to express how cold I am. Where have you been? I've been waiting for six hours, I think." He gestured out at the cattle; there were about two hundred in the herd. "I was just about to set a cow on fire to keep warm."

"I'm not sure that would work, Colt. I mean you can put *pieces* of a cow on a fire and that turns out good. But a whole cow?" Maverick laughed. "And it's been maybe an hour since I left. I brought you a Dewar Flask of coffee." He held out a long silver cylinder. "I even added a little sugar and cream to it."

Colton finally turned to look at his older brother. "But I'll have to take my scarf down to drink it."

"Don't be a pony." Maverick said with a chuckle

"Hey now."

His mother had named her four sons after horses; the oldest was Morgan, the next was Maverick, then Noriker. Her last child, also a son, she named Cob after a draft type pony because he was so small. Once he had gotten a little older but still hadn't caught up size-wise with his brothers, she had nicknamed him Colt. When he started school, he said he preferred to be called 'Colton' and the name stuck. Only Maverick continued to call him Colt as a term of endearment and not as an insult. Even though all the brothers were very close, Maverick and Colton were closest in temperament and sense of humor.

"Yeah, my pony is frozen, that's for sure." Colton took the Dewar Flask. "God bless Mister Dewar, wherever he is." He toasted the sky with the flask then unscrewed the metal lid. Steam rose out of it. "Oh please turn Your benevolent eyes to him, Lord. For all the poor souls his invention comforts on the coldest day on record."

In 1892, a Scottish scientist Sir James Dewar invented the vacuum flask. Working in the field of cryogenics, he needed to keep chemicals placed in a flask at a constant temperature. To do this he placed a glass bottle inside another larger glass bottle and sealed them at the mouth. He then evacuated the air between the two bottle walls. The partial vacuum this created insulated the temperature of the inner contents, keeping it either hot or cold for extended periods of time. He then fashioned a metal sleeve over the two glass bottles to ensure they did not break. After seeing how well his invention worked, James Dewar hired a professional glass blower to make sturdier and better fitting flasks which led to the commercial manufacture of the "Dewar Flask" in 1898. An American businessman named William Walker obtained the patents and funding and in 1911 Thermos Limited started mass production in England.

"You know it's only twenty eight degrees right now. That's what the thermometer said at the barn right before I left."

"Twenty-eight below zero you mean."

Maverick laughed. "You got spoiled on warm weather with all that time you spent in Africa, I think."

Colton took a sip of the very hot coffee. "Oh, that is good." He gestured out at the cows with his free hand. "I think we need to move these wayward critters back to the main herd and sort them out later." After a break in a fence was discovered two days before, Maverick had noticed cattle with a different brand intermixed with the 'Lazy S' branded Maguire family cattle. "It looks like about half of these are his."

Maverick nodded. "Sounds like a good idea. Noriker went over to let Mister Walker know we've rounded up a few of his herd."

"Noriker, huh? Did you have to ask him to go over there?"

Maverick laughed. "I got as far as 'Mister Walker's cows are intermixed with…' and he was already grabbing his saddle to go let him know."

"Any reason to see Becky." Colton laughed as well. "That boy is indeed smitten."

"They do make a fine pair, I think." Maverick leaned over in his saddle toward his brother. "And I don't think I need to point out her younger sister Kylie ain't bad looking neither." He waggled his eyebrows at him.

Colton leaned in toward Maverick. "Then why do you every chance you get?" Colton waggled his eyebrows back.

"Well, just in case you haven't noticed." Maverick leaned back in his saddle and put his hands on the horn. "Sometimes dear brother, you aren't the most observant cow poke on the range."

"Oh, I'm observant all right. I saw her caught in a downpour once." He looked at his brother. "And I'll tell you…I was observing."

Maverick laughed. "I'll bet you were." He clapped his hands. "Oh, I almost forgot. There was a telegram for you at the house." He reached into his heavy coat and pulled out a small card. "Want me to read it to you so you don't have to put down the coffee?"

"You are truly a gentleman if you do that." Colton took another sip of his coffee.

Maverick cleared his throat then read: "Colton Maguire. Expedition fully funded. Expect Pierre, Frank, and Anna with three others. Require local hires. Both reptiles and other on agenda. Arriving Port Orleans December 28. One month to accomplish." He looked at Colton. "Now tell me what that means."

Colton screwed the cap back on his coffee. "Well, Pierre, Frank, and Anna are the ones I went to Africa with."

"And they're coming here for reptiles? And other? What's an other?"

Colton twisted to put the flask in his saddle bag. "We best get those cows brought in before the temperature freezes the very air solid."

"Another adventure, huh? You almost got killed on that last one. So what are you wrangling up now?"

"We're not moving until I tell you, are we?" Colton frowned.

"Nope." Maverick folded his arms.

"Big gators. And a couple of snapping turtles."

"They don't have alligators in Europe?"

"Truth be told, they do not. It's too cold. They got a couple of Egyptian crocodiles in the zoo but they're little things; six or eight feet long." Colton said. "So I was going to help Pierre get a couple of twenty-five footers, and some smaller ones to bring back to the zoo since we lost that giant ape."

"Sounds simple enough." Maverick said. "Those local hires can get that done lickedy split." He picked up his reins. "Say, what's this other?"

"Snapping turtles, like I said."

"It was reptiles and *the other*."

"It's nothing." Colton picked up his reins and nudged his horse with his heels. "Nothing important."

"Either you tell me, or I'll tell Ma and you'll deal with her." Maverick coaxed his horse beside Colton's.

"Damn, that's pretty rough."

"*And* I'll tell her you've been cussing. More bad habits from Europe, I imagine she'll say."

"Fine, fine. I might have mentioned to Pierre as we watched that giant ape walk back into the forest that some of the Cherokee mentioned seeing a Sasq'ets and that might be neat to have in a zoo."

Maverick laughed. "First off, I can't believe you're listening to Chief Onacoa's stories."

"There's truth in all his stories, you know." Colton turned his horse to go behind the herd to push them toward the main herd of cows almost two miles away. "I'm still freezing; you can complain as we go."

"Ma is not going to be happy about you gallivanting around the countryside instead of staying here and working the ranch." Maverick maneuvered his horse beside his brother's.

"And by 'working the ranch' you mean 'finding a gal to settle down with'." Colton said sourly.

"So who's this Anna gal? She available?"

"She is not; she and Pierre are getting hitched in the Spring." He looked at his brother. "I was invited." He smiled. "Hey, come with me! It'll be fun; I can show you the sites of Paris."

"You mean like where you were almost killed?"

"That was out in the Mediterranean." Colton pointed out.

"Touché."

Colton beamed as he pointed at his brother. "See? Right there! You'll fit in *fine* in Paris!"

"Maybe I can convince Samantha to come along." He pointed. "I'll go left and we'll push them along the bottom of that hill."

"The more the merrier," Colton said. Truth be told, he got along with Maverick's wife as well as he got along with Maverick. If Samantha's sister was eighteen instead of thirteen years old, he would have proposed to her in an instant. "Pushing cows. Don't we have hired hands to be Drag Riders?"

"Oh Colt, it's *way* too cold for hired hands to be out here." Maverick chuckled.

"Nice."

"So let's get them all back together… So you can tell Ma you're going hunting for Indian folk monsters."

"Let me do the talking; when you say it like that it sounds crazy." Colton smirked at his brother. "I'll bet you a nickel Pa will be on my side right from the start."

Maverick shook his head. "No bet." He said because he knew that Pa was interested in folk tales of any kind. "Let's get to work."

"Hee-yah!" Colton shouted at the cows as he coaxed his horse to a gallop right at the mass of cows. They startled and began running away from him, along the base of the hill. "Keep 'em penned in, I'll keep 'em moving!"

"On it!" Maverick shouted back as he steered to the left to keep any cows from veering off. Thanks to the effort required to run uphill as well as the fact that the cows were used to seeing cowboys around them they weren't spooked enough to do more than just run along the base of the steep hill. In the very direction the two men wanted them to go.

Within twenty minutes, the cows were back with the main herd; all two thousand of them. Once the straggler cows saw the other cows they made their way to them on their own, making the job easier.

Colton took out his flask and drank the last of the coffee- it was still steaming hot. "Okay, that's that. Ready to head back?"

"Oh, I am; I can't wait to hear you explain your telegram at dinner." Maverick said. While each of the brothers had their own houses all located within half a mile of their parent's home, they tended to gather there to eat four or five times out of the week. Taking into account the large bunkhouse for the single hired hands and five other houses that were for the trail bosses and other top ranch hands and their families, and all the out-buildings, the homestead portion of the Lazy S ranch was a veritable village.

Seven
Port LaHavre

Pierre stood on the dock looking at the *Monarch*. There were a dozen sailors moving about the ship storing supplies in various locations as well as several moving massive metal cages down into the hold.

"Is everything proceeding according to your liking?" Captain Seville said as he came up beside Pierre.

"Yes, Captain. Yes; I was just admiring the efficiency of it all. I have to say I am glad you are taking our expedition to America."

Captain Seville nodded. "It is my pleasure since I was given plenty of advance notice this time." He leaned in to Pierre "And I have a new First Mate so I believe we will have a more uneventful navigation this time."

"Of that I am glad."

"Well, since my wife will be accompanying us I wanted to make sure we had an uneventful trip."

"Oh?"

"We're taking advantage of the month layover to see the sights of New York. I have a private coach room booked to take us there from New Orleans."

"How long will the trip take us?" Pierre asked.

"Eleven days to New Orleans. We could make New York in seven days since we have to travel farther south and then around Florida adds a few days."

Pierre nodded. "I envy you and your wife seeing the sights." He frowned. "I will endeavor to book a relaxing trip for my honeymoon."

Captain Seville laughed. "Yes, well this one will be more relaxing than the other one. For the most part."

"For the most part?" Pierre looked at the man.

"Well, we will be traveling the Atlantic in December so we will be running into some weather as we go." Now Captain Seville looked at Pierre. "I hope everyone has their sea legs or it will definitely *not* be an enjoyable passage." He shrugged. "Unfortunately the return trip in early February might not be much better. So the best…"

"Pierre!" Anna said as she came down the pier toward the two men. "Are we ready to go? Captain Seville, it is so nice to see you again."

"Miss Garnier," Captain Seville gave a short bow. "The pleasure is mine." He nodded at Pierre. "I will leave you two and oversee the remainder of the loading." He smiled at Anna. "We should be leaving within the hour, Miss."

"Thank you, Captain." Anna said.

"Then I shall leave…" Captain Seville caught a glimpse of Anna's pistol at her side. "We are not expecting any trouble this voyage," he said as he gestured at the pistol. "Are we?"

"What?" Anna realized where he was pointing. She put her hand on the pistol. "Oh, no no; it's become a habit, I am afraid."

"I approve," Captain Seville said with a laugh. "Until later." He gave a wave and walked up the gangplank.

"So is everyone aboard?"

Pierre shook his head. "Not yet. A couple are still unaccounted for. Running late, I suppose."

"Who's missing?"

Pierre hesitated. He still hadn't figured out a way to explain to Anna that he had invited Frank to join the expedition. "Well, there's Daniel Larchmont. He's not yet…" He stopped short because Daniel was marching down the pier as if he owned it. He was followed by a team of porters. "And there he is." He gestured.

Anna turned to look then laughed. "He's leading a parade, it seems."

"A parade of foolishness." Pierre said. "I do not trust that man. And I do not think you should either." Watching the man walk toward him, he was glad that Anna was wearing her pistol.

"Oh I remember him from our last voyage." Anna rested her hand on her pistol. "You know, I believe I nicked his ear at one point."

Pierre hadn't noticed when he was in the meeting but as the man got closer, he indeed did have a small notch in his left ear. He stifled a chuckle. "Oh Anna; I love you so."

"Mister Larchmont." Anna said as he reached them. "Is that you?" She closed one eye as she looked at him. "It is indeed, Sir. How nice to see you again. Closer up."

"You do look familiar but I do not remember where we have met," Daniel said. He eyed Pierre. "I did not know there would be women aboard. I thought that was bad luck; sailors superstition."

"I have never heard that." Anna said matter-of-factly. "Perhaps I'll ask the Captain's *wife* about it at dinner."

Daniel looked at Anna. "We've met? I still cannot place it."

"We've met in passing." Anna said as she reached up and rubbed her left ear. "A grazing to be more precise."

The man's face turned red as he realized where he knew Anna from. "I…" he looked back at the porters. They had all stopped to watch the exchange. Several were smiling. "Follow me to my quarters!" He snapped as he stormed up the gangway.

Pierre and Anna took a step back to allow the porters to make a wide turn to get on the gangway with the large trunks Daniel had brought- eight in all.

"I hope he brought enough things." Anna said.

"Anna, you need to settle your differences with that man or this will be a very strained journey."

"I may find it impossible to be friendly with someone who was shooting at me, but I will endeavor to be polite company." Anna said diplomatically.

"Thank you." Pierre said.

"So we are ready to go now?" Anna took Pierre's arm and pulled him toward the gangplank. "Finally."

Pierre resisted her pulling. "Well, there is one more."

Anna crossed her arms. "Is there someone else who has tried to kill us that you have invited on this trip?"

"I did not invite Daniel Larchmont as you well know." Pierre said. "So if you could please try…"

Anna raised an eyebrow at him. "Who else is missing?" She interrupted.

"What?"

"You seem to be avoiding the question, Pierre."

"I did not think that I was." Pierre said, avoiding the question yet again. He hazarded a look down the pier hoping Frank was on his way. At least at that point, he hoped Anna would be happy to see him again.

"Who are you looking for?" Anna said. She turned and looked down the pier then turned back to Pierre. "Who is it, *Mister Dudas*?"

"Well, you see since we're going hunting for big game, I thought we should…" His voice trailed off as he saw a young man coming down the pier toward them. He had three porters behind him.

"Oh, you didn't!" Anna said. "You talked Frank into coming along on this trip. He and Jeanne haven't even been married six months! Oh, Pierre!"

The young man smiled and waved at Pierre.

"How could you think such a thing? See? There's our last man right there." He waved back.

Anna looked. "Who's that?"

"Hello!" The young man said in an English accent. "Or is it ahoy?"

"Either works," Pierre said as he held out his hand. "I was getting worried."

The young man shook Pierre's hand. "Sorry mate, I had a hard time getting porters. It seems someone has cleaned out almost all of them."

"That would be Daniel Larchmont." Pierre jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "He's packed for a round the world trip."

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" Anna asked.

"Err…" Pierre said, not having the faintest idea who the young man was.

"Oy! Pardon me, Miss." The man let go of Pierre's hand and offered it to Anna. "Steve Fields is the name. It is a pleasure. I've heard so much about you."

"Anna Garnier." Anna said as she shook the man's hand. "Heard of me?" Her eyes swiveled over to Pierre. "Really?"

"Oh indeed. It's a pleasure, Miss Garnier." Steve let go of Anna's hand and turned to Pierre. "Frank wasn't able to make it so he asked me if I would take his place."

"Pierre…" Anna started.

"Oh, well. I'm sure that's just fine." Pierre said quickly. "Let's get your luggage aboard then we can discuss it over coffee. We'll be shoving off shortly. Right, dearest?" He smiled at Anna.

Anna squinted her eyes at Pierre. "Oh yes; we shall discuss it."

"Great, great." Pierre said. He startled as the ship's horn sounded twice. "That's the thirty minute warning. Let's get you aboard Mister Fields and your porters on their way. Follow me to your cabin." He hooked his arm around Anna's and started up the gangway.

"Oh you've dodged a bullet, I must say." Anna whispered as they went. "Dodged a bullet."

Pierre just smiled and kept walking. "At least my ears are intact."

"So far."

Eight
Underway

Pierre leaned on Anna. "Well, it's goodbye to France for a while."

The ship was slowly moving away from the busy port of La Havre. As they did, the waves were becoming bigger. They were close to ten feet now.

"We'll be back soon enough." Anna said.

"And married soon after." Pierre reminded.

"And sooner than that, you're going to explain Frank Wiswell." She put her hands on the railing as the ship rode down a particularly large wave. "Oh, I hope these don't get much bigger."

"Mind if I join you?" Steve Fields said as he stepped up to the railing. He sighed. "Underway. I love being at sea."

Anna leaned out past Pierre to look at the young man. "You have uncanny timing, Mister Fields."

"Oh?" Steve smiled at her. "In a good way, I hope?"

"I am not sure yet; Pierre was just about to explain what was happening with Frank Wiswell when you showed up at the dock. And now when he was going to explain, you appeared again."

"So how is Frank?" Pierre asked. "Married life suiting him?"

Steve nodded. "Yes, he and Jeanne are doing well. Everything seemed to be going splendidly, in fact."

Anna leaned out again. "Seemed?"

"Oh!" Steve said. "No, there's nothing wrong with their marriage. They get along great. It's the business."

"I thought it was still running tours while he was in Africa and France."

"It was. I was… am his second in command. We had consistent tours going to Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and even several to Africa. Nile cruises and big game hunts."

"So what went wrong?" Pierre asked. Glad to be on a different subject.

"Well, we lost contact with two tour groups. Disappeared, every person on them."

"Two groups?" Pierre frowned. "Well, Africa is a dangerous place." He looked at Anna. "Crocodiles and Hippos, and such."

"I wouldn't know." Anna said with a smirk. "Where did he lose contact with them? Surely they finally returned to the office."

Steve shook his head. "No, neither the customers nor our two guides. One group after another, both in the same month."

"Oh dear. In Africa? Perhaps they are just delayed in the jungles somewhere. Bad weather perhaps?"

"Romania. They were in the Carpathian Mountains, in the state of Transylvania. It is pretty wild terrain out there. And there's not a lot of law enforcement beyond a village's borders."

"That's terrible." Anna said. "What are they doing about it? Have they stopped trips there?"

"Well, guided tours there have stopped yes, but Frank left Jeanne in charge and went there to try and find out what happened. That's why he sent me here. He has two employees helping Jeanne run the other tours in the meanwhile. I'm expecting that by the time I get back, it will all be sorted out." He smiled. "Frank is pretty resourceful."

"Indeed he is." Anna said.

Daniel Larchmont stepped up beside Steve. "Gentlemen. Miss." He tipped his hat. "Everything in order?"

"They are, Mister Larchmont," Pierre said. "I was actually going to speak with you about our expedition."

"Oh?"

Pierre nodded. "Yes. I was hoping you would lead the expedition that is capturing the alligators and turtles."

"While you go in search of your fantastic creature?"

"As I told your father, folklore has basis in fact. So while it may very well be a wild goose chase for this fantastic creature, we may yet surprise everyone." He held up a finger. "And if we do, the Menagerie will be the talk of Europe. Of the world even."

"So you get the glory then." Daniel smirked. "While I get… what?"

"The assured money maker for your father. The fact that there are twenty-five foot alligators and four-foot turtles in the swamps is just that; a verifiable fact. So if we fail, you will be guaranteeing that your father's investment in this expedition is not completely lost."

Steve considered that. "Yes, I suppose that meets the intent of his request. And who will be joining me on this reptile gathering expedition?"

"Oh, I have no idea."

"What?"

Pierre raised his hands plaintively. "Colton Maguire is our contact for that. Once we get to America, he will be able to answer that question. I'm sure if you wanted to hire a couple of the sailors from the ship to accompany you, you could do that easily enough. But I have to tell you Colton is a man of honor and the men he hires for that portion of our endeavor will be similarly trustworthy. He may already know who they are since he is familiar with the locals there."

"I suppose so." Daniel said, even though he did not fully trust Pierre. "You know, I think I will take your advice and speak to the Captain about recommending one or two sailors that can accompany me on my expedition. And perhaps one to go with you as well" He smiled. "Just to make sure my father's investment in this expedition is not completely lost."

"I will leave that up to Captain Seville to choose someone from his crew that he trusts." Pierre said.

"We haven't had the best of luck with the sailors on this ship," Anna said. "I'm not sure I would be willing to let one of them join us in the wilds of America."

"I am sure you would be able to take care of yourself quite well, Miss Garnier." Daniel rubbed his ear. "If recent events are any indication."

"Well I think that…" Anna began tersely.

"We will speak with Captain Seville," Pierre interrupted. "And get his opinion on the matter." He smiled at Daniel. "I will trust his judgement."

"Agreed." Daniel said. "Now if you will excuse me, I believe I will go below and farther from the rocking." He looked at the horizon. "Sea travel does not always agree with me." He turned and walked quickly to the doors that led below decks.

"Well there goes a cheerful chap," Steve said. "What's with the ear thing? Some sort of secret French code?"

Pierre gestured at Anna. "You should tell it."

"It's a secret French code," Anna deadpanned.

"Then I shall tell it." Pierre said. "You see while we…"

Anna shoved Pierre. "You'll just gloss over the exciting parts, I'll tell it."

"Over coffee?" Steve suggested.

"Excellent idea." Pierre gestured. "After you, Anna."

The three went to the galley to discuss the hour-long gunfight.

Nine
Port Orleans

Colton was sitting on a large crate looking at the ships as they entered the busy port.

"That one?" Maverick asked.

"That one is also a sailboat. Now you're just doing it on purpose."

Maverick chuckled. "You know ships get delayed often. They almost never show up when they say they do; either they're early or late. They should have come by train, if you ask me."

Colton stared at his brother. "You could have stayed home you know."

"We could have had lunch by now, you know."

"We'll get lunch after they get here. There's plenty of places here in New Orleans. It will give us a chance to warm up as well." Colton said.

"What if they've already eaten? Will they just sit and watch us eat? That would be rude."

Colton exhaled loudly. He swung around on the crate. "Look, over there." He pointed at a long row of street vendors. They were set up around the port selling their easily carried foods to both arriving tourists and sailors. "You can get some fried rice fritters there or even gumbo in a bread bowl over at that one." He pointed a little farther down. "And pralines there for dessert if you're so inclined."

"That sounds good; gumbo." Maverick looked in that direction. "You want anything?"

"Gumbo would be nice. My breakfast is long gone." Colton admitted. "And I think the temperature has dropped some."

"It's was forty-two when we left the house, Colt and it's warmed as the sun has moved up. It's probably forty-five, forty-six by now."

"That's almost freezing, I think."

"Fine, I'll go get a couple of *hot bowls* of gumbo." Maverick hopped off the crate and slapped Colton's back. "Two bowls coming up, Colt."

A ship's horn sounded in the distance.

Colton and Maverick both turned to look. "Hey, that's it. The *Monarch*. That's the ship." Colton pointed at the large steam ship. It was still almost a half mile away.

"Well shoot." Maverick looked toward the street vendors then back to the ship. "It's kind of a long way off still, don't you think? We could surely polish off a couple of small bowls of gumbo before they get here."

Colton looked at the ship again. "I suppose they do need to dock still. We've probably got half an hour before they put down that gangplank." He turned to look at his brother. "So I suppose…" His voice trailed off because Maverick was already jogging toward the vendors.

Colton and Maverick sat on the large crate eating their gumbo with their knives.

"This was a good idea," Colton said. "I wouldn't have made it to dinner, I don't think."

Maverick chuckled. "I'd never steer you wrong, brother." He tilted his bread bowl up and drank the last of the broth. "I need to see if Sandra can make this." He looked back toward the vendor. "Think she'd give me the recipe?"

"Gumbo is pretty standard. And bread too." Colton gestured. "Look, they're tied up finally."

"Now I ain't in a hurry." Maverick took a bite of the bread- it was saturated in the broth of the gumbo. "Let them find us, says I."

Colton hopped off the crate. "Eat as you walk, Maverick." He took a bite of his bread as well. "By the time we get down there, we'll be done."

"Fine, fine." Maverick got off the crate. "Just walk slow. I'd hate to trip and end up in the water. That'd not make a good first impression."

Colton laughed. "I'll keep an eye out for the edge." He started down the long pier toward the docks where the *Monarch* had tied up. "Let's get going."

The pair walked down the busy pier avoiding sailors and porters as they went, finally reaching the docks at the end of it. By the time they got to the Monarch, both tossed what was left of the bread into the water.

"Ahoy!" Colton shouted up at the ship as the gangway swung out towards the dock. "Anyone aboard?"

Pierre stepped into view. "Colton!" He waved.

"Pierre!"

Colton and Maverick took several steps back as the gangway swung over and lowered to meet the dock.

"That's Pierre," Colton said.

"I figured as much."

Colton poked his brother in the side. "You've got a full belly now so you better be on your best behavior."

"That small bread bowl only aroused my appetite." Maverick rubbed his belly. "It came well short of bedding it down."

Colton laughed. "Well we can pick something else up on our way out of town." He patted his belly. "Before dinner back at the house."

"Colton!" Pierre said again as he started down the gangplank. "It's great to see you again." He held out his hand. "How are things here?"

Colton shook Pierre's hand. "Things are going very well. Well and calm."

"Excellent." Pierre looked over his shoulder- Anna had started down the gang way. "Be aware she is going to hug you." He said as he moved to the side.

True to Pierre's word, when Anna got to the bottom of the ramp, she extended her arms and embraced Colton. "Colton, I've missed you, my American friend!"

Colton patted Anna's back. "It is good to see you as well."

As Anna took a step back, Maverick extended his hand. "Hello, Miss."

"Pierre, Anna, this is my brother Maverick." Colton said. He winked at Pierre. "He's never seen a real Frenchman before."

Pierre laughed. "Well, I hope I don't disappoint." He shook Maverick's hand. "It is a pleasure."

"It's nice to meet you, Sir." Maverick said.

"Pierre, please."

"Pierre." Maverick smiled at him.

"I'm Anna." Anna extended her hand.

"Yes, I've heard about you, Anna." Maverick shook her hand. He gestured at her pistol. "Still packing a pistol, I see."

"I've realized pistols are like pens." Anna said.

"Oh?" Maverick smiled. "How so?"

"You can go for days at a time, weeks even while carrying one and never use it and it makes no difference. But if you suddenly encounter a need for one when you don't have one, it is already too late to go and find one."

Maverick laughed. "I guess so." He patted his sides self-consciously. "Oh. Well…" He wasn't wearing a pistol. "I do have a pen, if that helps any." He patted his jacket. "Just in case."

"Then between the two of us, we are prepared for anything." Anna said with a smile.

Colton looked up the gangway. "Where's Frank? Did he not make it?"

"No." Pierre said. "One of his assistants is here instead. A Steve Fields. British."

"Everything okay with Frank and Jeanne?"

Pierre shrugged. "Hopefully we'll get some word while we're here. Seems he had a couple of tour groups go astray."

"Colt, I'll go get the wagon and bring it to the end of the pier." Maverick said. "And I'll send some porters this way." He looked at Pierre. "How many you think you need?"

Pierre sighed. "A dozen, probably. fteen trunks."

"Fifteen?" Maverick laughed. "You are going back to France eventually, right?"

"That is the plan." Anna said.

"Mister Larchmont owns over half of them." Pierre said with a head shake. "He's packed for every contingency, I think."

"Okay then." Maverick considered that for a moment. "I may have to hire a wagon just for the luggage."

"Larchmont is here?" Colton gaped at Pierre. "That lousy no good…"

"It's his son, Daniel that's here." Anna corrected.

"Daniel Larchmont?" Colton said. "I don't think I remember him."

"Oh you might. Remember that one man who…"

"My ears are burning," Daniel said as he came down the gangplank. Behind him were three rough-looking sailors.

"Mister Larchmont," Anna said. "I had just told Colton that 'Mister Larchmont' was coming with us and he thought it was your father. He was surprised that he would make a trans-Atlantic trip to go hunting in the American wilds."

"To be honest with you, I'm surprised I'm doing it either." Daniel shook his head. "A fool's errand."

Colton laughed. "Buck up, Mister Larchmont. Think of it as an adventure most people pay to go on." He held out his hand. "Colton Maguire."

"Nice to meet you Mister Maguire." Daniel shook his hand.

"Where is this Steve fellow I've heard about?"

"He is with the baggage to make sure it all gets taken." Daniel said. "Are there porters coming?"

"My brother was sending some this way while he went to fetch the wagon." Colton smiled. "Or to be more accurate, wagons as I've heard there is quite a bit of luggage." He shook his head. "Fifteen trunks? You folks do realize we're going to be hiking through virgin terrain. It's mainly essentials out there. Essentials being things like tents and food and such. This isn't a luxury safari."

"I understand that, Mister Maguire." Daniel said. "I've been on several trips into the jungles of Africa with only what I could carry on my back."

"And the backs of a couple of native porters, I imagine." Colton said with a smirk. "We don't have those." He nodded at the three sailors. "Or is that what you're here for, gentlemen?"

The sailor in front shook his head. "No sir; we…" he glanced at Daniel. "We weren't hired as porters."

"Mister Maguire, I can assure you it won't be me that hinders our expedition." He looked at Anna. "While I am sure she is capable, the wilds are no place for women."

Anna laughed. "You'll have to tell that to the Indians we come across; their women have been doing it for thousands of years."

"Yes, quite." Daniel said. "In any case Mister Maguire, do not concern yourself; it will not be a problem."

"We're going to be working and living in close quarters, Colton is fine."

Daniel stared at Colton for a long moment. "Yes. I suppose so." He said finally. "Colton. Daniel."

Colton slapped his hands together and rubbed them. "Well, let's get to the wagon. Oh! Have you eaten? We can get something light before we head out. If there's one thing New Orleans is known for, it's its food."

"I could use something to eat, now that you mention it." Pierre said. He looked at the sailors. "Gentlemen, something to eat?" He looked at Colton. "Say, how far is Nacogdoches from here?"

"Oh, it's three hundred sixty miles away." Colton said matter-of-factly as he pointed west. "That general direction."

"Absurd!" Daniel said. "That's three quarters of our time just getting to your *home*!"

"What?" Colton said. "Who said anything about going to Nacogdoches? That's three weeks away."

"Mister Maguire…" Daniel began loudly.

"Perhaps we need to speak to the Captain about his layover here." Pierre suggested. "If our schedule has changed."

"Okay, everyone just stop." Colton said. He pointed at the sailors. "First things first. Do you have money to eat?"

"Well yes, but we were told provisions would be provided." One of the sailors said. The other two nodded because that was indeed the agreement.

Colton reached into his pocket. "Here. Get something to eat but stay by the vendors and we'll grab you on the way out." He flipped a half-dollar to the sailor. "I recommend the gumbo in a bread bowl."

The sailor caught the coin and with a nod he and the other two moved off.

"Okay. Now you." He pointed at Daniel. "No one said we were going to Nacogdoches. I was just answering his question." He pointed at Pierre. "I figured he was making conversation."

"That's where I thought we were going." Pierre offered.

"That's three weeks the wrong direction." Colton shook his head. "We're heading up the Mississippi tomorrow. I've chartered a boat. It's a real beauty, I must say. We'll be heading upriver towards a town called Saint Louis. We'll beach about a day short of there in the wilds of Missouri near the town of Poplar Bluff in the Ozark Mountains. Beautiful country up there; you'll love it. I hope you brought your camera, Anna." He looked at the departing sailors. "It will be a little tighter now since we've gained three adventurers. But it will work out, I'm sure. A great time will be had by all." He smiled wide.

"Mister Maguire I will not be led on some wild goose chase gallivanting around the countryside on my father's expense account. My father will…" Daniel began tersely.

"And I'll not have you scold me in public." Colton snapped. "I am not one of your employees and for all I care, you can remain aboard the

Monarch until we return." He turned and squared off to the man. "Who your father is does not impress me, Daniel. I have a *hundred fifty thousand* head of cattle, over eight million dollars' worth back on my ranch that need tending but instead of that, my brother and I are here helping my friends with an endeavor to get them out from under your murderous father's thumb! Lest you forget, I was also there for the gun battle of my life on *that ship*." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "So…" He took a breath. "So, how about you grow some manners for your host, appreciate what he is doing for you and work as part of a team that will make it a success for everyone in the shortest amount of time possible." He offered his hand. "How does that sound?"

Daniel realized he had pushed the man more than he should have. "Colton. I apologize. I was caught unawares and spoke out of turn and it was rude. I apologize." He lied as he shook Colton's hand. "Saint Louis you say? How far away is that?"

"Six hundred fifty miles."

"But that's even farther than…"

Colton held up a finger. "This boat will do better than ten miles per hour every hour all day long. So it can travel almost two hundred fifty miles a day. It's only a two and a half day sail to where we're getting off. Furthermore, we'll do close to twelve miles per hour on the way back thanks to the current so it's just a two day return trip. We will have plenty of time to hunt." He let go of Daniel's hand. "Don't worry; I have it all planned out. My brother and I don't want to be dawdling around the wilds longer than we must. We have several thousand cattle we need to drive to market in early March before I head back to France for a wedding."

Daniel decided to keep things as amicable as possible. "Then there is only one more thing that worries me."

"What's that?"

"The alarming lack of gumbo."

Colton smiled as he pointed a finger at Daniel. "*That* my good man, I can alleviate. Lady, Gentlemen; let us find my wayward brother and then grab a bite to eat."

"So where are we going right now?" Anna asked. "If it's not your ranch."

"I've rented a house north of town near some docks as a base camp. We will stay there for the night and sail out tomorrow at nine in the morning. The boat should be there by about eight. It also gives us a place to stay when we return while the *Monarch* prepares to sail back to France."

"Rented a house?" Daniel said as they started walking. "That seems an expensive endeavor for one night. No offense; I only ask because I am funding this expedition."

"No, no. That is a good question." Colton pointed to where the sailors were standing. "There they are. I've rented the house for a month and it will accommodate all of us. Trying to rent an entire floor of a hotel for us would have been three times as expensive, and we'd not have a kitchen to use so you'd pay restaurant prices for every meal."

"A month?" Daniel asked.

"Yes. Pierre here told me you were heading up the alligator hunt. That doesn't need to happen for about three weeks. So that gives you a large place to stay, with room to relax and eat instead of just a cramped room in a hotel. I've hired a cook as well."

"Three weeks?" Pierre asked. "I thought we were all heading out together."

Colton shrugged. "Well, we are looking for something we've never seen before. Daniel's expedition won't take more than a week. Crocodiles and snapping turtles are plentiful in the swamps. If he went out tomorrow, he'd be back in three or four days and then trying to figure out how to arrange a place to keep a couple of twenty-five foot alligators for three weeks. Plus the smaller gators, and turtles. Keep *and feed*." He shook his head. "No, I think when we're on our way back, success or not, we stop in Poplar Bluff and send word and that's when he needs to go out and procure those beasts. If we have to wait, then it will only be a couple of days at most. In the meanwhile, you can go out with the trappers to find the gators."

"Find them now?" Daniel asked. "How does that work?"

"Alligators don't travel all that much so once you locate them, you'll easily be able to go back out to their nest and get them when you want. And in the meantime you can get some hunting in and enjoy the town."

"That does sound like a good idea." Daniel admitted. He stopped in front of the vendor. "Gumbo in a bowl made out of a small loaf of bread so there aren't even dishes to wash. Très ingénieux." (How ingenious).

Colton slapped Daniel on the back. "Hey! You could serve those at the Zoo. Put some Bouillabaisse or Garbure in a crusty sourdough round loaf, you'd sell them hand over fist. Ca a l'air délicieux, non?" (It sounds delicious, no?)

Daniel raised an eyebrow at Colton.

"He does that sometimes." Anna said with a giggle. She held up four fingers to the vendor. "Four please."

"I already had one," Colton said. "Just three, please Ma'am."

The woman nodded then turned to prepare three bowls.

"So we get settled in the house and I introduce you to the others. Then we'll get a nice meal then we're off in the morning."

Daniel nodded. "You seem to have it all worked out, Colton. Again, I apologize."

"Say no more of it." Colton said. He looked over his shoulder. "I'm going to check on Maverick. You all stay here and we'll be back with the wagons."

"Don't forget Steve." Pierre said.

"Don't worry." Colton said as he walked off.

Ten
Base Camp

Colton steered the wagon around the circular driveway to the front of the house. Maverick was driving the other wagon loaded with luggage.

"Here we are. Home sweet home." Colton said.

"I say this isn't bad at all." Steve said.

The very large one-story house sat at the end of a long driveway, a half mile from the street. It stood on massive brick pillars so the entire structure was one story above ground.

"That's amazing," Anna said. "I've never seen a house built like that."

"Well," Colton said as he dropped down from the wagon, "the Mississippi is known to flood its banks. This way, if the river comes visiting, it just passes under instead of coming in. There's lots of houses along the banks that are raised up like this."

"What a sight." Pierre said. He hopped down and offered a hand to Anna.

Colton looked at Daniel. "A good hotel room in town is two dollars a night; times five rooms is ten dollars a night. For a month, you're suddenly up to three hundred dollars. I got this entire house *plus* a cook and a gardener who does odd jobs for a month for one hundred ten. And there's a library overlooking the river at the back to relax in. That's a view you can't get in town."

"Indeed." Daniel hopped off the wagon. He looked at Maverick. "Your brother is quite astute."

"Oh, please don't go saying things like that, Daniel. It'll go to his head and then there'll be no living with him."

Daniel laughed. "I will keep those comments to myself." He replied. Despite what his father had told him and the entire incident aboard the *Monarch*, he was beginning to like Colton and the rest of them. They seemed to genuinely care for each other and even though he had been actively trying to kill them recently, they seemed to also accept him and wanted the expedition to succeed. He felt a little remorse for having hired one of the sailors to kill Colton and Pierre when the chance arose. He looked at the house. "Who is going to carry the bags up those elegant stairs?" He said referring to the twin curved staircases that led from the paved driveway to the entrance to the house.

"I was thinking we only carry up what we need for the night," Colton said. "Why carry everything up a flight of stairs then back down the next day if we don't need to? We'll just leave them here and get all our bags to the ship in the morning to save our backs the trouble. We can just leave them on the wagon and move it to the barn for safekeeping. Anything someone does not need on the boat, we can all pitch in and carry up together."

"That's very…" He hesitated as he saw Maverick hold a finger up to his lips. "Yes. We will do that."

"Nicely done, Sir." Maverick said. He cocked his hat back on his head. "Pierre, can you let Olive know we'll have eleven for dinner. Unless Rémy and his men decide to join us."

"Ask them to stay so we can make sure we are all singing from the same sheet of music." Colton said.

"I will do that." Pierre answered. He took the stairs two at a time and entered the house.

"Well I suppose I really just need that one bag there for the night." Anna gestured at a bag.

"Okay; I'll get that one." Colton said. "Maverick, can you park that one in the barn and have Sully put away the horses?"

"This one is hired, remember?" Maverick said with a smile.

Colton snapped his fingers. "Oh right." He looked at the men. "If we get the wagons side by side, we can hand the luggage over since this wagon belongs to the house. Care to lend a hand?"

One of the sailors stood. "Sure. We can do that."

"Be right back." Maverick said as he snapped the reins. He steered his wagon in a wide circle then alongside the other. "I'll hold them steady."

Colton clambered back onto the wagon and handed the other set of reins to Maverick so he could keep both teams of horses still while the men jostled the luggage around.

Within minutes, the sailors had moved the luggage over to the house's wagon.

"We could have helped you know," Steve said.

Colton shook his head. "Too many cooks spoil the soup." He clambered down off the wagon as the sailors jumped down.

"I'll return this one and be back shortly." Maverick said as he handed the reins to the other wagon back to Colton. He snapped the reins and the horses took Maverick and his loaned wagon back toward town.

An old black man approached the group. "Say Mister Colton, back already?"

"Yes, Sir. The gang is all here." Colton said. "Sully if you can stow this wagon with the luggage in the barn for the evening, I'd appreciate it. We'll just drive it down to the dock so it can all get loaded onto the *Leona* tomorrow morning."

"No trouble at all. Boss."

"Excellent, Sir." Colton smiled at the old man- he was probably in his mid-sixties which meant that since he was in America as a young man in the 1860's, he had been a slave. Slavery was a practice that Colton did not agree with at all; in fact his father had traveled north and fought for the Union during the war. It had put his ranch in jeopardy because Texas had seceded from the Union in 1861 after it had replaced its governor Sam Houston who had refused to swear his allegiance to the Confederacy. Sam Colton had transferred ownership of his ranch to his neighbor, Thad Walker who while he didn't agree with slavery in principle, supported the State of Texas. When the war was over and Sam Colton returned, in a true testament of his friendship and honor, Thad transferred the entire property back. Colton smiled. "Will you be joining us for dinner? We're talking giant alligators and turtles."

"Not unless you're grillin' them with some garlic and butter, Boss." Sully smiled. "*Then* we can talk."

Colton had given up trying to get Sully to stop calling him 'Boss'; it seemed it was more a term of endearment than actually showing subjugation. "Then it will be drinks in the library afterwards. Chivas and Grouse will be the talk at seven."

"Oh, that's my kind of talking." Sully said with a smile. "I'll bring a couple of oranges so we can make us some proper Old Fashioneds."

"Excellent. See you then, Sir."

"You gonna stop calling me that?"

"You going to stop calling me Boss?"

"See you at seven, Boss." Sully said as he stepped up into the wagon. "I'll get this put away and the horses out in the corral in the meanwhile."

"All right." Colton said with another smile. He turned to the others. "Gentlemen? Let me show you in so everyone can get cleaned up for dinner." He picked up Anna's bag. "Let's go get settled."

Eleven
Plans are Laid

Everyone moved to the table when the dinner bell was rung.

"This place is indeed better than a hotel." Daniel said. "I must admit." He had spent the time before dinner perusing the library. He sat at the end of the table. "It is very nice indeed."

Colton moved to the head of the table and also sat. "Thanks."

Maverick sat beside him at the end.

Two Indians entered after everyone had sat.

"Ahh! Wayah and Joseph. You made it back. Excellent. Olive would have been upset if you missed dinner." Maverick said.

"Sorry we are late," Wayah said. "We were sidetracked."

The two Indians sat midway down the table next to Anna. The long table still had four empty chairs.

"Hello." Pierre said loudly. "We are from France." He pointed across the room. "From across the big water." He made a waving motion with his hand.

"Hmmm." Wayah said with a raised eyebrow.

So did Maverick. "Oh boy." He muttered.

"I'm kidding," Pierre said. "It's a pleasure to meet you both. I am Pierre and that lovely woman is Anna my fiancé."

"I am Joseph. Nice to meet you." Joseph's eyebrows went down. "I think."

"Steven Fields from England." Steve piped up.

"And I am Daniel Larchmont."

"Ahh; Larchmont, the holder of the purse strings. N'es tu pass?" (Are you not?) Wayah said.

"C'est mon père. Je suis ici pour une aventure." (That is my father. I am just here for an adventure.) Daniel answered, testing the man's French.

"Bien sûr" (of course) Joseph chuckled. "We hope we can give you one. Coming all this way to just walk around a snow-covered forest would be a waste."

"Indeed."

"It is a pleasure meeting you." Anna said. "So you are our guides then?"

Wayah picked up a fork and the napkin from under it. "Guides may be a strong word." He laid the napkin on his lap. "Trackers perhaps. If we're lucky enough to find one of them."

"Lucky to find one of them?" Pierre said. "You mean there is more than one of them."

"One deer would only last as long as one deer lasts. Stories of the Sasq'ets go back for many, many generations. So they must…." Joseph hesitated as he placed his napkin on his lap. "I do not want to be… inappropriate but you must get my meaning, Pierre."

"Ah, well… yes. I suppose there would have to be males and females of the species." Pierre admitted. "Touché."

A forty-something Creole woman came through the large doors from the kitchen. She was pushing a large double-deck cart. "Bonswa tout moun!" (Good evening everyone – in Creole.)

"Bonswa, Olive," Colton answered. "Li pran bon sant." (It smells great)

"Of course it does." Olive answered. She moved around the table quickly placing a plate in front of everyone. When she had made her circuit, she removed a last plate and sat beside Daniel. "Hello." She said to him with a smile.

"Oh. Hello." Daniel's eyebrows went up. He looked at her plate then Colton.

"You don't like Cornish hens?"

"No. That's not it." Daniel said.

"Oh." Colton said. He leaned forward on the table. "Well, let's eat while it's hot. We can discuss European class status compared to those in America in the meanwhile."

"Oh." Now Olive said. She looked at Daniel. "Eating with the help does not sit well with you, Mesye?" (Sir)

"Oh, not at all." Daniel smiled. "It just caught me unawares." He looked down at the plate. Each person had a roasted Cornish hen with garlic, butter, and rosemary. There was also some rosemary on the roasted potatoes and carrots. "This looks delicious."

"Changing the subject are we?" Olive smiled as she picked up her fork and knife.

"Olive, stop being mean to poor Daniel." Colton said as he picked up a small potato on his fork. He pointed at her with it "He is out of his element I think."

Daniel cut a piece of chicken breast off. "No, no; not at all. As Pierre can attest, I always take my meals in the employee cafeteria. My father frowns on me doing that, but I think it is the best way to get a feel for what employees think."

"That is indeed true." Pierre said even though he had made a point of never eating with Daniel.

"A good meal loosens the tongue, eh?" Olive popped a carrot into her mouth.

Daniel laughed. "I does indeed." He put the chicken in his mouth and chewed. "And a meal like this would loosen them greatly."

"Oh, flattery is *always* accepted, mezanmi" (dear) Olive said.

"Anna said you spoke Creole, Colton. I can see why French comes so easily with how similar they are."

"It really helps." Colton said as he cut his chicken.

"Of course it does." Olive said. "As most people are aware, French was derived *from* Creole." She cut a piece of chicken while furiously not making eye contact with Daniel.

Daniel raised his eyebrows again. "What?"

"Olive." Colton warned.

"I'm not sure if you are rubbing off on Colton, or he is rubbing off on you." Maverick said.

"We are kindred spirits, I think." Olive said. "So I hear you are going in search of a Sasq'ets. Travay danjere." (Dangerous work.)

"Yes, well, we're hoping to find one near the Mississippi in Missouri." Pierre said.

"If it doesn't want to be found, it won't be." Olive said. "It can pass into the Spirit World when it wants. That's why none are ever found dead. Powerful Voodoo protects that animal. Powerful."

Wayah just looked at her as he ate a piece of chicken.

"See? He knows it's true." Olive continued. "*None* are ever found. Dangerous thing you are trying to do."

"We will be careful." Colton said. "In any case, we're prepared for it. Right Steve?"

Steve was busy eating his chicken- he had opted to skip the gumbo because he didn't like shrimp. "What? Oh yes. I've hunted big game all over Asia and Africa. I'm sure we can take down anything we come across."

"Take down?" Joseph said. "But I thought the plan was not to kill it, but to capture it alive." Joseph was worried because his Chief had instructed him to not only assist in capturing the Sasq'ets but to try and help it turn back into Human form. The Chief had explained that he believed the creature was an Indian who had gone missing after going on a Vision Quest and had traveled in his animal form to the wilds of the Ozarks. "Has that changed, Colt? I do not think Chief Chaske would approve of it."

"No, no." Colton said. "We are *not* going hunting for the Sasq'ets to kill it. We are hunting it yes but the better word is track. Steve misspoke."

"Oh yes, sorry." Steve said. "We have several gallons of Chloral Hydrate with us. It's a gas that will put the animal to sleep."

"And you think it will work on a Sasq'ets?" Wayah asked.

"It was able to knock out a twenty-five foot ape consistently. And this thing is what, seven or eight feet tall?" Steve said.

Wayah nodded. "Yes, it stands two full heads taller than a tall man."

"Then it's just a matter of getting it to breathe it in." Steve nodded. "Easy peasy."

"So two have seen this Sasq'ets?" Daniel asked. "Yourself?"

Joseph shook his head. "I have not seen it. I have seen its footprints and a camp destroyed by it."

"I have seen one." Wayah said. "From a distance of a hundred paces. It was running along the river between me and my camp."

"Was it fast?" Steve asked.

"Very. Once it was gone, we went and measured its stride in the mud. Each one was three of my paces."

"So it's horse-fast." Steve said.

"It can be as fast as a galloping horse, yes." Joseph answered.

"Hmm… Okay." Steve said. "Well we may have to lay traps with the gas in its path once we get in its territory."

"That sounds like a good plan." Colton said. "Standing face-to-face with that giant beast is probably not a good idea."

Anna snorted a laugh.

Everyone turned to look at her.

"Oh. I… uh… thought Colton was making a joke." She wiped her mouth with her napkin. "Because that's just exactly what he kept doing with that ape."

Joseph laughed. "From what I know of Colt, that does not surprise me."

"Colt." Pierre said. "And Maverick."

"Yes?" Colton and Maverick said together.

"You're named after horses?"

Maverick nodded. "Yes. That was Mom's doing. Dad wanted Biblical names."

"So the oldest son is Morgan." Colton said. "And Maverick here was next."

Maverick nodded. "Then there's Noriker the second youngest."

"But a Colt isn't a breed of horse; it's any young male horse."

"Well by that point, Mom decided that…" Colton began.

"And the youngest," Maverick pressed on, "was named 'Cob.' "

"Isn't that a draft pony?" Daniel asked with a smirk.

"Yes." Colton said. "But as the youngest, she called me her little Colt. When I started school, I changed it to Colton. Only Mom calls me Cob."

"What if they had a girl?" Anna asked.

"Lusitana." Colton and Maverick said together.

Anna smiled. "Well that makes sense." She nodded at him. "Colton."

"So back on the subject of our expedition." Colton looked at Maverick. "Where have our alligator wranglers gotten off to?"

"They had a previous engagement." Maverick explained. "Horace said he would stop by tomorrow afternoon to talk to Daniel."

"Horace Guillon." Colton said to Daniel. "He's a colorful character and a good man. Excellent hunter. He knows the swamps around New Orleans better than anyone else I know."

"Horace." Daniel said. "All right. We will work out the details of our expedition tomorrow."

"Definitely ask to accompany him on his trips to the swamp in the meanwhile."

"I will. So he will be by in the afternoon? Early or late?"

"Huh." Olive said. "I know Horace. He'll make sure he shows up right at lunch time. The man won't pass up a free meal."

"If it's like this dinner, I can understand why." Daniel said.

"Ohh, I like this one." Olive said with a smile. "I do indeed."

By this time, everyone had finished their meals.

"Well now that our plans are laid, why don't we all retire to the library and I can tell you about the *Leona Sleuth Aurore*." Colton said.

"I've never heard of a ship having three names," Daniel said.

"When you see her tomorrow, you'll know why she takes three names. Majestic doesn't even begin to describe her." Maverick said.

"And expensive to charter?" Daniel asked.

"Not as much as you'd expect." Colton said. "Not many folks are looking to take trips down the Mississippi in the middle of winter. The owner was just happy to get her out and about for a month of it instead of just sitting at a dock or up on blocks. It's much better than trying to make a go at it on foot or wagon. We'll be crossing some wild terrain. You may not believe it, Daniel but I do keep the Larchmont's family interests in mind."

"I see."

Colton stood. "Olive, do you need a hand with the dishes?"

"Thank you for asking but I have it. Go enjoy your evening. My payment will be a quiet house tomorrow night."

"Are you sure you aren't related to Colton somehow?" Daniel asked as he also stood. "Long lost cousin perhaps?"

Maverick stood. "Remember what I said about Colton? Don't get her started either."

With that, they all moved to the library where Sully joined them soon after.

Twelve
The Leona Sleuth Aurore

Daniel stood on the dock watching as everyone moved about the majestic ship. He couldn't think of it as just a boat because it seemed to be almost a hundred feet long. Yet was narrow to the point of being dagger-sleek. Between the steam engine and the two masts, he was sure it was much faster than what Colton had said it was yesterday.

"I'm hesitant to ask what it cost to charter a ship such as this." Daniel said to Colton.

Colton smiled. "This little thing? Oh, I'm sure your father has much larger ships than the Leona Sleuth Aurore."

"None of my father's ships have three names."

Colton ran his hand along the handrail. "It takes three names to contain the beauty of her."

Daniel frowned. "This is capable of maneuvering on the river?"

Colton nodded at the man as he stepped to the polished railing. "It takes under six feet of water; five six to be exact. And will hold enough coal to run from here to Saint Louis and back with half again as much to spare."

"It seems like it would be able to go much faster than a mere twelve knots."

"Oh yes. Out on the Gulf on a calm day, twice that. But here on a twisting river? I'd hate to run into a log or a sandbar."

"I'm sure the owner would be quite upset." Daniel said. The ship was indeed nowhere near the size of even the smallest of his Father's, but those ships were for carrying cargo- they were built big and bulky. And ugly. This ship with its polished wood decks, shining brass fixtures, and bright blue awning that spanned almost the entire deck was more

like floating art. Even the portholes for the cabins below deck all gleamed. He snapped out of his reflection, realizing that Colton was staring at him. "What did you say?"

Colton smiled wide. "Takes your breath away, doesn't it."

"So what is my Father paying for this ship?" Daniel said again.

"Don't worry Daniel; your Dad got it for a song." Colton stepped up onto the polished wood railing, holding a mast guywire for balance as he looked forward.

Daniel looked down at Colton's feet, surprised he would ever just walk on the railing like that. "I'm sure the owner would take issue with you walking on that."

Colton leaned out over the side and whispered loudly to Daniel "I'm the owner."

"What?"

"Well, my family is to be exact. We keep it here in New Orleans for jaunts up and down the Gulf Coast. To get a break from the scenery on the ranch." Colton said. "She's Australian made; the sister ship to the Ena Sleuth Aurore." Colton stepped onto the dock beside Daniel. "It's named for the wife of some rich manager of the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney." He gestured at the ship. "She's a little smaller at eighty three feet long and fifteen and a half feet wide but she's set up just about the same. There are two large cabins fore and aft; ladies up front, men at the back. The wood is Australian except for the decks which are Kauri tree from New Zealand. It's what is called a Classic Edwardian Gentleman's Steam Yacht." Colton smiled. "Nice, huh?"

"Unbelievable." Daniel said.

"What; that they'd sell it to some dusty cow poke from Texas?" Colton slapped Daniel on the shoulder. "The world's changing Mister Larchmont; there's more than just old money out there."

"I suppose so." Daniel remarked. He was disappointed that he would not be traveling up the river in such a fine craft. "I imagine our trips into the swamps will be on something a little less grand."

Colton laughed. "Yes, unfortunately. Flat bottom pole barges is what Horace Guillon uses. But let me tell you; if he ever invites you out to his place for dinner one evening, I'd suggest you take him up on it."

Colton gestured toward the house. "He's got one of *those things* to come home to. America; the land of opportunity."

"I… okay." Daniel said.

"Mister Maguire!"

Colton turned to look. "Captain Sackett. Are we all set?"

"We are." Captain Sackett said. "Except we might need to rearrange a little."

"Oh?"

"Well, you've got eight gentlemen and one lady. And I was thinking…"

"There's eight in all; seven men and one woman." Colton corrected.

Captain Sackett put his hands on his hips. "I might just be a simple boat captain, Mister Maguire but I'm fairly good at counting. There's nine of you."

"Colton," Daniel interrupted. "I apologize; I decided to send two sailors with you and only keep one with me. That's where the extra man is from."

"Oh." Colton said.

"Oh, is right." Captain Sackett said. "And with that number of men, it is foolish to try and put them all up in one cabin with the woman in the other. So I think it would be best if I move to the aft cabin with the gents so that Miss Garnier has use of my cabin. And it would give her her own private head."

"That is most considerate of you, Captain." Colton said. "I truly appreciate it."

"Then I'll go get her settled." Captain Sackett gave a half-hearted salute then disappeared into the cabin.

Colton turned to look at Daniel. He gave a wink. "I was hoping he'd come to that decision even without the extra man."

"As the owner of the boat, you should have just ordered him to move."

"Just because you can tell someone what to do doesn't mean you always should." Colton replied. "You'll find Daniel when you're running your Father's company that you'll get better service from your employees if they feel like they have a say." He patted Daniel's shoulder again. "Just a little free…"

Captain Sackett poked his head out of the cabin. "She's getting moved now, Mister Maguire." He gave a smirk. "That young sailor Bill Conway is moving her luggage over; he thinks it's his idea."

"Well done, Sir." Colton said.

"Since it was your plan from the start, I'll just say you're welcome." Captain Sackett said.

"Oh, well…I"

Daniel laughed. "Well, I'm learning all sorts of lessons." Now he slapped Colton's shoulder.

"Then let's shove off," Captain Sackett said. "We've got the tide slowing the current a little at the moment, gentlemen." He moved forward to the helm.

"Good hunting Mister Larchmont." Colton extended his hand. "We'll see you in three weeks."

"And to you as well." Daniel shook Colton's hand. "I look forward to seeing that giant beast when the ship returns."

Colton nodded then jumped back aboard.

"Not you of course, since you'll be dead." Daniel said as he walked up the dock.

Thirteen
Meal Plans Change

The creature stood beside the large broken trees looking out at the river. It really was the best place to watch for fish early in the morning. As he stood there, he caught the scent of a bear. It was the same one as before; the one with two cubs with her. In the past they had competed for fish so he listened for it to approach. On more than one occasion the bear had stolen the fish he had thrown up onto the bank. Or more precisely, her young had. When he had approached them, the mother got between them and him. Which was when he just allowed them to run off, each with a fish in its greedy mouth.

As he watched the water, listening for the bears -which were now moving away from the river- a movement on the water caught his eye. Without moving from its position, he swiveled its head to look. He met the gaze of a Light One sitting on a large boat. The two stared at each other for several seconds. There was another sitting with the first but he was looking the other way. As the boat came closer, the creature decided it would eat something else this morning. A deer perhaps since they were easy to catch. With the decision made, he turned and strode off into the forest, putting the boat and the Light Skins out of its mind.

Fourteen
Right Peculiar Stumps

Colton was seated at the back of the *Leona* drinking his coffee. It was early- close to seven AM and no one else was awake. The ship had steamed up the river making good time because there wasn't a lot of traffic to avoid. They were on their second day of sailing and were ahead of schedule by several hours. As the ship sailed north, it got colder and colder to the point where right before they stopped on the second day, the ground was covered in almost a foot of snow. Since there was no moon, the ship moved closer to shore and anchored when it got too dark to safely travel up river. At dawn, Captain Sackett suggested not using the engine and just sailing up river since there was a very brisk northerly wind to counter the river's current and they only had a short distance to go. So the ship unfurled its two sails and started up river silently sailing about a fifty yards from the western shoreline to stay well out of the way of the occasional barge moving down the middle. At this point, the Mississippi was three quarters of a mile wide.

Steve stepped out of the cabin and looked around. When he spotted Colton he motioned if he could approach.

"Sure, come on over," Colton said. "I'm just enjoying the quiet scenery." He patted his coat. "From the safety of my trusty coat."

Steve smiled as he started over carefully- he had a cup of coffee in his hand as well. "The temperature sure has dropped a lot since we left New Orleans, that's for sure. I checked your cabin and you weren't there. Everyone else is still asleep."

After Anna had been moved to the Captain's quarters, he had chosen to sleep in the aft cabin along with Steve, and the two sailors. Colton, Pierre, Maverick and the two Indians slept in the forward cabin. The first mate, Casey Windham and his brother the Engineer Cory had their own cabin with bunk beds.

"They'll be up soon enough. Once this morning wind dies down, the Captain will fire up the boiler. That'll get everyone up and about."

"Well, I wanted to catch you before anyone else was awake."

"Oh?"

"Oh, is right," Steve said seriously. "I was listening in on those two sailors- Bill and Terry?"

"Eavesdropping Mister Fields?" Colton tut-tutted.

"They were talking when they thought everyone was asleep." Steve said. "And I'm glad I was awake. They're planning on killing you. And Pierre."

"That's not very neighborly." Colton said.

"This is serious business, Colton. Daniel paid them to do it."

"Well, we'll just have to win then over, I suppose."

"And what if we can't?" Steve asked.

"Then the wilderness can be a dangerous place." Colton took a sip of coffee. "But I'd really rather think we can work something out with them."

"Colton…"

Colton held up a hand. "Listen, I know you Europeans think we cowboys shoot three people before breakfast, but the fact of the matter is that talking typically solves more problems than anything else." He smirked. "Or a good lawyer."

"I wouldn't get my hopes up." Steve said. With a sigh, he took a sip of coffee. "But okay."

"Fine." Colton said.

The two sat in silence watching the bank pass them by as the ship moved along silently. The sounds of birds the only thing breaking the silence.

"Those are most peculiar stumps." Steve gestured with his coffee cup.

Colton had been looking behind the ship. "Well, there was a large fire along the banks last year. Lots of trees burned all the way to the

ground. Lots of others were just scorched then died." He took a sip of coffee. "Peculiar stumps you say? Could they be Indian totems?"

"No, I don't think so. They're tree trunks is all. They're all in a row and cut off pretty high up." He pointed with his free hand at a series of stumps near the water's edge. There were four of them- three were perhaps four feet tall, the other closer to eight.

"Well trees do grow in a line along the water. That's pretty typical." Colton still hadn't looked.

"Well, all right but that one looks like it's covered in…"

The tallest of the 'stumps' swiveled its head to look at Steve.

They locked eyes for several seconds. When the eyes squinted at him, Steve bolted upright, spilling his coffee on Colton. "What!"

"Hey now." Colton said. "I don't got that many changes of clothes." He stood and wiped at his pants.

"Loo… Look!" As Steve said it, the creature turned and started off.

Colton looked over just as the creature took two giant steps- almost leaps- and disappeared into the forest. "What on God's green Earth was that?"

"It… it was right there. Standing by those other three stumps." Steve stammered. "Did you see it? Please tell me I'm not crazy and you saw that thing! It stared right at me."

"I saw… something." Colton said. "Was it a bear? That could have been a bear."

"That wasn't any bear. Come on, Colton. You had to have seen that thing. It was *huge*."

"Morning all," Maverick said as he exited the cabin. "Man I love sleeping on the water. Makes me want to fill a huge tub at the house with a floating bed in the middle of it. Best sleep I get is on a rocking boat."

"Maverick!" Steve wheeled around. "I saw it!"

Maverick pointed at Colton's pants. "Did it scare the pee out of my little brother?"

"That's coffee." Colton said with a headshake. "I swear."

"And I'll tell Mom." Maverick said with a smile. "What'd you see?"

"I saw *it*."

"It?"

Steve looked visibly shaken; he sat back against the railing. "*Yes*. Right out there. It was a stump then it turned and looked at me."

"I'll be right back." Colton said as he made his way forward.

"A stump looked at you? I can see how that'd be unsettling." Maverick smirked. "Say, what's in that coffee? It's pretty early to be hitting the bottle, Sir."

"I'm being serious, Maverick." Steve pointed. "Right out there was that Sasq'ets. Sitting there staring back at me."

Maverick turned to look. "Well if it is, it'll be easy to track with all that fresh snow." He looked toward the forest. "We just need the Captain to lay up on shore." As he said it, the ship slowed as the sails were brought down. Then the ship turned toward shore. "Nice to see Colton is taking care of that."

"Should I wake everyone up?" Steve asked.

"I suppose so. Then after breakfast we…"

"After breakfast? We need to get to shore now!"

Maverick held out a hand. "Steve, from all the stories we've heard, these things tends to stay around one place. And the snow will make it real easy to track. We don't need to go rushing headlong into the forest before we have a plan. That's not how you hunt big game is it?"

Steve sighed. "No. No it's not. But I guess I got excited because that was something I've never seen before in my life." He smiled. "Breakfast for all first."

Maverick nodded "Then Wayah and Joseph can track it back to its lair. That's why they're here, remember?"

"Sure, sure." Steve answered as he stood. "I'll go wake everyone up." He said, anxious to get going.

Fifteen
Ghost Tracks

Wayah and Joseph spoke to each other in Cherokee. It was much too fast for Colton to keep up; they purposefully spoke slower and simpler when they spoke to him in their native tongue.

"Do you have any idea what they are saying?" Steve asked Colton.

The group had lagged behind letting the two Indians track the animal. They had already walked almost a half of a mile from where the Leona had nosed onto shore. A narrow gangplank allowed them to disembark without getting wet.

"No, they're talking too fast for me to follow. I'm getting words like 'tracks', 'ghost', and 'lost'. And I thought I caught 'my brother' from Joseph. And Wayah doesn't sound pleased so I don't think that's a good sign."

Finally both Indians turned and looked at the group. "We have no idea where it is." Wayah said flatly.

"But you're trackers." Maverick shook his head as he gestured at the two. "Pah; famous trackers. We didn't bring you along for your *looks*, you know."

"I now am offended." Wayah crossed his arms defiantly. "I am assuredly the best looking male here. And definitely ranked as one of the two best trackers in the group."

Colton laughed; he and Wayah had become friends mainly because of the Indian's sense of humor.

Joseph pointed to the tracks. They were spread out almost six feet between strides because the creature was obviously running. Then they just ended. "It is difficult to track a ghost."

"I saw the thing," Steve said. "It was no ghost."

Joseph nodded. "We have heard that it can cross into the Spirit Realm but in this case, we believe it has gone up instead." He pointed upwards.

"It can fly?" Steve asked. "I don't see how that's possible."

"It climbed up the trees." Anna said. "That's why the tracks disappear. You know, I wonder if it is a long lost relative of the Chimpanzee. They are experts in the trees."

Steve nodded. "The trees. Yes, I have seen Chimpanzees and other monkeys moving across the trees so they are not near ground predators." Now he looked up. "I can't imagine it could go very high up into the trees with how big it was. Maybe ten or fifteen feet before the trees wouldn't support it."

"Just being off the ground is enough to keep us from tracking it. Unless…" Wayah stepped back and examined the tree where the footprints ended. "There. See there? The claw marks in the tree?"

"That's where it grabbed it when it climbed." Colton said. "Nicely done, Wayah master tracker."

Wayah raised an eyebrow at Colton.

"Nicely done Wayah, handsome master tracker."

"If you two are done, see if you can find a mark in any trees near this one." Joseph said. "Then we will know which direction it went."

The group spread out and within a minute found gouges in a tree almost ten feet away.

"So it's traveling farther from the river." Colton said once a third tree was found. "Well, we need to go back and get supplies before we wander any farther from the *Leona Sleuth*. We'll freeze to death out here."

"This time I agree with Colton's assessment of the weather. It's freezing during the day and well below zero at night. We need to get our tent and other gear before we try to spend the night out in the wilderness." He looked back toward the boat. "Or we can use the boat as our outpost for the time being and conduct searches during the day and come back at night. There is plenty of coal to keep the stoves running aboard ship."

"True." Colton said. "And if we end up being more up river, we can always move the *Leona* closer to where we need her." He looked at Anna. "Would it be useless for me to ask you to return to the ship?"

Anna looked into the forest then back towards the ship. "I'm not sure. If I go much farther I might not find my way back to the ship. And I'd hate to rob either Joseph or Wayah from the group just to get back."

"I will mark our path." Joseph said. He pulled his hatchet. "The arrows will point the way back." He made three quick hacks at the tree making a crude arrow. "I will do that every few trees so that anyone that wants to return can." He pointed at the ground with the hatchet. "Also, until it snows again, our path will be easy to see on the ground. No one should feel like they have to stay out here beyond their limit."

"Good, because I'm already cold." Wayah said.

"Doesn't your name mean Wolf Speaker?" Colton asked.

"Yes, dear Soquili Agina." Wayah answered. "And when I speak to Wolves they tell me they do not like the cold either."

"Fair enough." Colton said. "Well, let's at least try to get an idea if this thing is smart enough to know we are tracking it, okay?"

"Right." Steve said. He unslung his rifle.

"Please do not shoot our specimen." Pierre said. He looked at the two sailors. They were each carrying large backpacks. "Are you two okay with continuing?"

Terry looked at Bill who nodded. "Yes, it would be good if we can catch this animal on the first day."

"Catch it on the first day? So your sense of humor rivals even Wayah, Bill. That's good to know." Colton said with a smile. "If that does happen, Steve here will probably hire you away from the Larchmonts to go on his big game hunts as his lucky charm, right?"

Steve nodded. "Oh, I surely would. You'd have no choice, mate."

Bill did not answer. Colton has seemed to make a point of trying to be friendly with him at any chance while they were sailing up the river. He wasn't sure if their plan to shoot both him and Pierre was known or not because Colton seemed to be friendly with everyone he met. Even strangers while they waited in line for their food.

"So how violent is this thing?" Colton asked. "Should we be planning for a confrontation? Like with a black bear?"

Joseph shook his head. "There are stories of the Sasq'ets ransacking a camp or taking horses, but none of anyone being injured."

"It steals horses?" Terry asked. "That's hard to believe."

"It *eats* horses." Joseph said. "Parts of horses were found after they went missing."

"So we'll keep our guard up." Pierre said.

"Should we get out one of the bottles?" Terry gestured at his backpack.

From his experiences with King Gor, Pierre had hired a glass blower to make him three dozen orange-sized round bottles out of thin glass. Each with a cork stopper. He had filled them with Ether Sulfate and carefully packed them with hay padding in the backpacks Terry and Bill were carrying. His plan was to shoot them with a slingshot at the creature to knock it out. To fire the small glass balls, he had purchased five Zip-Zip cast iron sling shots before leaving Paris. After practicing on the ship to America, he was confident he could hit a man-sized animal at ten yards. Anna had also practiced and was a competent sling shot user.

"I'm still not convinced that you can take down any sort of animal with these little glass bottles," Bill rested his hand on his pistol. "Fired from a child's toy no less."

"We used to hunt squirrel and rabbit with sling shots when we were kids," Colton said. "Firing lead shot, we were as successful as we'd be with a 4-10 rifle up to twenty yards." Colton took his Zip-Zip from his coat pocket. "You should take pot shots at trees as we're going along. Any rock about the size of a marble will do." He offered it to Bill with a smile. "Just sight over the top of it and make sure you pull straight back."

"And the Ether Sulfate was able to knock out a twenty-five foot ape." Pierre said. "If this thing is hit on the head, chest or shoulders with it, it will do the same thing."

Bill took the slingshot. "I'll give it a try." He said, sounding unconvinced. If it turned out to be as effective as Colton said, he decided he would buy one to use aboard ship to shoot rats. If things

worked out as he planned, he would just keep this one since Colton wouldn't need it any more. "Maybe I can shoot rats with it aboard ship."

"In close quarters on a ship? Oh, it'd be perfect for that." Colton said. "And you'd not poke holes in the hull."

"Let us try to get an idea where it is going. If we are lucky it will lead us to its lair on this hill and we can trap it there." Wayah said. He pointed in the direction the creature seemed to be going. "This way but keep your eyes up. A panther in the trees will kill you before you know it is there." He started walking up the hill into the woods, Joseph close behind. "Let's go."

Throughout the rest of the day, they did not find any more tracks and spent the day circling back to the ship late in the afternoon.

Sixteen
Avoiding the Light Skins

The creature pulled the dead deer up onto its shoulders then headed back toward its lair. Deer were less plentiful now that it was colder but still not too difficult to find. He had gone a bit farther from its lair when he had come across the group of Light Skins that were moving about the forest. He would oftentimes come across a single Light Skin traveling with a horse or mule. These smelled very similar to the Dark Skins even though they dressed differently.

These Light Skins seemed to leave him alone- on several occasions, it had wandered by the camp of one of these lone Light Skins but instead of attacking, they either sat still and quiet, or chattered at it as they looked on. The creature did not understand the chattering but it could tell that it was not a panicked or fearful chattering. It was more like the type the Light Skins seemed to do with their horses or dogs. Since these Light Skins did not bother him, he did not feel the need to kill them.

He had killed a good number of Light Skins however. There were ones that would travel in groups and kill deer and bear. They carried long sticks similar to the ones that the Dark Skins carried except they did not have a sharp point. They did make a sound like thunder. Once he had felt pain in his arm after one of the Light Skins had pointed his long stick at it. The hole ran with blood and pus for a long time before it healed. After it healed over, it hurt for a long time afterwards. Then one day, something that looked like a pebble pushed out of the wound. The creature had washed the reappeared hole in the river. This time, when it finally closed over, it stayed closed for good. He made a point to avoid the Light Skins that carried these long sticks when he could. And when he couldn't, he would kill them as quickly as possible. They would chatter and scream at him until they were all dead.

This recent group of Light Skins did not seem to be killing deer or bear. Or any animal for that matter. They just seemed to be walking.

The creature was prepared to just ignore them until they started following its path. Whether they were actually following it or just going in the same direction didn't matter. It decided that it would try to lose them by climbing into the trees. If they showed up again, it would kill them.

In the meantime, it carried the deer along, heading toward its lair. It wasn't going to take the entire deer into its lair; just the two rear legs. That was usually all it ate from deer. They were easy to pull off, had a lot of meat on them, and didn't attract as many bugs or flies into the lair like an entire deer would. So once it got a little closer to his lair, he would pull off the two rear legs and leave the rest of the deer for the bears, cougars, and wolves. He had learned that taking the deer apart on the path that the deer used would make them harder to find them later on. So he left the parts of the deer he didn't eat near the lairs of bears and cougars for them to get rid of them.

Seventeen
Brother Inola

The group once again walked into the wilderness in the early morning light. The ship had been moved another three miles upriver the evening before.

Joseph and Wayah were out front moving back and forth looking for marks in the trees for almost twenty minutes, up and down several hills through the forest. Since no tracks had been found, they assumed the creature as moving –quite successfully- through the trees to avoid detection. Without leaves, the sun from the clear blue sky penetrated to the floor easily. Even so, the temperature never got above thirty. When the terrain had become rockier, Colton had checked several small caves for the creature with no success.

While they walked, Bill had fired dozens rocks from the slingshot, at first not even able to hit a tree ten feet away because the pocket for the slingshot had been replaced with a much larger one to accommodate the glass balls. After a couple dozen tries using larger rocks, he was consistently hitting trees at ten paces.

Again, Joseph and Wayah came to a stop.

"The path is gone once more." Wayah said.

Colton looked back. "It seems that today we've probably walked five miles from the boat but I'd guess we're not more than a couple from the river, right?"

"That is probably right." Joseph said as he pointed at the sun. "We have been walking more north than west today so we are moving along the river more than away from it."

"So we should move the boat instead of walking back to it then moving it." Pierre said. "Right?"

Colton looked into the forest the direction they had been walking, then toward where the river would be. "I think so. It's well past noon so it'll be dark in a little bit. So what we..."

Bill fired at another tree, hitting it at almost twenty yards away.

Colton looked at him. "Say, you're getting pretty good with that Bill."

"Thanks." Bill answered. He began looking at the ground for another suitable rock.

"So what we should do is…" Maverick coaxed.

"Right." Colton nodded. "So what I think we should do is split up."

"Split up?" Terry said. "I don't know if that's the best idea out here in the wilderness."

"This isn't all that wild." Colton said. "Instead of walking all the way back to the boat again, if everyone but me and Wayah walk eastward toward the Mississippi." He pointed. "We'll get the boat and meet you there. We'll move a lot faster with just two of us. Joseph and Maverick will make sure you don't get turned around. We can regroup and start again first thing in the morning. That's two miles or so instead of five."

"That does sound like a good plan. Two sounds better than five." Anna said. Her feet had become wet within the first mile and they were numb. Between the prospect of walking five miles or two, she definitely preferred the two.

"That's another day lost." Pierre said. "Tomorrow makes five days with no luck. Maybe we should just press on a little more instead of moving the boat again."

Bill picked up a large round stone. "Personally, I prefer two to five miles as well."

"It will be dark soon and getting back in the dark will put is back at the boat very late and very cold. I think we need to go back now." Maverick said.

"I agree. There is no sense in risking anyone getting frost bite."

"Fine then." Maverick said. "Wayah and Colton will head back to the boat while the rest of us move directly to the river. They'll be a lot quicker alone so we won't have to wait that long."

"And if we need to, we can start a fire," Joseph said. "With the sun on the way down, it will be getting colder."

Colton rubbed his gloved hands together. "Then it's settled; we get back to the boat and start fresh from here…"

The Sasq'ets dropped to the ground among the group and let out a long roar. Its arms splayed out to the side.

Anna stumbled backwards, falling on her butt at the sight of the massive creature.

"Everyone stay calm!" Colton said. He turned to face the creature. "Easy now, big fella." He held is arms out but low as he crouched slightly. "Easy."

The creature roared at Colton. They were less than ten feet apart.

"Why do you say that to every dangerous animal you see?" Anna said. She was still on the ground.

The Sasq'ets turned and appraised everyone in the group, growling.

Joseph stepped toward it. "Inola, it is me." He held his hands out to the side. "Do you remember?"

"Joseph, stop." Colton said. He took a step towards Joseph. "What are you doing?"

"Inola," Joseph said again. "Let me help you. *Please*." He took another step. He was now within the reach of the creature.

Pierre sidestepped toward Terry hoping to reach the backpack. "Joseph, just keep him still." He said. He was within three paces of Terry.

The creature turned toward Pierre and howled at him angrily.

As the creature took its eyes off Joseph, he took two steps toward the creature. Now it was within his reach of it.

"Joseph," Maverick said, "get back."

Steve unslung his rifle. He and Maverick were behind the creature so it did not see him.

"No, Steve." Colton said. "Don't."

Joseph reached up and put his hand on the creature's chest. He was five foot six and the creature almost eight feet -it towered over him.

"Joseph." Maverick hissed. "What are you doing?"

The creature startled as Joseph touched it. It turned its attention back to him and roared.

"*Brother*." Joseph said. "Come back home."

The creature grabbed Joseph by the arm that was touching him.

"Inola, remember!"

The creature picked up Joseph by his arm and threw him.

Almost twenty feet away, Joseph slammed against a large tree and cartwheeled another ten feet before landing face down in the snow.

"Joseph!" Wayah said. He started to take a step toward his friend when the creature turned and howled at him.

Pierre took another step toward Terry- he reached out to unfasten the flap on the backpack.

The creature took a long step toward Pierre and Terry, ignoring Bill who was frozen in place now barely five feet away. He had a stone in the slingshot and had drawn it back when the creature had dropped down from the trees. The creature growled at Pierre and Terry again.

In one smooth motion Bill brought his hand up and let loose the stone as the creature turned to look at him. The stone hit the creature squarely between the eyes with an audible 'crack!'.

The Sasq'ets staggered backward from the impact and dropped to one knee, dazed. Blood immediately began to run down its face from the jagged gash the rock had made.

Bill dropped the slingshot and reached for his pistol. He had tied it down because he was afraid he would lose it walking in the forest, forcing him to look down and use both hands to untie the square knot.

"Bill!" Colton shouted. "Move back!"

The creature shook its head in anger, throwing droplets of blood onto the white snow. It leapt at Bill from its crouching position catching Bill on its shoulder. Continuing its forward motion it moved to a

standing position and took three leaping strides away. As it moved away from the group, it slammed into a tree with Bill still on its shoulder. Whether it was on purpose or just because it was disoriented, the affect was the same; Bill's body snapped upright, the back of his head hitting the trunk as the tree bent backward from the force. The creature spun away from the tree letting Bill's body crumple to the forest floor.

With a final roar it turned and bounded into the forest.

"Bill!" Terry said as he rushed to his friend. "Bill!"

Wayah moved quickly to his fallen friend. "Joseph, you fool!" He said as he slid to his knees beside him. Joseph's body was twisted at an angle that let Wayah know that his friend was gone. "Oh, you fool."

Colton dashed to Bill, getting there at the same time as Terry. "Bill!" He reached down and put his hand on the man's chest.

"Don't touch him!" Terry snapped. "Bill?" He cradled Bill's head to turn it to look at him in the face. When he pulled his hands away, they were covered in blood.

"He's gone, Terry." Colton said as he put his hand on his shoulder. "There's nothing we can do for him."

Terry fell back, sitting on the snow. "Bill, I told you to stay with Mister Larchmont." He looked at Colton, tears in his eyes. "He said that this would be more fun that hunting alligators."

"There was nothing you could have done." Colton said. He reached out and closed Bill's surprised eyes. "Let's get this backpack off him, okay?"

Terry glared at Colton. "Sure, then we'll take his *boots* too! Anything else you want to take from my dead friend?"

Colton stood. "No, Terry; that's not it at all." He said softly. "We're going to bury your friend properly. But we don't need to bury the backpack. If any of them are still okay, we're going to need those supplies to get that thing."

"What we need is rifles to shoot it." Terry put his hand on Bill's knee. "We just need to shoot it."

"We were hired for a job." Colton said. "We need to finish it."

"Yeah." Terry glared at Colton again. "Hired for a job."

"Listen Terry," Colton said as he put his hands on his hips - and his two pistols. "In case you haven't noticed, what we're doing is pretty damned dangerous. We've enough on our plate dealing with that thing out here in its home territory without having to watch our backs. So if you want to have it out with me, we can do that right here and right now." He deftly flipped the leather straps off the hammers of his pistols. "Because we can't afford to not trust each other right now. So what's it going to be?"

Terry looked from Bill to Colton's pistols and back. His, like Bills' were tied down with leather straps. Now he wanted to kill Colton even more but he realized that Colton was correct; this was not the time for revenge. Especially since he was now outnumbered six to one. "Fine, Colton. Let's get this animal."

"Good. Now if you will take off your friend's backpack, I'll get a shovel and we'll give Bill a proper burial. Okay?"

"Fine." Terry snapped.

"Fine." Colton repeated as he turned to go see how Joseph was, even though he was sure he was dead. He also wanted to know why Joseph was calling the creature Inola.

Eighteen
Vision Quest

Colton approached Wayah who was kneeling by Joseph. "Brother, how is he?" He asked even though he was afraid he knew the answer.

Wayah turned and looked up at Colton and shook his head. "No." he said simply.

"I am sorry." Colton knelt beside his friend. "I am so sorry."

The pair looked at Joseph in silence for a long moment.

"Who is Inola?" Colton asked softly. He had known Wayah for the better part of five years, Joseph for almost two. He had never heard of Joseph speak of a brother. He did have three young sisters that Colton knew well.

Wayah took a long breath. "Inola was his brother. The oldest."

"I thought Joseph was the oldest. He never mentioned having a brother."

Wayah nodded. "A year before we met, Joseph's brother Inola went on his vision quest when he became a man. He found his Spirit Guide; a Sasq'ets."

"So he thought this Sasq'ets is his brother's spirit guide?"

Wayah shook his head. "No. When Inola went on his quest and never returned, Joseph believed he never changed back." He gestured into the forest where the creature had bolted. "He came to find his brother and bring him home."

Colton only nodded. There were many things he did not understand about the Indians' beliefs. And there were many things he had seen that he could not explain while with Wayah; Spirit Animals, Lightning from a clear sky, and even wild animals that seemed to obey

him. "Do you think this thing is his brother?" He hesitated, "I'm sorry; I don't mean 'thing'. What I mean is…"

Wayah put his hand on Colton's shoulder. "If it was his brother, it is no longer." He looked at Colton. "We spoke; Joseph's father, the Chief and I about this before we left. They said that if looked like it was possible to bring Inola back, then we must try. Otherwise we were to help you so that it does not continue to curse our lands. Only death and pain can come from such a creature. Awinita's brother became a bear. He destroyed several camps, killed several braves. He destroyed crops and chased off the Buffalo. He was finally tracked and put down."

"I didn't know that," Colton said. "And Awinita and I talked late into the night on many occasions." He said referring to the tribe's Chief.

"It is a very rare thing. It is not something we openly discuss."

"I understand." Colton said. "But… you know we are not trying to kill this animal; we are taking him away."

"To France." Wayah said. "That would suffice. However he would only bring his curses there." He shrugged again. "But those lands are far from our lands."

"Once he is in the zoo, I don't think he can harm anyone anymore."

"Zoo? What is that?"

"It is a place where people go and pay to look at animals."

Wayah turned and smiled at Colton. "You are making a joke at my expense."

"No, I'm being serious."

"People pay to look at animals? Soquili Agina, do not make fun of me."

"I tell you, it is a real place. A large park with cages and open areas where people go to look at animals that are usually from far away. Things they would not normally see in the wild. And also wild animals that are too dangerous to get near."

"I would like to see one of those, one day."

"You can accompany us to France if you like. The zoo there is very nice."

Wayah smiled. "I may very well do that." He sighed. "If nothing else to make sure this Sasq'ets is taken far away."

"Then you will be my guest." Colton said as he stood. He extended his hand. "Let us bury our brother and get everyone back to the boat. Tomorrow the hunt begins."

Wayah took Colton's hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "Yes it does." He looked into the forest. "We *will* catch this animal, Soquili Agina. You and I. And take it far away."

"Colton?" Anna said from behind the pair.

"Anna." Colton turned to face her. She was holding Bill's backpack. "Oh, I'll take that."

"Okay." Anna handed it over.

"Ask Pierre to get out his shovel. We are going to bury these two men then head back."

"I will get it from him." Wayah said. "And the water." He added as he left.

"Water?" Anna asked.

"It's custom for them to wash the body and bury it in ceremonial clothes. Since we don't have that, we will bury Joseph in the clothes he has now. Plus his weapons."

Anna nodded. "What are they calling you? Soquili is it?"

Colton smiled. "It's Cherokee for a small horse; a colt. It's my Indian name."

"I see." She looked toward Terry. He was still beside Bill's body. "Terry is very angry."

"Tomorrow he can help capture this thing. That will help."

Anna shook her head. "He's angry with you. Really really angry."

"With me?" Colton said. "What did I do?"

"He told Maverick this was all your fault. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be out here in the first place. I tried to tell him that wasn't true but he wouldn't listen."

He frowned. "Okay, this is ending now." He marched toward Terry, unlatching his guns as he went. When he got there, he grabbed Terry by the shoulder and pulled him to his feet. "All right. We're going to have this out here and now." As he spun him around he drew one of his pistols and pressed it against Terry's forehead. "I'm pretty fed up with all of you people."

Terry's eyes got large. "You've got a lot of nerve with what's happened!"

Colton pushed Terry away but kept his gun pointed at the other's head. "Yeah, I've got a lot of nerve. It's raw and you're pushing on it right now. This ends right here right now one way or another."

Terry put his hand on his pistol. It was tied down like Bill's was. "You'd just shoot an unarmed man?"

"Oh yeah, I sure would." Colton said. He took a step back and cocked his pistol. "Killing someone before they can kill you is how things work out here in the wilderness. And not only have you threatened to kill me, now I hear that you think this is *my fault*!"

"It is your fault! Bill is dead because of you."

"My fault? Do you know why we're out here, Terry? Do you?"

"You wanted to capture this animal and bring it to the zoo." Terry tried to untie his pistol one-handed but wasn't able to.

"Nope. That's not it. You've heard of the giant ape; King Gor?"

"I've heard."

"Well, we brought that back to Henry Larchmont and Justin Trudeau. And when it escaped and was going to kill people, we recaptured it and took it back to Africa." He held his arms out wide. "We did that to save lives but Mister Larchmont wanted to keep the animal instead. So he set the crew of the *Monarch* on us to kill us out in the middle of the Mediterranean." He pointed at Terry's pistol with his own. "Use both hands to untie that thing. Does any of this sound familiar? Gunfight aboard the ship?"

Terry reached over and started to untie his pistol. "There was no gunfight. You all took the ship under your control and stole the ape. The sailors were just trying to protect themselves."

"So how did the ape get on Henry Larchmont's ship in the first place? His plan was to sail out of the harbor, kill all of us and bring the ape back to Paris. There's no other reason that ape would be back aboard that ship. Otherwise it would have gone right to his zoo."

Terry hesitated. "No. That's not right."

"Oh, it's right." Colton said. "Do you want me to untie that thing?"

Terry looked up at Colton as he finally got the knot untied. "That's not true."

"And," Colton continued. "Henry Larchmont threatened both Pierre and Anna because he lost his prize ape. To try and appease him and make it so they could just live their lives, Pierre said he would bring him some huge alligators and this thing we are trying to catch for the zoo."

"No…"

"Then how do you explain the *Monarch* once again at our disposal for a trans-Atlantic round-trip voyage? Did we commandeer it again? Remember any gunfights aboard ship? Did Captain Seville look like he was being held captive during all those meals we had together? Or target practice on deck? Or could it be he was on orders from Henry Larchmont to help us capture these animals for his zoo? Which sounds more reasonable?"

"No, I…" Terry let his hands fall to his sides. "That can't be right."

"Sure, sure." Colton holstered his pistol. "Because they are such kind and benevolent people, right? Rich folks don't ever feel bad when they don't get their way, right?" He brought his arms out wide. "And none of us had anything better to do with our time than to sail back and forth across the Atlantic capturing animals for those two men out of the kindness of our hearts!"

Terry moved his hands to his belt. "I…I need to think."

In a flash, Colton's pistol was back out again. "Well think with your hands off that hardware or I'll take it from you and you can try your luck at hand to hand against that Sasq'ets."

Terry's hands flinched upward off his belt. "No, I wasn't…" he frowned. "I just need to think."

"You sure do, Terry." Colton re-holstered his pistol. "Because we're out here in the wilderness with an animal that seems to have absolutely no trouble killing us and doesn't take to being tracked either." He pointed at Pierre- he had started digging a hole. "Unless you think we've all gotten together to get our story straight, why don't you go ask Pierre how things have been for him in Paris? If nothing else you can help him dig the hole for your friend. Then Wayah and I'll dig one for Joseph. It looks like Maverick and Steve have gone to look for rocks to mark the graves. So everyone's keeping busy."

Terry let out a long sigh. "I'll go help Pierre."

Colton gave a nod. "You do that. I'm going to keep watch in case that thing decides to circle back. I'll put a *stuffed* Sasq'ets in that zoo before I let it hurt anyone else."

Without another word, Terry walked to Pierre.

Wayah stepped up to Colton and put his arm around his shoulder. "You have such a way with people. Why are not you a mayor?"

Colton glanced at his friend. "Because I don't live in town, I'd imagine. I'll keep an eye out to make sure that thing doesn't come back for seconds while you take care of Joseph. Then I'll help you dig."

Nineteen
Back Aboard the Leona

Everyone sat around the table quietly, eating soup and crusty bread. It had taken almost two hours to bury the men because of roots which had to be cut by hand. Once that was done, Colton and Wayah had walked back toward the *Leona Sleuth* while Maverick took the rest of the party straight to the river to wait on the boat.

They had joined up again with the sun already low in the sky.

"Okay," Maverick said. "So what do we know about this thing so far?"

"What?" Terry said. "We don't know a thing about it."

Wayah shook his head. "No, no; that is not true."

"It murders people." Terry said. "Well, we do know that."

"An animal is an animal is an animal." Colton said. "A mamma bear will attack you if you get between it and its cubs. If you corner one in a cave, you've got a real big fight on your hands. Same with a cougar."

"And buffalo and deer will attack if provoked." Wayah added. "They can be very dangerous."

"We weren't provoking it." Terry said. "We were just standing around."

"Standing around while we followed it." Colton said. "That means this thing is smart enough to know it's being tracked. If you start chasing after a bear, it might run away or it might just turn and try to explain to you why you shouldn't be running after it."

"So is it people smart?" Anna asked.

Steve shook his head. "No. I don't think it's that smart. If it were, once it saw that it had the upper hand, it would have continued to attack us. It only attacked the people that attacked it, then ran off." He tilted his head to the side. "Well, after Bill bloodied it, that is."

"Joseph did not attack that thing." Terry said. "Now Bill did, sure. But not Joseph."

"He put his hand on it. That's just as bad sometimes." Maverick said. "Even reaching out to pet a normally tame horse that doesn't know you can get you bit."

"Right. So what I think we need to do is when we head out tomorrow is for everyone who has practiced to be armed with a loaded slingshot." Colton said.

"What am I supposed to do?" Terry asked since he hadn't taken part in any target practice aboard the *Monarch*.

"You'll have your pistol." Colton said. "If it comes down to it, you shoot the thing before it hurts anyone else. Like I said before; if all Henry Larchmont gets is a stuffed Sasq'ets, then that's all he's going to get. No one else is going to get hurt if I can help it."

"Then I think we should be carrying more than just a pistol." Steve said. "How are you with a rifle, Terry?"

"I fought in the Annexation of the Leeward Islands in ninety-six and seven and the Mandingo Wars of ninety-eight" Terry said.

"I'm not familiar with those," Colton admitted.

"We won." Terry said flatly. "I know how to handle a rifle."

"Well, I don't know if you've been big game hunting, but the most dangerous thing out there is a wounded or scared animal. Since this thing kind of looks like a man, then I'd imagine the heart is in the same place as ours." Maverick patted the middle of his chest. "So put one or two rounds right there to put it down if you have to. I'll be trying to do the same."

Colton put his hands on the table. "Just don't get all trigger happy on us out there. Catching this thing alive is definitely Plan A."

"How are we going to tie it up after it's knocked out?" Anna asked, glad she had not only taken part in the target practice with the Zip Zip

slingshots, but that she was actually very good with one. "Did you bring shackles?"

"No." Colton said. "We're going to use steel chain. I talked with one of the blacksmiths in town and because I didn't know what size this thing would be, he couldn't give me shackles that would work. So we're going to use steel chain and half inch bolts. We'll drape it over its shoulders and bolt it around the neck under the chin, then wrists and feet. Then we bolt the two lengths of chain to each other so it can't move its hands or feet out. I've got two lengths of ten feet of half inch chain and a dozen bolts. It all weighs about fifty pounds so I'll just carry that."

"And when you get tired, I'll carry it some too." Maverick said with a chuckle.

"And I won't say no when you offer."

"How are you going to carry fifty pounds of chain around the forest?" Anna asked.

"I've brought several Poirier Pack Sacks with me. They will handle the weight easily."

"Or we put a length of chain and a few bolts in a couple of packs and they only weigh twenty-five or so pounds each." Steve offered.

"Between the six of us men, we should be able to pass them around and keep a good pace." Terry said.

"Then that is the plan." Colton looked out the window; it was almost completely dark out. "We should all go to bed early so we can head out right at daybreak. The days are real short right now so we need all the time we can get out there."

"And once it's knocked out and tied up, how do we get it to the boat?" Anna asked. "I mean, it's not as big as that ape, but it's still pretty big."

"I was doing some calculations on the way back." Colton said. "If it's a full eight feet tall, then it should weigh about four hundred, four hundred fifty pounds."

"How in the world can you move that?" Anna asked. "Surely not in that pack."

"With a travois." Colton said.

"Are you expecting us to pull that thing by hand?" Steve said "I hope we catch it close to shore."

"Well, I'm not sure what else would work."

"You know Colton, I was talking to the Captain earlier and he said he thinks we're only a couple hours from Poplar Bluff since we've moved the ship a couple of times." Maverick said.

"That sounds about right."

"So how about this," Maverick said. "Once we're off tomorrow morning, we'll mark the shore with a flag then send Captain Sackett to Poplar Bluff. While he's there he can a message back to New Orleans about what has happened so far and he can pick up two mules to bring back for us to use. We could build a travois and use the mules to pull that thing back."

"That sounds like a much better plan," Steve said. "Better than dragging four hundred pounds through a snow-covered forest."

"How will the Captain find us?" Pierre asked.

"Oh, well…" Colton started. "Maybe…"

"I'll go with the Captain." Maverick said. "Your path will be easy enough to follow. So I'll take the mules and follow the trail you people will be blazing in the snow. If you do get the thing, we can build a travois and bring it back. If we don't we can put the packs with the chain on the animals and walk back. They can wait ashore overnight."

"Or you could just bring the chain with you," Anna said. "Why should we carry it when you can bring them on a mule?"

"Good idea."

"But if we find that thing, we'll need a way to tie it up until Maverick shows up." Steve said.

Maverick pointed at him. "Very good point, Steve. You bring the chains; I'll bring extra Ether Sulfate."

"Are we going to sail back with that Sasq'ets and a couple of mules on that little boat?" Anna asked. "I mean, this is a large boat but that would get crowded, I think."

"We'll just let the mules go." Colton said. "There's plenty to eat in the forest so they'll be fine. Besides they'll probably get scooped up by

some trapper in no time. A pair of free mules is hard to pass up. We're a lot closer to civilization than you realize."

Anna gave an approving nod.

"So then it's settled. We'll eat breakfast about five so we're ready to go as soon as the sun peeks its head. Then the *Leona* will go fetch some pack animals." Colton stood. "Deal?"

"Deal." Maverick said. "Speaking of which, how about a quick game of cards?" He looked at Steve, Terry then Pierre. "Are you in?"

"I don't play cards," Steve said. "So I'll pass."

"What are the stakes?" Terry asked.

"The highest there is; matchsticks and shots. We will drink to lost companions." Now Maverick looked at Wayah. "What say you, good Sir?"

"I will leave you gentlemen to it, I think." Wayah said. "And see everyone in the morning." He stood as well. "Good night all. It has been a… trying day."

"I'll get the cards then." Maverick said. "Pierre; matchsticks?"

"Anna?" Pierre said. "Would you like to join us for some friendly cards?"

"There are too many to play bridge, so I believe I will pass." Anna said. "I would lose all my matchsticks rather quickly at poker, I think."

Colton nodded. "Well then, tomorrow night we play bridge." He pointed at Maverick. "You can have my brother as your partner and I'll take Pierre."

"I'm terrible at Bridge." Pierre said.

"So's Maverick." Colton grinned.

When Anna stood, the remaining men stood as well. "Then I'll bid you all a good night and good luck." She said.

Twenty
Sasq'ets Lair

The Leona Sleuth chugged up river quietly, without even a toot of its horn. Its sails were also unfurled, catching the morning breeze to make better time. Maverick was at the stern of the ship, waving.

"She'll be there in a couple of hours. An hour to find some animals, and an hour and a half back. They'll be here before noon, I'll bet." Colton waved back. "Let's get going so he can hopefully have something to show Maverick when he shows up with those pack animals." He looked down at the forest floor; a new snowfall covered everything. "Is that going to be a problem, Wayah?"

Wayah moved beside Colton then knelt down. "Do not look at your feet Soquili Agina; look out there." He pointed. "A small distance away you can still see the impressions of our tracks. See them?"

Colton crouched down as well. Looking farther ahead, he could see the indentations of their feet the day before in the snow easily set out from the smooth ground on either side. "Nice." He stood back up and turned to the others. "Okay, Wayah is going to lead the way. Once we get to where we ran into Sasq'ets yesterday, we'll arm ourselves. Those glass balls are pretty fragile; we lost four of them yesterday. And we have a limited supply so we can't afford to break any between here and there. Especially with them all in one pack."

"What if we run into it before then?" Steve asked.

"Then it's up to you and Terry to keep it busy until we get the Ether Sulfate balls out." He patted the slingshot tucked into his belt. "Everyone make sure you don't lose your slingshot; we've only got five and there's no general store around here."

With that the group moved off in the same direction they had walked the day before.

Only an hour later, the group stood in the large open area. There were still bloodstains on the tree that Joseph had been thrown against.

"All right. We'll take a quick break then we head in the direction it came." Colton pointed. "Wayah?"

"It seems to have kept to the ground. I imagine it felt its attack made us change our minds about following it."

"Ten minutes then we head out." Colton said as he slid the pack off his back. Even though the pack was very well made, it was still tiring to carry thirty pounds of chain and bolts. Since Pierre was carrying the pack with the Ether Sulfate, it was down to just him, Wayah, Steve and Terry to pass off two heavier backpacks. It had come back to him twice on the walk. "God bless Camille Poirier."

"Who's that?" Anna asked.

"The man who invented these packs. Shoemaker and outdoor supplier out of Duluth. I imagine there's lots of folks that would like to buy that man a drink for making these things." He patted the sturdy pack then sat on it. "Nice." He said as he bent forward stretching his back.

"It is early yet," Wayah said. "If this creature is like the bear it might still be in its lair. It would be much better to find it there than out in the forest."

"Why is that?" Terry asked.

Wayah gestured around. "This terrain has many small caves in it. If the creature is in one, it will not be able to run off like it did last time. And if it is at its lair, it will stand its ground to defend it, making it easier for us to hit it with these things." He patted his slingshot.

Terry nodded at the man. Out of the entire group, he liked the Indian and the Brit more than the others. "Well, I will keep you covered." He said. He did not plan to provide the same level of support to Colton or Pierre if the need arose. As long as the animal was subdued, he did not care if either of the men returned with him. In fact if they were killed by it, then he wouldn't even have to mount any kind of defense.

"Well, if we want to catch it in its lair, we should head out then." Colton put his hands on his thighs and pushed himself to his feet. "No peace for the wicked."

"Darn; I thought we were the good guys." Pierre said as he stood- he had been sitting on a fallen log. "Which way, Wayah?"

Wayah pointed. "This way. The ground gets more rocky so there should be caves ahead." He started walking again, keeping about twenty to thirty feet ahead of the group, moving quietly.

"Please stay in sight, Wayah" Colton called after him.

"Want me to take the pack for a little?" Steve asked. "I think I'm next. And I can fire a rifle without it interfering."

Colton smiled. "Normally I wouldn't say no, but let me hold onto it; you might need to move around quickly to get a shot at it. I just need to stand still and use the slingshot."

Steve smiled. "Suit yourself. Thirty pounds doesn't sound like a lot, but after a half hour, it really adds up."

"Very true. If we don't find it soon, I'll definitely take you up on that offer." Colton took out his slingshot. "Pierre?" he said as he walked toward him. "If you'll do the honors."

Dutifully Pierre turned around. They had carefully loaded all the glass balls into one backpack, much to the annoyance of Anna who had insisted she could easily carry a backpack even though she was a woman. "Get one out for me as well."

"You sure you can shoot with the pack on?"

"I'd rather take a chance at missing with it on than not be able to shoot at all." Pierre replied.

"Fair enough." Colton unbuckled the flap and passed a glass ball to Anna. "Ma'am." He said. "Your ammunition."

Anna placed it in the sling of her Zip Zip and practiced pulling it back several times. "Okay."

Colton handed one over Pierre's shoulder to him, then took one for himself. He looked in the direction Wayah had gone but couldn't see him. "That crazy Indian. I told him to stay in sight." He tucked his slingshot into his belt and took out a second glass ball. "He's going to

get himself killed out there." He lowered the flap on the backpack but didn't re-buckle it. "I'll leave it open in case anyone needs to reload quick like so don't do any running."

"Good idea." Pierre said. "Where did he go?"

"Follow his tracks." Colton said as he pointed down. "Let's catch up to him." He said as he started off quickly.

Within only a minute they came to a thicket. Wayah was crouched down behind it.

"Wayah, I asked you…"

Wayah held a finger up to his lips. "We are here." He said softly.

Colton crouched down then motioned for the others to do so as well. "What?"

Wayah pointed. "There. He has been out already this morning. See?"

There were massive footprints leading out of a small cave into the forest then they returned from a different direction.

"Those are some big feet," Colton said. "And look at that stride."

"Yes."

Pierre and Terry moved up beside the pair. "What's going on?" Pierre asked.

"We have tracks." Colton said. "It's been out and about already this morning but it is back in its lair." He pointed at the tracks leading into a cave fifty feet away. "So we're in luck. Oh!" he said as he handed the glass ball to Wayah. "You're going to need this, brother."

Wayah sighed. "Now that I see the tracks and the cave, I'd prefer something more substantial. Are you sure this water will stop it?"

"It will." Pierre nodded. "It put down an ape four times as tall as this. Just hit it in the chest or face."

Anna duck walked up to the group. "What are we doing?" She whispered.

"Waiting for our courage." Wayah said with a smile. "It seems mine is taking some time to arrive."

"I have experience with this." Steve offered.

"Courage not arriving?"

"What?" Steve said.

"Ignore him." Colton said. "What's your plan, Steve?"

"We need to keep it from bolting between us so we should fan out in front of it. Big guns to the side but not so far to the side that a miss hits the person opposite. We four should be in the middle. Once we get in position within ten or so paces, we need to make some sort of non-threatening sound to lure it out. Then we can attack it when it comes out into the sunlight. The darkness of the cave will make it so that it will have trouble seeing us for a few moments. That will be our chance."

"I've had that happen coming out of the house into a sunny midday on the ranch." Colton said. "Damned tough to see for a little bit."

"Exactly." Steve said.

"Okay. Everyone ready." He looked at Terry. "You loaded?"

"Since we got off the boat."

"Good. Okay, you take the left, Steve take the right. We'll go down the middle." Colton stood. "Let's get this thing."

Steve and Terry moved around the edges of the thicket to the sides of the cave as Colton, Pierre, Wayah, and Anna moved through the pathway the creature made, walking in its tracks. When they got within fifteen paces of the cave, they stopped.

Just as Pierre whispered "So how do we get it to come out?" The creature stepped out of the cave. It was holding a half-eaten, bloody deer leg in one hand as it exited. It squinted its eyes as it left the darkness of the cave, apparently unaware of the interlopers.

"Now!" Colton said as he let loose his glass ball. It hit the creature squarely in the chest, glass dutifully shattering.

Pierre and Anna fired at the same time, his ball ricocheting off the creature's cheek and shattering on the rocks behind it. Anna's breaking right on its chin.

"Hand me another!" Pierre said as he spun around putting his back to Colton.

The creature roared with anger as it raised the deer leg over its head. It blinked again as its eyes got used to the bright morning light. It took a step forward and staggered as the fumes of the Ether Sulfate reached its nose.

"Shoot it, Wayah!"

Wayah took two steps to directly in front of the creature and fired his glass ball right at its face. It shattered splashing fluid everywhere.

The creature staggered forward and reached for Wayah.

Colton grabbed a glass ball from the pack and tossed it to Anna then took one himself. He moved to Wayah who was now within grabbing range of the creature.

"I need one too!" Pierre tried to reach over his shoulder but couldn't grab one of the balls.

Anna handed hers to him as she took another then went to join Colton.

The creature lurched forward and grabbed Wayah by the coat. As it pulled him closer, it opened its mouth to bite the Indian.

Not in a good position to shoot at it, Colton charged the creature and smashed the ball against its cheek. The spray catching both it and Wayah in the face.

Sasq'ets stumbled to its knees as the fumes began to overtake it. It reached out and grabbed Colton as Wayah pulled from its grip, staggered back and landed on his butt, dazed by the Ether Sulfate.

"Hit it again!" Colton said as the animal pulled him close and tried to bite him. "Anna!"

Anna skipped sideways around the creature to get a direct shot at because it was holding Colton in the way. "Duck down Colton!"

As the animal pivoted on its knees to keep Anna in front of it, Terry fired. The force of the bullet hitting Colton in the back knocked him into the creature's chest.

"Colton!" Anna let loose her ball, hitting the creature in the middle of its face, splashing Colton as well.

The creature roared again as it sat back on its heels. Its eyes rolled back in its head and it fell over, still holding onto Colton.

"Colton!" Pierre ran to Colton and pulled him away from the unconscious creature. "Colton!" He felt the backpack. There was a hole in the middle of it. He glared at Terry. "What did you do?"

"I thought I had a shot at it. It looked like it was going to bite his head off," Terry lied.

Colton rolled onto his back. "Did we get it?" he asked groggily.

"Yes, we got it." Anna said. "And you've been shot!"

"I don't feel shot." Colton said.

The creature snorted as it fell into a deep sleep.

Everyone turned to look at it. Pierre grabbed Colton by the shoulders and pulled him away from it. He looked down as he did, fearing he would see a trail of blood in the snow. There wasn't one.

"Colton, get that backpack off." Steve said as he stepped near.

"I…I'm having trouble doing that." Colton said. "Fuzzy headed."

"Oh no!" Anna wheeled around on Terry. "You shot him in the *back*!"

"I was aiming for that thing." Terry said as he lowered the rifle. He was hoping that in the confusion, his shot would have been overlooked but that did not seem to be the case. "Honestly I was." He offered hopefully.

Pierre rolled Colton to his side and slipped the pack off. He examined his coat; there was no hole in it. "The chains stopped the bullet." He sighed with relief. "The chains stopped it."

"Lucky for *you* they did!" Anna said.

"Everyone needs to calm down." Steve said. "Did you think you had a good shot at it?" He asked Terry.

"I did. I mean, it was going to bite Colton on the face. What was I supposed to do?" Terry said.

"Fine." Steve said. "Fine then." He looked back at the creature. "What do we do now? I … its…"

"We need to put some of the Ether Sulfate on a cloth…a handkerchief and hold it against its mouth for a couple of minutes to make sure it is knocked out. Then we can chain it up." Pierre said.

Anna snatched the rifle from Terry. "I'll keep watch while you help."

Steve shrugged out of his pack. "Get the chains out and bolt them together at one end." He looked back. Wayah was holding himself up with his elbow. "I'm going to check on Wayah."

"Fine." Terry said as he pulled the two packs to the side. He played out the chains as he put the large bolts and nuts in a pile on one of the packs.

"Someone should check the cave." Steve said. "It might not have been alone."

Everyone turned to look at the cave.

For a long moment, no one said anything.

"I'll look inside," Anna said as she stepped toward it.

"No, I can do that." Terry said. "Hand me that rifle."

"You're *done* with the rifle," Anna said as she worked the bolt, putting a fresh round in the chamber. "You get the chains ready."

"Anna, how about I check out the cave and you help Colton."

"You can pull Colton much easier than I can, dearest." Anna said as she walked cautiously into the cave.

"You're just going to let her go?" Steve asked.

"It seems I am." Pierre said.

"Hey," Colton said groggily. "How'd that work out? I might have missed a piece here and there."

"We got it down." Pierre pulled Colton to a seated position and pointed at the creature.

"Well that's good. Anyone get hurt?"

"Wayah got a good dose of that Ether stuff." Steve said.

"And Terry shot you in the back." Pierre whispered even though he was almost ten feet away.

"I can still hear you." Terry said as he bolted the lengths of chain together at one end.

"Terry shot you in the back." Pierre said loudly.

"That thing was trying to bite your face off." Terry said. "And I thought I had a clear shot." The more he said it, the more he believed it himself. "That's what I thought."

Colton reached around to his back. "Oh no. Where?"

"The chains stopped it." Steve smiled. "Glad you didn't pass that pack over now?"

"Yeah, I think so." Colton rubbed his head. "Man, I have a headache all of a sudden. If that thing is like that, it's not going to be pleased when it wakes up."

Terry pulled the chain to the creature. "This is ready."

"First we need to dose it again." Colton said. "How many balls do we have left?"

"Four. I didn't fire my second one." Pierre said.

"Well that should be plenty." Colton said. "Help me up?"

Steve offered a hand. "Are you sure?"

Colton allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "Yeah. We need to get that thing dosed again and then chained up. This all happened kind of all of a sudden like; Maverick isn't going to be here for a few hours still."

"Oh, that's true; I didn't think of that." Steve said. "How's Wayah?"

"He's pretty groggy," Pierre said. "I think we should move him to the cave until he comes to."

Anna stepped out of the cave. "There's another leg from a dear in there as well as a bunch of bones. It goes back about twenty feet with a bed made of sticks and pine needles in there. But nothing else. I'm sure it lives alone; that bed's not big enough for two and there's only one of them."

"Well done." Pierre said. "But keep watch in case any others are around. They might have heard its roars and know it's in trouble."

Anna looked at Terry. "I'll keep an eye out for everything."

Terry shook his head. "I'm telling the truth." The lie was already getting easier to tell.

Colton took his handkerchief out as Pierre and Steve pulled Wayah to the mouth of the cave. They leaned him against an outcropping. "Can you start a fire?" He asked as he retrieved the glass ball Pierre had put down. He was still shaky but the effects were wearing off quickly. It made him want to dose the creature even more.

"I'm on it." Steve said as he went in search of wood.

"Good." Pierre said as he joined Colton. "Want me to do that?"

Colton nodded. "Yeah, I might fall down if I lean over right now."

Pierre took the glass ball and unstopped it. He splashed a little of the Ether Sulfate on the rag then quickly moved to the creature to hold it over its nose and mouth. After only a minute, the creature let out another snort then seemed to relax all over.

"What now?" Terry asked.

"We get those chains on it." Pierre said. "Help me get it stretched out on its back." He pointed at the creature's massive feet. "You get one and I'll get the other. Anna, you should take pictures of this thing in case something happens and we lose it."

Anna nodded. "That is a good idea." She said as she put the rifle in the crook of her arm then brought the camera around from where it was hanging across her back on a long leather strap. "I'll need someone for scale later, but for now I'll use the shovel."

"Okay. Just keep an eye out for anything else while you do it." Pierre said. "When Wayah recovers, he can help you."

Twenty One
And a Wagon Just in Case

The Sasq'ets had killed the deer earlier that morning and since it was still fresh, they had decided to cook some of it over the fire while they waited for Maverick

After helping Anna get photographs of the creature, with him lying beside it for scale, Wayah had had gone into the forest and brought back birch leaves to make tea. After melting snow, he had brewed what turned out to be a very nice Birch Twig Tea.

While drinking the tea and eating venison, everyone went to examine the creature.

"Is it a type of ape?" Steve asked. He had hunted silverback apes as well as chimpanzees in Africa. "It kind of looks like it is."

"It is definitely not the same species but it could be in the same family. Definitely the same order." Anna answered.

"What would you know about animals?" Terry asked.

Colton chuckled.

Anna turned to face Terry. She put her hand on the sling of the rifle she now had over her shoulder. "It just so happens, *sailor* that I not only work at the world renowned National Museum of Natural History in Paris but I am also the lead scientist for the primate exhibit at the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes in Paris, the second oldest zoo in the *world*."

"Terry," Pierre said. "If there's anyone here who can tell us what this is, it's Anna." He looked at her. "Anna?"

Anna stepped closer to the creature. They had draped the chains over its shoulders, bolting them tightly under the neck. As each length of chain ran down, they bolted a loop around each wrist then bolted the

loops to each other. They did the same with the creature's ankles. While it could probably stand up, it wouldn't be able to do more than shuffle its feet and move its hands more than a foot apart. "It can lie flat unlike the gorilla and it walks upright. So its hips are more like a human's than an ape's. I imagine it can swim as well."

"I've seen apes walking upright." Terry said.

"Yes, they can walk upright over short distances but their legs are bowed and they waddle as they walk." She pointed. "This creature takes strides like we do; legs extended and straight down with a stride that is from the ball of the foot up onto the toes. And it runs in long strides. If an ape needs to run any distance, it will drop to all fours and run that way." She shook her head. "No, this is closer to humans than a gorilla. Opposable thumbs, flat palms. Arched insteps as well. There is talk at the museum of a missing link between humans and apes."

"A missing link?" Terry said. "What does that even mean?"

"There is a great deal of discussion in the scientific community that animals evolve from other animals. We humans evolved from apes millions of years ago. Our family tree spit, apes on one branch, us on the other." Pierre said.

"That is crazy."

"You can't deny the similarities between apes and humans." Anna said.

"Well I don't believe it." Terry said as he walked off. "It's just wrong to think that."

"Just because…" Anna called after him.

Pierre put his hand on Anna's shoulder. "Anna, just let him be." He nodded at Colton. "I'm not so sure his shot was as innocent as he says."

"I agree." Colton said. "So let's not poke that bear. Once we get back to the *Monarch*, he'll be the Captain's problem. So let's deal with our problem right here."

"What's that?" Steve said. "We've caught the creature. That's great."

"And now we need to move him a couple of miles through the forest to the boat. Closer to three miles, I think. Then down the

Mississippi. Then across the Atlantic." Colton rubbed his hands together. "But first, we're going to make a travois." He said.

"I don't know what that is." Steve said.

"It's like a wagon but without wheels. Indians make them all the time." Colton explained. "It's a large 'A' shaped frame with cross bars to make it sturdy. How long should the poles be with the size of that thing, Wayah?"

Wayah was staring at the creature's face.

"Wayah?"

Wayah looked at Colton. "I'm sorry, what ?"

Colton stepped beside his friend. "Does he… look familiar?"

Wayah shook his head. "It is not him, Colton. If it were, he never would have killed Joseph. And if it was him before, it is no longer him now *because* he killed Joseph. No; this is either not anyone we know or no longer anyone we know. We should remove it from our lands."

"Okay." Colton said. "So we're going to make a travois."

"That is a good idea." Wayah said.

Colton turned and smiled at Pierre.

Pierre smiled back. "Good idea, Colton."

"So how long do you think we should make the poles for an animal this size?" Colton asked again.

"I would say twenty five feet or so." Wayah answered. "And the poles should be as big around as my arm. Maybe even a little more perhaps."

"We can start cutting down the trees," Steve said. "Terry and me."

"Good idea." Colton hesitated. "Oh no."

"What?" Pierre asked.

"I didn't bring any rope to lash the poles together. That's going to be an issue."

"We can use strips of hide from the deer legs." Wayah said.

"Good idea," Colton said. "Wayah and I will get a bunch of strips of hide ready to lash the poles together, you and Terry cut down a few saplings. Pierre and Anna can keep an eye on the creature in case it starts to wake up."

"Good idea." Anna said. "Steve, give your rifle to Pierre and we'll keep watch as well."

"Oh." Steve said as he looked at the rifle. "Sure, I suppose I can't both keep watch and swing an axe." He handed the rifle to Pierre. "Good idea."

"Excellent," Anna said. "What's the saying, Colton? Bringing an axe to a gun fight?" She stared at Terry.

"Anna!" Pierre scolded.

"I don't think that's a saying," Colton said. "Why don't we all get to work so we can be ready when Maverick gets here? I think that's the best thing for us to do right now."

"Fine." Terry said, unhappy that now both rifles were out of his reach. "Let's get to work. I want to get back to the ship." He was also upset because with Colton and Pierre both still alive, he knew Daniel Larchmont was not going to pay him the hundred Franc he said he would pay him for each one that he killed. He was sure that bullet hole in the backpack wasn't worth anything at all to Daniel Larchmont; he only cared about results not intentions.

By the time the sun was starting its downward path, the travois was built and everyone had stopped for a lunch of venison and tea.

"This birch bark tea." Anna said as she drank from her cup. "It's really quite lovely."

"It will also help with an upset stomach." Wayah said. "And if you take the soaked leaves, it will help with a rash if you rub it on yourself."

"I will have to keep that in mind." Anna said.

"Hello all!" Maverick said as he entered the open area. He was riding on one of two mules pulling a wagon.

"Maverick, what did you do; stop to see the sights in Poplar Bluff?" Colton said as he got to his feet and dusted his hands off.

"Have you ever been to Poplar Bluff?" Maverick asked.

"No." Colton admitted.

"Well dear brother, I'll have you know there are *no* sights to see there. Unless you're looking for ramshackle buildings and lean-tos." Maverick slid off the mule. "I was in and out of there in less than…" His voice trailed off when he spotted the creature. "Well I'll be." He said softly.

"Yeah, we got it." Colton said.

"Anyone get hurt?"

"Not exactly but…" Anna started. Colton gave her a stern look. "No. Just a little tussled."

Maverick whistled as he walked over to the creature. "This thing is… I don't even know how to describe it. I'm speechless."

"Henry Larchmont should be as well." Pierre said. "It will be the talk of Europe."

"I imagine so." Maverick said. As he stared at the creature he let out a low whistle.

"So a wagon, huh?" Colton said.

"Yeah, it was a package deal." Maverick tore his eyes from the creature. "Got them both for a song. Fifty dollars."

"Not bad at all, Maverick." Colton said as he looked at the wagon. While it was fairly narrow at four feet it was almost seven feet long. "I suppose we can use the travois we made to slide it up onto it." He looked at Maverick. "Think it will hold four hundred pounds or so?"

Maverick nodded. "It had real high sides that I just left behind. They had been using it to haul bags of corn to the river. They said they'd get six, eight hundred pounds in the thing."

"Nice." Colton said as he looked into the wagon; there was a large coil of rope in it. "Rope too, huh?"

"I remembered you didn't pack any so I brought it from the boat. Which technically makes it line and not rope."

"My brother the sailor." Colton said with a smile.

"So how are we going to get it up on that wagon?" Pierre said. "That's a lot of weight to just pick up."

"We won't pick it up; we'll slide it." Colton said.

"Yes." Wayah agreed. "Like with a buffalo. If we tie the wagon to two trees so it does not move, we can pull the creature and the travois onto the wagon using the two animals." He pointed at two nearby trees. "If the ropes will reach from the wagon to those two trees, we can anchor it there. I am sure we can roll the creature back and forth to get it on the travois. We can do it with a buffalo with six braves."

"Well we've got six plus an Anna. She's a mighty creature." Colton said with a laugh. "A mighty creature indeed."

"Mister Maguire," Anna said. "Are you making fun?"

"Of you while you have a rifle?" Colton shook his head. "Not a chance, Ma'am."

"Good then."

"Okay, let's get going. Daylight is wasting." Colton said. "We need to get to Poplar Bluff before dark."

"Why there?" Pierre asked.

"We need to send word to Daniel that we'll be heading back tomorrow afternoon. He needs to go pick up those alligators and turtles this afternoon hopefully. Tomorrow morning at the latest. By now I'm sure Horace Guillon and his crew know exactly where they are." He pointed. "Terry, Steve, bring over the travois while I unhitch those mules."

Twenty Two
New Crewmember

Captain Seville and Colton stood on the dock, overseeing the loading of the animals. As the massive alligators were hoisted aboard by the ship's crane, only a few people stopped to look; alligators were not at all uncommon. When the Sasq'ets was hoisted up off of the wagon, a crowd gathered on the dock to watch as it was lifted up, swung over the rear cargo hatch and lowered out of sight into a cage.

"Truly in all my travels around the world, I have never seen anything like that." Captain Seville said.

"Neither has Henry Larchmont," Colton said. "I believe he's going to be quite satisfied with our haul."

Captain Seville looked at him. "You do a lot of favors for a man who would sleep just fine if you were dead."

"I do the favors for my *friends*." Colton said. "So that Mister Larchmont leaves them in peace."

"Except…" Captain Seville looked back at the ship. "People like him are never satisfied."

"Well, we're done kowtowing to him after we get back. As far as I'm concerned we're square."

"Square?" Captain Seville looked back at him.

"Even. Our debts paid in full."

"Ahh. I will endeavor to support you on your squareness."

Colton smiled. "Well, I appreciate it." He looked left and right conspiratorially. "And while we are at it, I would appreciate your support with that young sailor Terrance. I am liable to toss him overboard if he tries to kill me again."

"What?"

"Put a hole in a perfectly good pack." Colton put his hands on his hips. "While I was wearing it."

"I will speak to young Mister Larchmont about this before we leave the port." Captain Seville said. "I promise you that." He smiled. "I just got all the holes patched up in my ship from the last time."

Pierre and Anna stepped up to the two men, arm in arm.

Pierre pointed at the stacks of chickens in cages and several dozen 50-pound bags of grain. "Captain Seville, why are you putting all that grain on board? Are we dropping them off somewhere on the way?"

Captain Seville shook his head. "No, no; it's for the chickens, of course."

"Chickens? Where are we dropping them off?" Anna asked.

"Apparently in the mouths of those alligators." Colton said. "And that Sasq'ets."

"What?" Anna looked at the chickens. "Oh dear."

"Well they got to eat, now don't they?" Colton said.

"Well sure." Anna said as she wrung her hands.

"You eat chicken, right?"

Anna nodded. "Sure Colton, but they aren't alive by the time they are served."

"The bright side is you'll get fresh eggs until the gators have eaten them all." Captain Seville said.

"Oh." Was all Anna could say.

"Well, you're right about something darling; this is nothing like transporting a large ape." Pierre said.

Anna nodded. "Is it aboard already? We were delayed at the house saying our goodbyes."

Colton nodded. "Yes, it's in the rear cargo area. The reptiles are all in the forward area. We figured we would keep them apart."

"How was he?" Anna asked, worried.

"Still pretty quiet." Colton answered. "They are lowering him into a large cage then bolting the top on. And the doors to the cargo hold will be kept locked just in case. He's not getting out and wandering the ship."

"That is a good idea," Pierre said. "It doesn't seem to care at all for us moving it about."

After the Sasq'ets had been moved to the *Leona Sleuth*, it had woken up momentarily and was furious about its capture. They had kept it unconscious for the entire two day trip. Later when they had arrived at the house and allowed it to wake up to eat and drink, it tried breaking its chains as it fought to escape. They had sedated it again and moved it back to the wagon for the night.

"I hope it eats something today." Anna rubbed her hands together worriedly. "I've seen it with other animals that do not adjust to captivity; they just stop eating and waste away until they die."

"Why don't you go check on it while I oversee the rest of the loading?" Captain Seville said. "We will be setting off within the hour and barring any weather, thanks to the currents, we will be back at La Havre at the end of eight days."

"Sounds good to me, Captain," Colton said. "After you." He gestured for Anna to board the ship.

Twenty Three
Face to Face

Anna stepped up to the sailor guarding the rear cargo door. "Hello again Monsieur Lavezzi", She said with a smile.

"Good morning, Miss Garnier." The sailor answered.

"Everything quiet today?"

The sailor nodded. "Yes. It seems over the past few days, it has decided to accept its fate."

The ship had been underway for three days now and for the first full day, the creature fought with the cage trying to break free. By the end of the second day, it had stopped pacing the twenty foot long cage and just sat in a corner. It was now sitting in a corner on several bales of straw looking down at the deck. It had also not eaten since it had been captured, or even tried to make a sleeping mat out of the straw.

"And food?"

Mister Lavezzi shook his head. "No. It still has not eaten anything. It has had a little water however."

"When?"

"This morning. It sipped a little water."

Anna sighed. "Well, maybe that will be the turning point." She peered through the porthole into the cargo area. "May I go in for a little while?" She gestured to the basket she was carrying. "I was hoping I could get it to eat something."

The sailor nodded. "Just please stay away from the cage." He warned as he worked the lever on the heavy door. "It is very important for your safety, Miss Garnier. Why you must be face to face with it is beyond me."

"Of course," Anna said. Even though when Pierre had come down to get her for lunch the day before, she was sitting right beside the bars, talking with the creature.

The man pushed open the door a little bit. "I must keep it closed, but if you need me just call."

Anna nodded. "I will. Thank you, Monsieur Lavezzi." She looked down the corridor the way she had come. "And if my fiancé comes this way, please give a knock."

"*Please* do not sit near the cage." The man also looked down the corridor. He planned to speak to the Captain about the woman's inability to follow what should obviously have been important safety instructions. "J'insiste." (I insist.)

"Of course." Anna said with a smile. "I wouldn't want to get you in trouble."

"It is not that at all." The man pushed the door open wide enough for Anna to get by. "I do not want to see you get hurt."

"That is most kind of you." Anna said as she stepped into the cargo area. The large cage- it was twenty feet long, ten feet tall, and ten feet wide was in the center of the area with chains holding it in place in case of bad weather. It had a thick wood floor and several bales of hay in one corner that could be made into a bed. A hose was coiled up near it. Since the creature hadn't eaten anything, there had been no need to clean the cell.

She took a chair that was by the door and carried it toward the cage. When she got close, she looked over her shoulder. The sailor was watching her. With a smile, she put the chair down six feet from the cage then sat in it.

With a nod, the sailor closed the door and latched it.

After it was latched, Anna scooted her chair closer then put the basket down in front of her. "Hello again." She said softly.

The creature did not raise its head to look at her.

"I bought you some food." She said as she opened the basket. "Maybe you would like some fruit. I brought berries and some apples. I was told those grow in the wilderness where you live." She scooted the chair closer, pushing the basket with her feet until it hit the cage. When it did, the creature looked up at her.

Anna picked up a red apple and rolled it toward the creature. "Try that."

The apple rolled to the creature's leg and stopped. It looked down at it and grunted.

"Please try it." Anna said. She took a bowl of blackberries out of the basket. With a quick glance toward the door first, she leaned forward and worked the bowl between the bars to put it inside the cage. She pushed it in another couple of feet.

The creature looked up at her again.

"Hey." Anna said softly. "Eat something please." She leaned forward and reached into the bowl, grabbing several blackberries. She pantomimed eating them. "Eat."

The creature just continued to stare at her.

"I know these grow wild in America." She popped one in her mouth. One of her eyes squeezed shut as she bit down. "Oh! That are tart." She smiled as she ate the other one. "That one was good though."

The creature looked down at the bowl then back up at her.

"I'll try one more. Okay?" Anna started to reach through the cage again.

As she did the creature pushed itself forward onto its knees and tried to grab her arm.

"Oh!" Anna said as she fell backwards onto her butt, pulling her arm out of the cage.

The creature growled and reached through the cage at her.

Anna crab walked backward as Mister Lavezzi pushed open the door. "Miss Garnier!" He shouted as he ran toward her. He unholstered his pistol as he did. "Miss Garnier!"

Anna continued to shuffle backwards as the creature's hand came within inches of grabbing her foot, its fingers fumbling on her shoe at one point. "Oh!" She said again when she was safely clear. The creature strained its shoulder against the bar trying to reach her but was unable to.

Mister Lavezzi skidded to a stop beside her. His hands were shaking so badly he couldn't get his pistol back in its holster. "Miss

Garnier… I asked you… asked you to stay back." As he finally got the pistol holstered he turned to look at her. "I happened to look through the glass when I saw you start to reach in. What were you thinking?"

"I was just trying to get it to eat something. If it doesn't…" Her voice cut off as the creature grabbed Mister Lavezzi by the collar and dragged him toward the cage. "Mister Lavezzi!" Anna screamed.

The man fought to keep his footing but the creature was much too powerful and he was dragged backward, heels dragging on the deck. When his body slammed against the cage, the creature put its other hand through to grab the man by the head.

"Mister Lavezzi!"

The man let his knees buckle under him as he raised his hands over his head. He slipped out of his loose-fitting work jacket and onto the floor. He quickly rolled away from the cage.

"Oh, Mister Lavezzi." Anna said with her hand to her mouth. "I thought you were…"

Mister Lavezzi rolled onto his stomach almost ten feet from the cage. He raised his head to look at Anna. "Miss Garnier. From now on I will place your chair in this room and it will stay *precisely* in that spot. Precisely in that spot! If it does not, I will speak to the Captain about denying you access to this cargo area." He let his head fall back to the deck. He pressed his forehead to the cool steel. "Dio mio." (My God in Italian).

Anna moved to the sprawled out man. "Oh, I am so sorry. I just thought I could get it to eat." She looked at the cage. "It will die if it doesn't start eating."

The creature was still holding the jacket. As it stared at her, it dropped the jacket then took a step back.

"Oh, let me get that for you." Anna said as she started working herself to her feet.

"No!" Mister Lavezzi grabbed her, pulling her back down. "What are you doing?"

"I was going…"

"It's trying to lure you in!"

"It's an animal. It's not smart enough to reason like that."

Mister Lavezzi spun around to a seated position. "Miss Garnier, most all animals are smart and can reason. I've seen dolphins do things that would make you think they are as smart as you and I. I've seen them go to help drowning sailors. Protect them from sharks. Push crates back toward a ship. I've seen dogs do many amazing things. Cats are always conniving. Why once I saw a parrot…"

"Okay, Mister Lavezzi." Anna said. "Okay. I understand." She looked at the creature. It was still standing back from the bars keeping an eye on her. It looked from the man to the jacket then back to Anna. Still without making a sound, it reached down and took a blackberry from the bowl. It reached outside of the bars and let it drop beside the jacket. It looked at her again.

"See? It is trying to lure you over, the devious beast!"

"Mister Lavezzi." Anna said. "Maybe that's its way of saying its sorry?"

"You are forgiven." The man gave a nod to Anna. "There. Now there is no need to move closer."

Anna laughed. "You are a most untrusting young man."

"Yes. And I would like people to call me a most untrusting *old* man at some point." Mister Lavezzi stood and offered his hand to Anna. "Miss?"

Anna let out a sigh. "Fine, Sir." She took his hand and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. "How do you propose we get back your jacket?"

They both looked at the cage for a long moment. The creature seemed to be appraising them as well.

With a sigh, the man looked around the large cargo area. It was as wide as the ship, almost fifty feet long, and thirty feet high. And practically empty. He spotted a boat hook hung on the wall near a water-tight door. "Ahh. There's just the thing." He walked over to it quickly and pulled it from its brackets. "Now to retrieve my jacket." When he turned back around, Anna was once again very close to the cage. "Miss Garnier!"

"I'm being careful." Anna said. She had her eyes on the creature. "Do not worry."

"Oh, I shall worry." He said as he jogged to her, the fifteen foot boat hook held out like a pike. "A worrying untrusting young man am I."

The creature was still standing away from the bars watching them.

Anna pointed at the blackberry. "Try it." She said. She pantomimed eating it again.

The creature looked down at the lone berry then at Mister Lavezzi. For the first time, it made a sound: it growled at him.

"I believe it is time we left."

"Mister Lavezzi, are you aware of the last creature we captured and transported on this vessel?"

"I was not aboard the ship but I have heard stories." The man looked at her. "I imagine they were exaggerated."

"It was a twenty-five foot gorilla. And before we took it back to the jungle, we had become friends."

"Miss Garnier, I find that difficult to believe. Friends with a giant ape?"

"I have it on good authority that most animals are smart and can reason." She smiled at him. "Why, I once heard about a parrot…"

"Yes?" The man raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

"Oh poo." Anna frowned. "I do not know. But evidently it was an intelligent bird."

"Yes, well it was." He looked at the creature. "But still. A parrot would not be capable of tearing you limb from limb even if they had nefarious intentions."

"That is true." Anna took a step toward the creature. "But at some point, someone needs to make the first move. Bridges are built one stone at a time, you know."

"I do not build bridges so I can't comment on that."

Anna took another step. She was almost to the blackberry.

"Miss Garnier, what would your fiancé say?" The man held the boat hook at the ready. "Please."

"Oh, Mister Dudas would *never* approve of this." She turned her head to look at him. "Not at all." She stepped forward and picked up the berry. "Eat it." She pantomimed eating the berry then held it out.

The creature looked at her then down at the bowl. It reached down and picked it up.

Anna popped the blackberry into her mouth. Again, she squinted one eye. "Oh dear. I do hope you don't get one of those."

The creature tipped the entire bowl into its mouth.

Anna clapped. "Well done. That's one way to even out the sour ones." She looked back at Mister Lavezzi. "See, I told you…"

Mister Lavezzi lurched forward and grabbed Anna, hugging her close to him.

"Mister Lavezzi!" Anna said, shocked. "What do you think you are doing?"

The man pointed. "It was reaching out toward you." He pointed. "See?"

The creature was against the bars, arm slack on the outside of it.

Anna waggled a finger at it. "You are a crafty animal, aren't you."

"Miss Garnier." The man said exasperated as he released her. "Have you had enough excitement for one day?"

Anna appraised the creature. "At least for before lunch I have." She smiled at the man. "Will you be here later?"

"My watch is over at two bells." He hesitated. "One o'clock that is. Then another sailor will be posted at the door until five."

"Oh, good." Anna said as she started for the door.

"And it is my job to let him know all goings on before leaving, Miss Garnier."

Anna turned to look at the man. "Well, I'm not sure that would be necessary, Mister Lavezzi."

"Forewarned is forearmed, Miss Garnier." The man replied.

Anna smiled at him then left the cargo area.

"And you, my friend." Mister Lavezzi turned to face the creature. "Will keep your hands to yourself." He pointed the boathook at it. "Understood?"

The two stared at each other for a very long moment.

"You have much more the look of a man than a dolphin, I must say." Mister Lavezzi finally said. He pointed the boathook at the bowl the creature was still holding. "So if I come across any more blackberries, I shall drop some off." He held out his hand.

After another moment of staring at each other, the creature let go of the bowl and it bounced out of the cage. It was still well within reach of the creature.

Mister Lavezzi used the boathook to pull the bowl closer. After he picked it up he hefted the boathook to his shoulder and turned. "And thanks to the manners imparted on me by my dear mother, I bid you a good day, Sir." With that he left as well, making sure the door was locked behind him.

Twenty Four
Trapped

The creature sat up at the sound of clattering. It did not like where it was at all. Everything seemed to move up and down like when it was floating in the river. Except it was sitting on the ground. Sometimes the rocking was a lot, other times it was only a little. But it never seemed to stop. It looked toward the opening where the sound was coming from. It had been a few days and it knew that that meant someone was coming in. Now only a few Light Skins still came in to look at it. When it was first trapped, many different ones would come down and look. There were Light Skins and Dark Skins, and to his surprise some very Dark Skin Ones. They were dark like the night sky. It was very strange. None however would get close though. Lately it was usually a female. Sometimes there was a male with her but not always.

It was the female again. She was carrying a large bowl. And chattering. She did that a lot.

The creature sat next to the edge of the enclosure. It did not seem to be made of trees because he knew he could easily break trees that were as big around as the enclosure had. It was confusing. He looked at the chattering female.

The female continued to chatter as she moved closer. Once two days ago, he had reached out and touched her as she put a bowl of water down. Just to see what she would do.

From past experience, he knew that the females were less likely to attack. When he was walking in the forest back at home and came across some Dark Skin females, they would usually just watch him quietly as it passed. The males would raise their weapons at him and chatter among themselves. Females did not act aggressive. Even if the females had their young ones with them. The creature knew from that this was not the case with bears. Getting between a female bear and one of the young bears often started a fight. Since he did not like the taste of bears -large

or young- he avoided this situation. When it happened the first time with the Dark Skin females, he had walked down to the river to catch fish and ended up walking between where the Dark Skin Females were catching fish and the Dark Skin Young were playing next to some trees. He had stopped, expecting an attack. The young ones just stared at him but one female walked right past him to its young and stood in front of it.

He found that interesting since it was very different from how a female bear would have acted. The next time he came to the river and he heard the Dark Skin Females there, he looked for the young ones and purposefully moved between the two groups. He stood waiting to see what would happen.

He was even more surprised when one of the females stopped to chatter at him angrily as it went by. It was definitely close enough he could have swatted at her head like he did deer, easily killing her. But instead he just watched as the female chattered angrily then moved to its young. Finding amusement in the situation, when he left across the river, he stopped to steal a few of the fish the Dark Skin Females had gathered on the bank. Like the bear did to him. There was much more chittering from all of the females for that. So that became a fun game; stealing fish from the Dark Skin Females. Once when he had come down to the river, there were two piles of fish. A female stood next to one pile and chattered as she pointed at the other pile of fish. With no game to play, he left both piles of fish. He planned on rushing in and grabbing the fish the next time he came across the Dark Skin Females. But he had been caught outside his lair by the Light Skin Ones and now he was in a large cave with no way to get out.

The Light Skin Female was chattering still.

He looked at her. She was holding out a bowl. He leaned forward and took the bowl just as the Light Skin Male that was usually with her came in. He began chattering angrily right away.

The bowl had some other fruit he had never seen before. It was tart so he liked it. There were too many for him to eat all at once so he picked them up and ate them one at a time, chewing them as he enjoyed their tart flavor. As he ate, he watched the male grab the female and pull her away. It was not an angry grab like he had seen the Dark Skin Males do but even so the female did not like it if her chattering was any indication.

When he was done with the bowl, he tossed it at the male, hitting him in the leg. He grunted in amusement.

The chattering let him know the male was not amused. It picked up the bowl, chattered at him then started toward the door.

The female started toward the door chattering at the male, then started back toward him instead. The male came back and pulled her away, chattering angrily at her.

When he grunted at the female, she would stop and look, forcing the male to stop dragging her. When the male started pulling her again, he would once again grunt.

He did this three times before they were through the opening and out of sight. It was a fun game. The creature decided that between the two, the female would be the one he wouldn't kill if he got the opportunity to escape. She seemed to fall into the same category as rabbits; not food, not enemy, and amusing to watch.

Twenty Five
Coming Ashore

Anna leaned against the rail as the city of Port La Havre loomed large. Pierre was at her side.

"Well, we've made it, it seems." Colton said as he walked up to the pair. "A quick train ride and we'll be in Paris and this will all be over."

Anna sighed. "For us anyway. That poor creature will be stuck in a zoo for the rest of its life."

"Anna, I warned you to not get attached to that animal."

"It's more than an animal, Pierre. If only you had spent time down there like I did."

"I was down there enough to know it hates me. It would have killed me if it got the chance."

"I like you." Colton said with a smile. "That should count for something."

"Thanks." Pierre smiled back. "It does."

"If you two are through being silly." Anna said.

Wayah moved to the rail beside Colton. "Is this Paris?" He pointed at the approaching city. "I thought there was a large tower in it."

"There is." Pierre shook his head. "No, that is the port city of La Havre. We will take a train two hundred twenty kilometers to Paris."

Wayah looked at Colton.

"About a hundred forty miles. The distance from Nacogdoches to the town of Dallas." Colton explained. "Or a little farther than Houston."

"And a train runs the entire distance?" Wayah asked.

"Yes." Pierre said. "We have a sitting car reserved for all of us and three boxcars for the animals right behind. It should take us just under three hours to get here. The rail line runs all the way down the pier so they'll load the animals directly into them. Like they do other goods."

"Not counting any problems along the way." Wayah said. "Of course."

"Don't say things like that." Colton said. "Are you trying to jinx the trip?"

"What is jinx?"

Colton thought for a moment. "Uyoi Udelidvgvdiadvnelvd."

"That's a mouthful." Anna said.

"Bad magic?" Wayah said. "It takes more than thinking something will happen to make it happen, Brother."

"A perilous journey starts with merely a thought to take it." Colton retorted.

"Touché," Wayah said with a smirk.

"That's Cherokee for 'oh okay then.' " Colton said to Anna.

"You two are quite the pair." Anna said. "I'm glad you came, Wayah."

"I wanted to see this zoo that Colton spoke to me about."

"I will give you a tour personally." Anna said. "It is amazing."

Everyone looked up as the ship's horn sounded two quick blasts.

"We're a half hour out, it seems." Colton said. "We should go make sure everything's packed and stay out of the way while the ship docks. Let the professionals work and all."

"Good idea." Anna said. "I will go down and make sure everything is okay with Sasq'ets."

"Anna, we should let the professionals handle the unloading." Pierre said.

"That's what I plan to do." Anna said matter-of-factly.

"Well, I'll go with you if you like." Colton said. "I'm all packed up." He put his hand on Wayah's shoulder. "Brother, can you give my room a second look to make sure I didn't forget anything?"

"I can."

"And if everyone moves their luggage to the hallway, I will send porters down to get them when we dock." Pierre said. He eyed Anna. "Since there won't be any trouble aboard the ship."

"As if I ever am the cause of trouble." Anna said.

"There is a list I am keeping Wayah, in case you want to see it." Colton said. "I'm planning on selling it as a penny novel later. You would be shocked at some of the incidents this dainty Frenchwoman has been involved in. Shocked."

"I have heard of the incident with the crocodiles. It was riveting."

"I'm sure Mister Maguire embellished it considerably." Anna said and then she marched off. "Considerably." She said again over her shoulder.

"Who me?" Colton said. He patted Pierre's arm. "I'll keep an eye on things." He turned and he jogged to catch up with Anna.

"If you take care of Colton's luggage, Wayah, I'll move Anna's to the hallway."

"Do you think Mister Larchmont will move his to the hallway?" Wayah asked.

"Someone as important as him?"

"Even the Chief pulls a travois when the tribe moves."

"You are indeed a better people than most give credit. I think I'll just have him leave his door open and tell the porters what room it is in."

"He has been almost a ghost this entire voyage." Wayah observed. "How will you find him?"

"He has been hanging out on the bridge, eating with the officers instead of with the crew or passengers."

"Oh?"

Pierre shrugged. "Well, it may have more to do with the Captain. He told me he had a talk with Daniel and was not going to put up with any sort of mischief on the return trip. Keeping Daniel Larchmont on the bridge was a good way of making that happen."

"Especially since Colton said he was going to throw him overboard."

"Yes, well Henry Larchmont would not find humor in that and I'm sure Captain Seville appreciates his job. So keeping a tight rein on the young Larchmont was probably a good idea."

Wayah raised an eyebrow. "Will he come down to tip the porters?"

"He will if he doesn't want his luggage all banged up." Pierre smiled. "I shall tip *your* porters, Sir."

"That is appreciated." Wayah patted his leather breeches. "It seems I am not in possession of any currency. Local currency that is."

"Oh, in an international port like La Havre, they'd take American currency. I'm sure they'd be just as glad to see Greenbacks as Francs."

"Then there is no need." Wayah smiled. "Now all I need to know is what an appropriate tip is. I am used to pulling my own travois."

Pierre laughed. "I shall take care of it for you since you are my guest." He gestured at the approaching city. "A week long full-board tour of Paris is in store for you, my friend." He pointed a finger at him. "As of right now, your money is no good."

"And when you come back to America, I shall give you a tour at my expense." Wayah stuck out his hand.

"Deal." Pierre shook it. "Now let's go move those bags quickly so you can go help keep an eye on Anna."

Twenty Six
Loaded Cargo

After the ship had docked, Daniel Larchmont was standing at gangway before it was even completely secured into place.

Pierre, Steve, and Wayah were there as he stalked back and forth.

"Come on, come on." He said anxiously.

"Mister Larchmont, you need to calm down." Pierre said. "The dock hands are experienced at unloading cargo safely and efficiently."

Henry Larchmont frowned at him. "Mister Dudas I don't..."

"Mister Larchmont," Pierre interrupted. "The crew and hands are more than capable of moving *all* the animals to the rail without your expert guidance. This is a cargo ship after all. Take a moment to be glad in a successful and yet also dangerous expedition."

Steve shrugged. "That's what I'm going to do. I for one am glad to be home. Or at least back on the continent."

"Look" Pierre pointed. "They've backed the boxcars down to the end of the rail. Everything is quite under control. As usual."

"That's what you said last time."

"*And they were* until people started changing our well-laid plans." Pierre said. "I should point out that there was never *any* agreement to an open viewing from me." He held up his hands. "Honestly, for how you and your father feel about women, why you ever allowed Miss Garnier's demands to be met is beyond me. I surely did not want that ape out in the open without a cage."

"I don't believe…" Daniel began.

"So allow the plans to go how the people with the most experience think they should go instead of the ones with the most money." Pierre said.

"Hey, that'd be me, mate." Steve said. "I have been studying this animal, Sir and I do have some pointers I would be glad to pass on to your handlers."

"I did not come down here for idle banter from you, Mister Dudas or you, Steve. I spoke to my father via wireless this morning. He has coordinated a proper viewing area at the zoo. All the animals will be tended to by experts. As far as I'm concerned the dealings between us and your companions are through."

Steve looked at Pierre. "Well, you heard him. Want to get a pint? Because I'm getting on that train to Paris no matter who is in charge."

Wayah nodded. "I have heard of these things called pints. I believe I would like to try one."

Daniel Larchmont started to say something, then just pursed his lips and marched off.

"Oh, I think that the viewing is going to be a smashing success." Steve said. "Do you think the folks at the zoo even know what we've brought back?"

"They know about the reptiles," Pierre said. "And I hate to say it, the people who tend the crocodiles and alligators that are there already are more than capable to handle these new ones."

"Right, right; but what about Mister Sasq'ets? I'm sure they've never seen the likes of one of those."

"No, they have not." Pierre said. "That's what worries me."

"Then I suggest that when we go to the grand opening, we sit a couple of rows back." Wayah said.

Steve put his arm around the Indian. "That sounds like a good plan, Mate. I'll make sure we both have a drink to watch the festivities."

"Don't tell Colton." Wayah shook his head. "But I have a feeling about this grand opening and it is not a good one."

"Then let's grab a drink on our way to our train, Sir." Steve said. He looked at Pierre. "You want to join us?"

"I think I'm going to head below decks and try and get between Anna and Daniel Larchmont." Pierre answered.

"Then we'll see you aboard, Pierre." Steve said as he led Wayah down the gangplank. "We'll save you a seat because that train's not leaving without any of us. No matter what that man thinks."

"I'll go get her and join you shortly." Pierre said. He turned and jogged toward the doors that led below decks.

Twenty Seven
Boarding the Train

Colton pushed through the door leading back onto the deck of the ship. "Woo, it was getting hot down there."

Pierre was practically carrying Anna. "Honestly dear, you gain nothing arguing with that man."

"That man." Anna scowled. She shook her head. "I shall walk the rest of the way unaided, if you please."

Pierre had his arm around her waist to where her feet barely touched the ground. He let go of her then took her hand. "I'm sorry Anna."

"Well," Colton said. "Let's get on that train because once we're on, there'll be no getting us off. And I'm sure not going to buy a ticket to Paris."

"Oh. Good point." Anna said. "Before he tries to send word to keep us off!"

The trio left the ship just as Sasq'ets' cage was being lifted from the hold. They stopped to watch as the cage was hoisted up by a long crane, swung over the crowd that had stopped to watch, then lowered into a box car that had a two-piece opening top.

"Well, it's in." Pierre said. "The die is cast."

"The gators will be just as quick," Colton said. "They'll probably just stack the cages one on top of the other. We'll be on the way in thirty minutes. Paris before dinnertime."

"Thirty minutes? We need to get going then." Pierre said. He started pulling Anna again.

"We'll beat Mister Larchmont to the train, no trouble." Colton said. "He probably won't leave the ship until those gators are off. What's the rush?"

"Steve and Wayah said they were getting drinks before boarding the train." Pierre said. "They'll just leave them both behind if they're not aboard when it departs."

"Oh dear." Anna said. "Come on!" She moved to a very quick walk up the dock toward the pier.

When they arrived at the train, Pierre and Anna split up to check aboard the train to see if they were at the club car or in the reserved sitting car. "Keep them here if you find them and I'll be right back." Colton said as he jogged down to the small café next to the ticket booth at the far end of the station.

Colton looked around the café. There were several patrons there but not Steve or Wayah. He did notice four men sitting at a table together. They were wearing dusters and each had a repeating rifle leaned against the table beside them. Back home, it would have seemed out of the ordinary. In a French café, it caught his attention immediately. Figuring that Steve and Wayah would definitely draw attention, he went to the counter and beckoned the man behind it. "Pardon, monsieur." He called.

The man smiled at Colton. "An American? What can I get you, pardner?"

Colton smiled back. Invariably when he met any foreigner who realized he was from America, they addressed him as 'pardner' as if they thought every single American was a cowboy from the west. He wondered how New Yorkers dealt with that greeting. "I'm looking for an Englishman and an Indian."

The man's smile faltered. "Err, you mean someone from Calcutta?"

"What?"

"Well, it's part of the Empire, so they'd be English as well so…"

"No, no; an *American* Indian."

"And he's English?"

Now Colton's smile faded. "No; there are two of them' an Englishman from London and another gentleman who is an Indian from the prairies of America. Have a pair of men like that been in here?"

"No. No one like that." The man's smile returned. "An Englishman, an Indian, and a Cowboy walk into a French café… That sounds like the start of a joke."

"I suppose it is." Colton smiled back. "I just don't have a punch line." He gestured to the corner with his head. "What's with the four guns over there?"

The man leaned forward and whispered. "It seems they are Englishmen. They're here to deal with something on the train. That's all I heard when I served them tea. When I asked them what sort of problem there could be on the train, they threatened me."

Colton casually looked over his shoulder. The men definitely looked like hired guns. "I wonder why he hired foreigners." He said.

"Who?"

"Oh, nothing." Colton said. "It's none of my business." He tipped his hat at the man. "Passez une bonne journée monsieur." (Have a good day, Sir).

The man laughed out loud. "And you to, pardner."

With a headshake, Colton jogged back to the sitting car at the end of the train.

When he got there, Pierre was waiting at the steps. "Colton! They're in here." He said.

"I hoped at much." Colton said as he took several deep breaths. "Is this train always so long?"

"It's the main route from the port to Paris. It's more cargo than people." Pierre explained. "Let's go sit inside."

With that, the two men went to join the others.

Twenty Eight
A Common Enemy

Daniel Larchmont entered the sitting car. It was well apportioned with several couches and easy chairs spread around it, and as Henry Larchmont had requested, it had a dedicated waiter. As Daniel looked around he realized that unlike on his trip to La Havre, the large table that was against a wall for food to be served from, was now in the middle of the car. He realized it had been put there as a barrier between the sitting areas at both ends. "If you do not like my father's car, you are more than welcome…"

"You don't have enough men around to get me out of here, Mate." Steve said. He toasted him with his drink. "And thanks for the drinks."

"Well, those four guys down at the café look like they'd give you a run for your money." Colton said with a smile. He had a drink in his hand as well.

"Frenchies?" Steve said. "Even four Frenchies giving a Brit a hard time? Not ruddy likely."

Daniel frowned at the men then went to a large chair on 'his' side of the car and sat in it. He motioned to the waiter. "What are they drinking?" He asked, wondering how expensive their drinks were.

"Old Fashioneds, sir." The man said. "Would you like one as well?"

"No. I'll have Scotch and soda please." He was surprised that the others were drinking a common drink that was reasonably priced instead of something more exotic.

"Anything to eat?"

"Not just yet. Once we get moving and I've relaxed a little."

"Of course, sir." The Waiter said as he moved to the exit at the other end of the car to get the drink order.

Daniel looked to the other side of the car where Colton and Steve were still bantering. "Are you two going to do that the entire way?"

Colton looked over at him. "It's your own fault, Daniel. If you weren't using British guns as security, the conversation would be over with."

"I thought they were French." Steve said.

"They're fellow British, I'm sorry to say Steve." Colton said.

"Security?" Daniel said. "What are you talking about?"

"The four hired guns that were in the café. The waiter there said he heard them talking about taking care of that beast here on the train."

"I didn't hire anyone."

"Wait a moment." Colton stood. "Are you telling me you're moving that beast without *any* security at all?"

"I am sure that the Chemin de Fer Paris-Orléans is fully capable of dealing with any rabble rousers or common gawkers." (The French railway company of Paris-Orleans). He said haughtily.

"So you have no additional security at all."

"Mister Maguire, this conversation is becoming as dull as the one you were having with him." He gestured at Steve.

Steve stood. "Oh, you got troubles now, mate." He put down his drink.

Daniel stood as well. "I'll have you detained if you come near me!"

"What?" Steve looked at Daniel.

"All right, all right." Colton said as he moved around the table. He dragged a small chair along with him as he passed it. He placed it in front of Daniel and sat in it. "We don't have time for this." He pointed Daniel. "Yes or no; did you hire any additional security, Sir?"

"I did not."

"Then that means there are four armed men on the train right now that say they are here to deal with *that animal on the train* who are not on

your payroll. That is indeed a problem." Colton pointed to the rear of the car- toward where the animals were. "Four French fellows in long leather dusters with both pistols and Spencer Repeating Rifles, who if I saw the looks of them back home I'd make sure I kept an eye on all my cattle."

"Mon dieu!" Daniel said as he slapped the arm of the chair. "Raffles!"

"What raffle?" Steve said. "There's a raffle?"

"No, no; Thomas Raffles. He built the London Zoo. He contacted us concerning the ape. He demanded it come to his zoo for an exhibit after it was here." He scrunched up his face. "He claims his zoo is the world's oldest scientific zoo and as such had a *right* to have that animal there."

"Is it?"

"Is it what?" Daniel Larchmont looked down at Colton.

"The world's oldest scientific zoo."

"Well… Yes." Daniel scowled.

"Did you tell him you were bringing another exotic animal to the zoo?"

"Sir Raffle?" Daniel shook his head. "No, of course not." His shoulders sagged. "But I had been conversing with Robert Peel about the endeavor. I thought perhaps a joint exhibit could be beneficial…"

"Robert Peel?"

"He is another founder of the London Zoo. A friend, I thought."

"A friend in deed." Colton said as he leaned back in the chair.

"What have I done?" Daniel flopped back into the chair. "I am sure they are here to steal the animal!"

"Bloody good move, mate." Steve said. He sat as well.

"Okay, everyone settle down. Let's not get…" Colton began.

Everyone turned to look at the door as it opened.

"What?" Anna said as she stepped into the car. She was holding a plate with a sandwiche on it and some fruit. "Oh! I'm sorry; I didn't

realize I was supposed to bring food for everyone. Wasn't there a waiter here earlier?"

"Anna!" Colton said. "Were you just in the club car?"

Anna held up the plate. "Obviously."

"Did you see four men wearing leather dusters like the one I have?"

"I didn't notice any, why?" She moved to a table and put her plate down. "What's going on?"

"Seems there's other interested parties here for Mister Sasq'ets." Steve said. "And they're not going to take 'no' for an answer."

"We need to contact the conductor and let him know we need security back here." Daniel said.

Colton shook his head at him as he stood. "No, no; a couple of guys with leather blackjacks are no match for hired guns. They'd just end up getting hurt."

"So what do we do?" Daniel asked.

"We? Are you speaking French all of a sudden?" Steve said. "The last I heard you didn't want anything to do with us."

"That's right!" Anna snapped her fingers. "Perhaps I'll just point the way when those ruffians come through." She sat. "I'll just eat my sandwich and keep to myself." She picked up one of the halves of her sandwich and started to eat it. "Huh!" She said around it as she chewed.

"I'm suddenly inclined to just finish my drink." Steve said.

"You must do something!" Daniel Larchmont said.

"Why? What concern is it of ours, Sir?" Pierre said. "Perhaps I'll order my own sandwich."

"What!"

Colton pulled the small chair back to the wall. "Okay, let's all settle down. One thing we need to consider is that while the esteemed Mister Larchmont has severed ties with us, that is not common knowledge. And I doubt these men will allow us the time to explain it to them."

"Oh dear." Anna said. She wiped her mouth. "What should we do, Colton?"

"Oh," Colton said. "I do believe you and your Model 1892 will be just fine." He pointed. "If you could cover that door."

Anna stood and drew her pistol. "I can do that."

"Steve, are you armed?"

"I sure am, mate." Steve answered.

"Good," Colton said. "So you and me and Pierre will go try to talk some sense into these gentlemen."

"What am I going to use?" Pierre said. He wasn't armed.

Colton drew one of his pistols. As he started to hand it to Pierre, the door opened.

Colton and Anna both aimed at the door.

Wayah walked in holding a plate. There was a roasted chicken on it. "Oh! What is going on? Colton, do not tell me you are robbing this train! You cowboys are all alike."

Colton lowered his pistol. "Wayah, you gave me a start. What are you doing?"

"Eating, of course." Wayah put his plate next to Anna's. "Our drinks will be here shortly." He said to her.

"We've got problems." Colton said. "Hey, where's Maverick? Is he eating too?"

Wayah pointed with a drumstick. "He's up in the locomotive speaking with the engineer."

"Great; him and his fascination with trains." Colton shook his head. "So it's just us then."

"We could stop the train from leaving." Daniel said. "If we're here in the station, then they won't try to…"

The train lurched forward as its horn whistled.

"Oh. Well...." Daniel sat as well.

"Do you have a weapon?" Colton asked.

"No, why would I?" Daniel said.

"Okay, so it's just us then." Colton glowered at Daniel Larchmont. "Once again saving your skin."

Anna stepped in front of the door. "So what do we do?"

"Don't stand in front of the door for starters. Those rifles will shoot right through that thin wood. Move to the side." He pointed. "Better yet, get behind something sturdy where you can keep an eye on it." He moved to the table and tipped it onto its side. "Get behind this."

"What is the plan then?" Pierre said.

"Well…" Colton hesitated. He realized he was still holding the pistol. "Catch." He tossed it to Pierre. "And I'll give you twenty or so rounds so make sure you use them sparingly." He started pulling bullets from the loops in his belt. "Put them in a back pocket."

"Yes, so I can reach them while I'm crouched down. I remember." He moved behind the table as well.

"What do we do?" Daniel Larchmont said again.

"I'm working on it." Colton looked around the car. "Push those chairs in front of it then stay behind the table as well. Say, anyone have their slingshot? Mine's in my baggage."

"Mine is in my luggage as well." Anna said.

"Same with mine." Pierre said.

"Well crud. And I gave mine to Terry." Steve said.

"Well, the only other option is to throw forks and knives at them." Colton said.

"You expect me to hurl *cutlery* at them?" Daniel said. "Surely you jest. There is no way that would stop them."

"No, you're right. But if you're throwing sharp things at them, that will make them miss their mark when they shoot. A flying fork or knife will definitely make you flinch. Which will make it easier for Pierre and Anna to hit them. This will be a team effort."

"That is a good idea." Wayah said. He was still eating.

"Well, that does make sense." Daniel said. He moved to a small cart that had silverware wrapped up in cloth napkins on it.

"Perfect. You gather cutlery and we'll go find these fellows and try and convince them to just enjoy the train ride."

"Just you two?" Pierre said. He stepped to the table and took the rounds from Colton.

"Actually no." Colton shook his head. "No, now that I think about it, there's just that one narrow hallway on most of the cars so it would be easier for just one person."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Cover the roof." Colton said to Steve. "In case they just try to bypass this car once the shooting starts. They'll be sitting ducks up there."

Steve nodded. "Right." He moved to the door and opened it.

"No, no." Colton said. "Do it on the other end of the car. That way if you need to come in, Anna doesn't fill you full of lead. There's no bad guys behind us."

Steve shut the door as he chuckled. "That would be quite the misunderstanding." He quickly moved through the car to the rear of it. By now the train was picking up speed. "I'll keep low and let you know if they come that way." He opened the door.

"How will you do that?" Daniel said.

"I'll fire a couple of rounds."

"In the air?"

"Into the people trying to kill us. For an intolerable fellow, you sure are kind hearted, mate." Steve closed the door before Daniel could answer.

"Well now." Colton said with a smile. "That made my day."

The forward door opened again.

Anna and Pierre wheeled around and trained their guns on the interloper.

In a flash, Colton had his pistol out as well.

The waiter dropped the tray and put his hands in the air. "Mon dieu!"

"Sorry, sorry." Colton said as he holstered his gun. "You caught us by surprise, Sir." He smiled at the man. "I'm Colton, Colton Maguire."

"Do you have to introduce yourself to everyone you meet?" Daniel asked sourly.

"I am Françoise Remont." The man said. He looked down at the spilled drinks. "I am sorry. I will get those replaced right away."

"That would be excellent." Daniel snapped.

Colton glanced at Daniel and then turned his attention to the waiter. "Mister Remont. We have an issue that we hope you can help us with."

"What is that Mister Maguire?" The waiter picked up the tray and the now empty tumblers.

"There are four men on this train who are planning on stealing one of the animals we had loaded at the port."

"Honestly, I don't see how they could even manage that," Daniel said.

"If he can't maybe you can. Do you know how someone could manage that?" Colton asked the waiter.

The waiter thought for a moment. "Well, what are they trying to do, just remove a small animal? That would be easy to do. On some of the sharper corners the train slows considerably so it would be fairly safe to jump off then once they had it. An exotic bird perhaps?"

"No, this animal is very large. They would have to take the entire car."

"Again, I do not see..." Daniel said.

"They would want to get to England with it." Colton pressed on.

"Oh, well in that case…" The waiter said as he tucked the tray under his arm. "There is a switch at Rouen and then they could travel north to Calais then take the ferry across." He shrugged. "If they have the means of chartering a locomotive to pull the stolen car there, that is."

"Oh, if anyone has the means it would be Sir Thomas Raffle." Daniel said. "Once we stop in Rouen, we can contact the local authorities."

"This train is not stopping at Rouen," the waiter said. "It's the express. We will entirely bypass the station on a side line and never slow down."

"Then all the better to unhook the cars and then take the animals to Calais." Colton said. "And the rest of the train just chugs happily unawares to Paris."

"So what is it you need me to do, Sir?"

Colton nodded. "Right. If you could get word to my brother, Maverick in the locomotive and let him know the situation, he can probably muster some support." He looked back at Daniel. "And when you bring back the drinks, can you bring a couple of bottles of water and sandwiches as well? Knock three times so we know it's you."

"D'accord." The waiter said before leaving.

"What am I doing while everything is going on?" Wayah asked. He hadn't stopped eating during the conversation.

"Do you have a gun with you?"

Wayah shook his head. "No Colton, but I do have my knife of course."

"Then you stay here and help if they try to barge their way in."

Wayah nodded. "Be careful, Soquili Agina. You have come too far to get hurt now."

Colton smiled at him. "I'll do my best, brother. I'll be back soon."

Twenty Nine
Drunken Distraction

Colton slid the door closed behind him and stood for several minutes gathering his thoughts on the small walkway between the train cars. He took a deep breath, then another. "Here we go again."

After several other deep breaths he opened the door to the next car. It was a standard car with individual booths set up on the right side of the train with a narrow corridor on the left. It was so narrow that when passing someone, one would need to be standing with their back against the wall to let the other pass.

He looked at the far end of the car. The door there was closed- as it typically would be to keep the noise and dust of the tracks to a minimum. He drew his pistol and let his arm hang down at his side, hopefully in an inconspicuous manner. "I hope you're on your way, Maverick." He said as he started down the corridor glancing into the compartments- there were individuals and families in all of them.

The next two cars were just the same- families or individuals traveling in the compartments.

When he got to the far door again, he stepped back as someone else slid it open. It was Françoise Remont.

"Mister Remont!" Colton said. "Hello again."

"Mister Colton." He maneuvered through the door holding a large tray. It had several sandwiches and drinks on it. "Your order is being put together. This goes to another car." He explained.

"That's no trouble. Say…Have you seen those four men we were discussing earlier?"

"I believe they are two cars further forward a couple of compartments down."

"Excellent. And you got word to my brother?"

Mister Remont nodded. "We have a wired telegraph from the club car to the locomotive and the caboose. I relayed what you said to your brother and he said he was running this way to you."

"Once again excellent. After you drop off those provisions please do not linger in the hallway. I would hate to have you caught in the crossfire so get back to the club car as quickly as you can."

"With that I agree wholeheartedly." Mister Remont said. "Good luck, pardner." He added with a smile.

Colton sighed. "Yes. Thanks very much." With a wave, he pushed open the sliding door and stepped in between the train cars again. He stepped forward and peeked through the window. This one was a baggage car with boxes and luggage stacked all around.

With a relegated sigh, he slid open the door and stepped in. He raised his pistol and worked his way cautiously through the room. When he got to the far door, he stopped again to catch his breath- he had been holding it a great deal as he crossed the car. "So you're still sitting waiting, huh?" he said.

He slid open the door and once again stepped into the breeze. As he looked into the next car- the one with the hired guns, he decided on a different approach.

Colton holstered his pistol and flipped down the leather strap over the hammer. He slid open the door and quickly stepped in. When he closed the door he leaned forward and peeked into the first passenger compartment. There was a husband a wife and two children in it. He gave the man a nod when he looked at him as he passed- the compartments had large glass windows that gave a perfect view of the hallway- there was no practical way to sneak up on anyone unless they wanted to crawl along the floor.

Colton leaned forward and peeked into the next compartment.

The four men were seated in it.

Colton stepped back out of view of that compartment and took several relaxing breaths -as the husband watched curiously- then Colton staggered forward, banging loudly against the outer wall of the train. As he staggered back toward the compartment he saw that the four men looked at him. He half-fell toward the door, ostensibly grabbing for it

for support but instead he worked the handle and slid it open so that he did a half spin and fell in on his back into the compartment.

"Wooops!" He said loudly.

"Watch it, you!" One of the Brits said as Colton fell to their feet.

"Hey, ish not me making thish train rock!" Colton shouted as he struggled to get to his feet, purposefully not doing a good job at it.

"Bloody drunk American." Said another of the men. "Get out of here!"

"I ish trying!" Colton still hadn't lowered his voice as he put his hand on the man's knee, trying to get his feet under him. "I guess I don't have my rail legs yet, huh?" He laughed loudly.

"Get off me!" The man said as he grabbed Colton's wrist.

Colton looked up- all four rifles were on the baggage shelf above their heads.

"Give me a boost, will you?" Colton moved his legs under himself, getting in a kneeling position. He put his free hand on the man's shoulder. "Once I'm up, I'll fine, I promise!" He shouted right in the man's face. He smiled. "I'll *be* fine!" He laughed loudly again.

"Stop shouting, you bloody Yank!"

"Hey now, that's getting personal." Colton shouted. He still didn't stand.

"Hey!" Colton heard Maverick say. "What're you doing to my brother?"

Colton leaned forward and whispered loudly right in the man's face. "Don't tell him I've been drinking!"

"Bloody hell, get off me!" The man shoved Colton backward.

"Hey, leave my kid brother alone!" Maverick stepped into the already crowded room.

"You tell him!" Colton shouted. He pushed himself up and stuck his arms out and grabbed two of the men- one on each of the facing seats, keeping them from standing. In a seated position drawing a pistol would have been difficult. "Why's this train rocking so much!"

"You drunken fool." The Brit man closest to Maverick started to stand. "Get your idiot brother out of here!"

Maverick hit the man with a tremendous downward punch to his face, knocking him back into his seat, dazed.

"Hey!" The man that Colton wasn't holding said as he too started to stand.

Maverick raised a pistol. "And that will be enough of that." He said.

Colton kept his hands on the two men as he worked to his feet. "I agree." He moved back, leaning on the outside window and drew his own pistol. "Wholeheartedly, in fact."

"What?" One of the men said.

"Maverick?" Colton flipped his pistol around, butt first and tossed it to his brother.

Maverick caught the pistol and then cocked it. He aimed his pistol at the two men on one side, and Colton's on the other two. "All right, gentlemen. Everyone just remain calm. *And seated.*"

"Right." Colton opened the window.

Maverick grinned. "Wait you're not going to…"

"What?" Said one of the men.

Colton reached up and grabbed the rifles by the barrels and quickly tossed them out the window.

"Oh, well, I figured you were going to pitch them out."

"Through that little bitty window?" Colton said. "Be serious." He let out a long sigh. "I'm glad you made it here. I was running out of things to do."

"Bloody Americans!"

"Where'd you get that hog?" Colton said to Maverick, ignoring the man.

"The engineer had it." He smiled. "He let me drive the train some."

"Well that was nice of him." Colton smiled. "What are they running?"

"An Allen Crewe two- two- two. Saddle tank."

"Nice." Colton said, unsure of what a two- two- two was. He decided he would ask his brother later.

"If you two idiots are done talking trains…" One Brit said.

"Oh, we're just passing the time." Maverick said. "Want to join me?"

"Sounds good." Colton said.

Maverick took a step back but kept the guns trained on the four men. "Ready."

Colton ducked down to keep out of line of fire and duck walked out of the compartment.

"Sir?" A man said to Colton.

Colton stood. "Yes?" he smiled at the man.

"I was told there was trouble." The man said. "Thieves?"

"Ah yes. Security has arrived." Maverick said. He backed out of the compartment, still keeping both guns aimed. "Perfect timing, Sir."

"What do we have here?" The security guard said.

"These four British fellows were here to steal the animals that the esteemed Mister Larchmont was bringing to the Paris zoo. Apparently they felt that the animals should be in *England* instead even though they didn't do any work in capturing them."

"Huh." The security guard said. "That will not be happening, I can assure you."

"Excellent." Maverick said. He slid the compartment door shut then handed the conductor's pistol to the guard. "This belongs to Mister Adda, the conductor. Raphaël was kind enough to let me borrow it. If you could get it back to him, I would really appreciate it."

"Yes, of course." The security guard said. He looked at the men. "What should we do with them since… well… they haven't actually committed a crime yet."

"Have them deported for being undesirables?" Colton said.

"Ah. Yes; that is an excellent suggestion." The guard leaned back against the wall. "Once we arrive in Paris, I will contact the English consulate."

Maverick handed Colton his pistol. "And in the meanwhile, we will have a chair sent to you."

"And sandwiches courtesy of Mister Larchmont." Colton added with a smile. "For your assistance in this matter."

"That is not necessary," the security guard said.

"Oh, I am sure he would insist on it." Maverick said.

"Then please confer my thanks to him."

"I will indeed, Sir." Colton said. "Say, I had a thought." He cracked the door open slightly and put his mouth in the opening. "Tell that Mister Raffle that if he wants his *own* exotic animals he needs to speak with a Frank Wiswell of Big Waters Adventures. He is based out of Constanta, Romania." Colton pushed the door shut again. "Maybe I can send some business Frank's way, right?" He patted the security guard on the shoulder. "Chair and refreshments coming right up. Maverick, shall we?"

Maverick nodded. "Let's go."

As the pair walked off, Maverick shoved his brother in the back. "Sending business Frank's way? You know we'll end up getting caught up in that adventure."

"No way." Colton said. "We'll just tell them no."

"Sure, I've heard that before." Maverick chuckled. "Hey, maybe that Raffle guy has a good looking daughter."

"Don't start." Colton said over his shoulder.

Within a couple of minutes, the pair was standing in front of Daniel Larchmont's sitting car. Colton knocked three times loudly on the door.

"Secret knock?"

"Anna's on guard duty." Colton explained. He slowly slid the door open. "It's us!" He called into the car as the door opened.

Anna had her gun trained on him. "Are you alone?"

"Maverick is with me, if that's what you mean."

"I was worried they had taken you hostage or something." Anna said as she holstered her gun.

"Those fellows? They didn't know what to make of my brother." Maverick said as he pushed Colton into the car.

"Where are they now?" Pierre asked.

"They're being kept under guard by train security." Colton said. He snapped his fingers. "We forgot the chair." He looked at Henry Larchmont who was standing up behind the table. "Oh, and you're providing the guard with some sandwiches and a drink while he guards those Brits."

"What is he going to do with them?" Daniel Larchmont asked.

"He's going to have them sent back to England once we arrive in Paris." Colton said. "I'm sure Mister Raffle will not be pleased."

Maverick gestured at a chair. "This would work nicely. I'll run it back to him." He picked it up then looked at Henry Larchmont. "Is that okay?"

"Fine. Take the man a chair." Henry Larchmont said. "And refreshments."

"I'll be right back." Maverick said.

"Well, that was a chore, now wasn't it?" Colton said as he moved to an overstuffed chair and flopped into it.

"Oh!" Anna said.

"What?" Colton sat up. "What now?"

"Steve is still guarding the roof." She quickly moved to the rear door of the car. "I'll get him."

"Do you have a way of getting in touch with that fine gentleman, Mister Remont here?"

"I do." Henry Larchmont said. "Why?"

"I am in dire need of a drink. And perhaps something to eat." He looked at Wayah. "Since it seems all the chicken is gone."

"I did *my* part, brother." Wayah said. "I guarded the car successfully. In case you did not know, no one was able to gain entry."

"That's because I waylaid them in their compartment!"

"Now you are just picking nits." Wayah said.

"Please tell me you will not continue this for the remainder of the trip." Daniel Larchmont moved to a chair and sat in it. There was a small crank attached to the wall. He gave it several turns- the electrical charge it developed set off a light and a buzzer in the club car associated with the sitting car, signaling that a waiter was requested. "I shall buy everyone a drink if you just be quiet until we arrive."

"I believe I will have another one of those pints," Wayah said. "A perfectly sized drink, really."

Thirty
A Grand Opening

Anna, Pierre, and Colton stood to the side of the large enclosure along with the crowd of people. They were at the front of the railing so they still had a good view. Wayah was behind them, standing beside Steve. Both of them had drinks. It was their second while they had been waiting.

Once the creature had been brought to the Zoo, Henry Larchmont had told them they didn't warrant VIP seats and even Anna's position with the apes had been eliminated. While Colton was glad that he and Justin Trudeau seemed to want to cut all ties to them, Anna had taken it extremely hard because of the relationship she had built with not only the creature but with the apes.

"This is infuriating." Anna said as someone in the crowd jostled her. "We should be up there with him kissing our feet."

"Anna," Pierre said. "I understand you are upset, but at least we are not under his thumb anymore." He put his arm around her. "The biggest thing you should concern yourself with my dear, is your upcoming nuptials. Right Colton?"

"Absolutely." Colton said. "I wouldn't miss that for anything. This will still be a grand show. It's a shame Maverick wasn't feeling well enough to make it."

"Change in weather will do that to a person." Anna said.

"That's true." Colton said. "In fact once…" His voice trailed off as Henry Larchmont approached the speaker at the base of the bleachers. "Here we go."

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" Henry said. "I wish to welcome you to a grand opening the likes you have never seen before in your lives!" He gestured at the large enclosure. It was very similar to the ones that the

gorillas had; a broad grassy area, several trees, and a large moat separating it from the guests to the front. The back of it ended at a large crescent shaped building. In the middle of the area was a large cage covered with a cloth. There were two ropes trailing from the top of the cage to two men standing on the top of the building at the back of the enclosure. "Today the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes will be the *only* facility in the world with this subject. And you lucky people are here to see it first-hand!" He raised his hands over his head. "Lucky indeed!"

"Is he going to mention who it was that got it here?" Anna crossed her arms.

"Thanks to careful planning on my part, and the help of local guides in the dangerous wilderness of America, I am proud to present to you…" Henry dropped one of his hands. The man holding the rope attached to the sheet pulled it back revealing a very large cage. He pointed with his still raised arm. "A beast from the very legends of the American Indians!"

"It appears he is thanking me." Wayah raised his glass. "You're welcome, Sir." He said loudly.

"Cheers." Steve took a drink.

Colton laughed. "Well, at least you get credit, Wayah. And Joseph as well."

The creature had been sitting in the cage and when the cover was pulled back, it stood. The crowd gasped. While it was difficult to judge its size because of its distance, it was definitely much taller than a man. And while it looked similar to a man, it was very obvious it wasn't.

"At almost eight feet tall and four hundred sixty-five pounds, I give you the missing link!"

"Seven feet, four inches rounds to eight feet now?" Anna said. "I suppose when you are crooked as that man is, that's how your math works." She shook her head. "Missing link? I should say."

"It's catchy, I suppose." Colton said. "They can put it on the sign in bright letters."

"Oooh." Anna seethed.

"Darling," Pierre tried.

Somehow even with the crowd, Henry managed to look directly at the trio. "So enjoy your view of this magnificent creature ladies and gentlemen. But please remember there are people behind you that also want to see it, so please move along quickly."

"I believe he is still talking about me." Wayah said. "Maybe he is more considerate than we thought."

Steve elbowed him as he laughed. "You're a riot, mate."

"Is he telling me to move along? *Me*?" Anna said. "Oh, I'll show him moving along!"

"Anna, he is not worth it." Pierre said. "Let's go; we've already seen Sasq'ets up close."

"So without further ado…" Henry dropped his other arm. "I give you Sasq'ets, the missing links!"

The man holding the other rope yanked on it, pulling a pin from the top of the cage. The front of the cage clattered noisily to the ground. The sound made the creature step to the back of the cage.

"Do you think that wall is slick enough to keep that thing in?" Colton said as he leaned over and looked down into the water at the far wall. "Hey, I just had a terrible thought."

The creature stepped out of the cage tentatively. He looked left and right to more gasps from the crowd.

"What's that?" Pierre said.

"Anna, you said this thing wasn't an ape, right?"

"Yes." Anna said. "Missing link indeed. Why I should have told him…"

"Anna, please." Pierre said. "What were you thinking, Colton?"

"Well," Colton said. "Apes can't swim, right?"

"No apes cannot." Anna said. "Their arms won't swing over their heads to swim properly. Plus they are much too heavy to stay afloat. There are some small monkeys that can, but that is it."

"Right, so if this were a gorilla, that moat would keep it away from the water and this easily climbed wall."

"Oh, the Sasq'ets crosses rivers that are far deeper than this pond. And they are fast flowing as well." Wayah said. "It will not be afraid of this calm pool."

"Oy, I could have told him that," Steve said. "Now I have a terrible feeling."

All five now looked down into the water.

The wall was indeed made of large rocks cemented together. Since they were natural stones, it was a very rough wall with plenty of outcroppings.

"Yes. Of course. An ape is not going to go into water over its head. That's what his experts are thinking." Anna said. "I hope it doesn't notice it…"

They looked up as people in the crowd gasped.

Sasq'ets was dragging the cage to the rear wall.

"Uh oh." Colton said.

"That is quite smart." Anna said. "Quite smart indeed."

When Sasq'ets got the cage up against the wall, it climbed on top of it.

The people on that side of the compound started to rush away.

"Please remain calm!" Henry Larchmont shouted through the microphone. "You are all perfectly safe!"

When the creature reached up for the top of the wall, more people rushed away.

"It's still too short. There's no way it can jump those last seven or eight feet." Colton said.

True to Colton's observation, the creature reached up high on the wall but couldn't get anywhere close to the top. It scratched its claws in it, leaving long marks. After several attempts, it jumped down from the cage.

The people rushed back to the wall and cheered.

"You are all perfectly safe!" Henry Larchmont said again.

The creature looked up at the people and roared angrily at them. It only made them cheer louder.

"Maybe he's right. Maybe it can't get out." Pierre said.

The creature turned and looked around the enclosure, then started toward the water.

"Uh oh." Colton said. "He's coming this way."

"Once he gets to waist deep, he'll surely stop." Pierre said. "Right?"

When the creature got to where the water was waist deep, it stopped and looked around. It bent down and drank a handful of water. Then another.

"See? It isn't sure if it can climb that wall so it's not going to go out there into that deep water. That'd be suicide." Colton said. "Animals don't just kill themselves like that."

"Whales and dolphins do," Anna said. "They swim up onto a beach and it kills them. No one knows why. Look; look it's moving again."

The creature was now chest deep in the water and did not seem to be slowing down. The crowd directly in front of it backed up from the railing a mere fifteen feet above the water.

"Well that's not going to make for a grand opening if that thing just drowns out there." Colton said. He looked down at the water again.

"Sasq'ets can swim, I am sure of it." Wayah said. "Do not worry for it."

"Worry about it? I'm more worried for myself." Steve said. "It's heading straight for us."

"Oh dear," Anna said.

Steve stood on his tiptoes to look over Anna and Pierre. "That bloke's planning on swimming to this wall and climb right out. They'll end up having to shoot it before it's half way up."

"Oh no." Colton said. He leaned forward on the railing to keep an eye on the creature.

"What are you going to do?" Anna said. "Jump in and stop it?"

Colton shrugged. "Maybe. I feel responsible, you know?"

"Look." Pierre pointed. "Look at that."

The creature was now in water over its head but instead of sinking it was now floating. It looked around again as it floated, then seemed to decide to head straight for the far side- toward where Colton, Pierre and the others were standing.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Henry Larchmont said over the loudspeakers. "Please remain calm. You are in no danger at all. This enclosure has been constructed to state of the art specifications!"

"Sure; for a non-swimming ape." Steve said.

"Look." Anna said. "It's swimming this way."

The creature had started to dog paddle and was now moving toward the wall. Thanks to being so tall and having a huge arm span, it was within twenty feet of it by the time it had started to float.

"They're going to shoot that thing. I just know it." Colton said. "Oh man."

"What can we do?" Anna asked.

The crowd at the middle of the enclosure in line with the creature started pushing to the sides, forcing Colton, Anna, and Pierre to also move.

"Hey!" Colton said as he pushed back in vain. "Hey!"

"Get over the railing." Pierre said. He grabbed Anna in his arms, picking her up. "Put your feet on the other side and hold onto the railing or we'll be crushed."

Dutifully when her feet cleared the railing she took hold of it. "Okay, let me go."

Being behind them, Steve and Wayah were caught up in the crowd and were being pushed down the path that ran along the exhibit.

Colton scrambled over the railing as the crowd had moved to an almost run to get out of the path of the creature. Pierre was close behind him. "Steve, Wayah, move with the crowd and try to get where you can see where this thing runs off to!" Colton shouted.

The trio all held onto the railing as the crowd cleared out from the center of the enclosure, carrying Steve and Wayah along with them.

"Where'd it go? Did it sink?" Pierre asked just as a large hairy hand grasped the railing very near them.

The crowd began to run as one as everyone cleared out of the area.

"Everyone remain calm!" Henry shouted in vain into the microphone.

The creature grabbed the railing with both hands and hauled himself over it, flopping to the ground as a wet mess. There seemed to be ten gallons of water where it landed. It worked its way to its feet then shook like a dog would have- throwing water in all directions. It looked down at the water, then at Pierre, Anna, and Colton. A growl started in its throat. It took a step toward them as it also kept an eye on the crowd even though they had all backed up out of the immediate area.

"Well now, this is not at all where I want to be all of a sudden." Colton said.

"What are we going to do?" Pierre said.

The creature let out another low growl and started toward them.

"I do believe it blames us for his current predicament." Colton said.

"Rightfully so, I'm sorry to say." Anna said. "Oh dear."

"What are we going to do?" Pierre said again.

"Swim for it." Colton said.

"Swim for it? It's freezing out here." Anna said. "We'd catch our death of cold, like Maverick."

"A cold is better than that thing getting its paws on you." Colton said as he pushed off the wall and fell toward the water.

Just as the creature got to them, Pierre and Anna jumped backwards as well.

"Are you two okay?" Colton asked as he treaded water. "That was close."

"I'm fine. This water is freezing." Anna said. "Oh no." She said, looking up at the top of the wall.

"Oh no what?" Pierre said. He was facing away from the wall and also treading water but wasn't as good at it as Colton. "Oh no what?" he said as he struggled to pivot around.

The creature was at the top of the wall looking down at them, seemingly judging the distance.

"Uh oh." Colton said.

"Say something more descriptive!" Pierre exclaimed.

"We need to get to shore. And I mean like right now." Colton started to swim. "Swim for it!"

"You three stay right there!" Henry shouted through the microphone.

"Not likely." Pierre said. "Anna, are you okay?"

Anna nodded as she started to breast stroke. "This would be easier in a bathing suit but I'll manage."

Pierre stayed beside her as she swam, keeping pace. Mostly because he was not a good swimmer.

Colton rotated onto his back and continued to swim when he heard screams from the crowd.

"What's going on?" Anna said out of breath thanks to swimming while wearing almost eight pounds of bulky when dry, now water-logged clothes.

"Just keep swimming," Colton said. "It's not interested in us. It's made a run for it."

"Oh dear." Anna said.

"See there? Colton's comment was descriptive."

"Hopefully Steve and Wayah are keeping an eye on where it's going." Colton said. "We'll circle around and catch up with them."

"Bring them to me!" Henry shouted again.

"That man seems to think a wet, cold, and insulted Anna is who he wants to talk to." Colton said. "The poor devil."

Pierre laughed.

"Oh, do I indeed have something to tell him." Anna said as she put more effort into her swimming.

"Dearest, please try to be calm." Pierre said.

When they reached shore, there were two zoo employees waiting for them. One was Gerard Guidicelli.

"Mister Guidicelli." Anna said as she sloshed out of the water. "How nice to see you again." Her teeth chattered.

The man smiled wide. "Yes… I suppose so. However this is not at all how I have ever expected to see you."

"We were short of options back here." Colton said with a smile. "Are you the welcoming committee?"

Gerard looked back at the grandstand where Henry Larchmont was standing. "I… uh… I suppose I am." He gave a short bow. "Welcome ashore?"

"Oh, I like this guy." Colton said with a laugh. He gave a short bow in return. "Thanks. It's good to be on dry land again."

"What does Mister Larchmont want with us?" Pierre said.

Anna rubbed her hands together as she looked up toward Henry. He was about fifty feet away so she raised her voice. "I was under the impression *that our services were no longer needed!*"

"Anna, please." Pierre pleaded. "If we can keep people from getting hurt, we should help."

"Well?" Anna said loudly. "What is it you need, *Sir*?"

Henry started to speak into the microphone then thought better of it. He held up his hand then started to make his way to them.

"I have it from here, Mister Touré." Gerard said. "If perhaps you could find some towels and blankets for our wet and cold guests?"

The man looked from the trio to Gerard. "Yes, of course. I will be right back." He said as he moved off to find towels.

"Mister Guidicelli, this is Colton Maguire." Anna gestured at her friend. "He's a friend of mine."

"Hello, Sir." Colton said as he extended his hand. "Any friend of Anna's."

"The Mister Maguire. I have heard quite a bit about you." Gerard said as he shook Colton's hand.

"All good I hope."

Gerard looked over his shoulder. Henry Larchmont had just come through an inconspicuous door in the stone wall and was moving toward them. He took a step closer to Anna. "Get everything in writing. *Everything*." He whispered. "*The man is a liar and a cheat*."

"What?" Colton said.

"He has a note pad in his pocket. Do not let him tell you otherwise." Gerard whispered. He turned just as Henry reached them. "Mister Larchmont. You know Mister Dudas of course. This is Mister Colton Maguire."

"Yes, yes; I know this American." He nodded at Gerard. "Thank you. That will be all."

"Oh. Yes, sir." Gerard said. "I'm glad you are all okay." He said as he walked off. "I will ensure those blankets are on their way."

"Mister Larchmont. How surprising to see you again after our lovely discussion earlier today." Anna seethed.

"Yes, well…" Henry Larchmont said. "Perhaps I was a bit… punitive before."

"What is it you want, Sir?" Colton said as he picked up his leg, dumping the water out of his boot. "In case you haven't noticed we have just had to swim for our lives because of the failings of your state of the art enclosure."

"You need our help." Pierre said.

"Yes. Before anyone gets hurt."

"And you are held responsible." Colton said. "I imagine a board of inquiry would not like these current events. And then the board of directors would take matters into their own hands."

"Mister Guidicelli!" Anna suddenly shouted. "Mister Guidicelli!"

The man turned to look.

"We are in need of your assistance." Anna beckoned as she called to him.

"What do you need his help with?" Henry Larchmont asked.

"He is to be our witness." Anna pointed at the man's jacket. "If you would kindly take out your pad and pen."

"I do not…"

"Your pad and pen, *Sir*." Anna said firmly.

Henry Larchmont took out the pad and paper. "What is it I am writing, exactly?"

Pierre took Anna's hand. "First and foremost, Miss Garnier's position at the zoo will be reactivated."

"I… will make that happen."

"That is what you are putting in writing, Sir." Anna said. "So that Mister Guidicelli can sign as a witness."

Henry Larchmont hesitated as he started to write.

"The longer this takes, the farther that creature is going to get, Mister Larchmont." Anna pointed out.

"We shall make short work of it." Pierre said. "Garnier position funded five years." Pierre pointed at the pad.

Henry Larchmont wrote that down.

"The Zoo will host the gala wedding of Mister Dudas and Miss Garnier and fifty guests." Colton said with a smile. "Put that down too. Just write Dudas Garnier gala wedding."

Anna snorted.

"And you will fund Mister Dudas' next three expeditions." Anna dictated.

"That should be a given since he brings the specimens back to the zoo." Colton said.

"Three expeditions, funded." Henry Larchmont said as he wrote.

"And your zoo profits from them, which is nice." Colton added. "Oh, you don't have to write that."

"Anything else?"

"Uhm…" Pierre said- nothing else was coming to mind. He was already getting more than he imagined from the man.

"Ten percent of increased profits from said expeditions goes to Mister Dudas and his wife." Colton said. "Starting with Sasq'ets."

Anna shook her head. "No. That is not necessary."

"*Yes it is*." Colton said. "Write that down as well." He pointed at the notepad. "Ten percent D and G is sufficient. I am sure this gentleman will remember the finer details if there is a need in court."

Gerard Guidicelli nodded. "I shall."

"I would like for you as a gentleman to agree that you will speak to your son about his homicidal tendencies toward me and my fiancé." Pierre said. "Both his personal ones and hiring others."

Henry Larchmont nodded. "Anything else?"

"And if your son breaks that gentlemanly agreement, rest assured I will deal with your dishonesty in a manner well known in Texas."

Henry's eyes got large. "I don't think threats are appropriate."

"A position on the board?" Colton suggested.

"No. I would like to think Mister Larchmont and I could have a successful business relationship without that." Pierre said.

"Sign it." Anna said as she pointed at the pad.

After he signed the bottom of the paper, he handed it to Gerard. "Mister Guidicelli, if you please."

Gerard took out a pen and also signed the bottom.

"Please hold onto that." Pierre said. "I'd hate to lose it in our endeavors."

Gerard nodded. "Of course." He folded it and put it in his inside coat pocket.

Louis Touré ran up to them. He was holding three large towels and three wool blankets. "Here you go; I am sorry it took so long. What else do you need?" He looked at Henry Larchmont. "Oh, excuse me sir. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Henry Larchmont waved a hand dismissively. "Our personal matters are done." He looked at Pierre. "What do you need from me?"

"I need someone with two very fast horses to go to Pierre's home and retrieve the Ether Sulfate and slingshots." Anna said as she started toweling off.

"Slingshots?"

"Yes. My brother Maverick is there. He will know where the Ether Sulfate is. Ask him to bring both crates." Maverick said.

Henry Larchmont looked at Louis. "Take care of that post haste, Mister Touré."

With a curt nod, the man ran off.

"Does this place have a fence all the way around it?" Colton asked.

"Yes. There is a fifteen foot fence all the way around the property." Henry Larchmont said.

Anna nodded. "Correct. And there are two gates; front and side." She pointed toward both.

"Have those gates secured," Henry Larchmont said to Gerard. "And have all security persons armed."

Gerard looked at Anna. "Armed?"

"We can't have it killing people, unfortunately." Anna said. "We will find it first. Just go quickly. Go."

With a nod Gerard ran off as well.

"Perhaps she already has a seat on the board." Henry Larchmont observed. "And I am just unaware of it."

"You are probably right." Colton said. He wrapped the blanket around himself.

"Okay, so where would it go?" Pierre said

"I…" Began Henry Larchmont. "I have no idea."

"It would go someplace it felt comfortable. Someplace with trees." Anna thought. "The biggest enclosures are the deer pen, buffalo, the elephants…" She hesitated. "The bear enclosure. He won't go to the reptiles, I'm sure."

"I'll check the deer, you check the…" Colton started.

"I'll check the buffalo enclosure." Anna interrupted. "You take the others." Without saying anything else, she picked up the blanket, wrapped it around herself and started quickly toward the enclosure's door.

"Oh. Well…" Colton said. He looked at Henry. "You sure you still run this place?"

"Not entirely."

"I'll check the bear pen," Pierre said. "It's on the far side of the zoo. If you and Mister Larchmont can check the elephant habitat. I'll check the deer on my way there."

"Me?" Henry Larchmont said. "Why me?"

"He doesn't know where it is and time is of the essence."

Colton nodded. "It's you and me then. Let's go." He gestured toward the exit. "We meet in the center of the park at the rotunda if we don't find him. Otherwise send word with an employee there. Let's go!"

With that, the men left to search the enclosures.

Thirty One
Too Many Light Skins

The creature sat in the cage, head buzzing. He reached up and rubbed it. It did not seem to help. There was something covering it because while he could hear voices and smell many different smells, he could not see anything.

All at once, the covering disappeared and he was in a large open area. There was water in front of him with a small cliff. Behind was a large square hill made of stone. Nothing looked familiar. Even the two trees that were there didn't look like the trees he knew. Frustrated he pushed himself to his feet. It made his head ache more. There were loud sounds all around that he did not like.

Suddenly, the front of the opening fell down.

Freedom?

The creature stepped out and looked around. There were Light Skins everywhere. They were all looking down on him. Making noises like chattering birds. This made him more angry than frustrated. He raised his head and smelled. There were several smells that he did recognize. Deer and bear. And one other. It was not in the 'enemy' or 'food' category like deer and bear so that's where he decided he wanted to be. Especially if it was far from these Light Skins.

He looked at the small cliff behind him. He had climbed other ones in the forest but this seemed taller. He looked around but did not see any other way around it. The creature thought it could reach the top the same way it had used logs to reach the top of another cliff. So he pulled the cage he was in to the cliff and then climbed on top of it. The walls were too slick to climb up.

Another path would have to be used.

He growled at the Light Ones who kept making noises. Deciding that the smaller cliff would be the easiest way out, it walked toward the water. It was clear like the small rivers back home so he walked straight into it. He reached down and tasted it- it tasted okay. The river had fresher water but some of the small ponds had worse water. So he drank some of it hoping it would make the noise in his head stop. Then he started walking again. Once he was in almost to his chest, he started to float.

Back home he had crossed the Big River many times. And plenty of smaller rivers. Even when the water was moving very fast it did not frighten him because he knew he could just float if he got tired and would eventually end up where he could put his feet down and just walk out.

So he swam for the small cliff. He had climbed larger cliffs than these back home. And been much higher in trees. Heights did not bother him. Sometimes he climbed trees for no other reason than to climb them. He paddled easily- the water was cool and soothing and seemed to make his head hurt less. He took several more drinks as he swam. Once he reached the small cliff he was satisfied to find it was very easy to climb up the rough rocks.

He could hear the Light Skins shouting from all around. They were very loud for some reason. He was worried they would be a threat when he got to the top of the small cliff so he decided to keep an eye out for the sticks they used. Those he would kill as quickly as possible. When he got to the top of the wall, the Light Skins were wearing things he had never seen before. None of them were in animal skins and they definitely did not smell like the Light Skins he had smelled before. He noticed they were not carrying sticks so he pulled himself over the top of the small cliff and fell to the ground because his head was still dizzy a little.

It would have been easier if his head was not hurting, but even so he was satisfied he got to the top of it. He looked around at the faces of the Light Skins as he shook off the water. They all showed fear which was good. As he looked to the side he spotted several he recognized, which surprised him. He did not know how they had gotten to the top of the small cliff but he recognized two of the males and one of the Dark Skin males. And the chattering female was there also. He was glad to see her; hers was a friendly familiar face. The others he planned on killing.

As he moved to them, the crowd of Light Skins pushed away from him, taking one Light Skin and Dark Skin male away. The other two males and the female remained. As he moved to them, they climbed onto the small cliff and jumped into the water.

Frustrating.

He looked down at them, deciding if he wanted to kill them or leave. Leaving seemed like a better idea so he turned and smelled the air again. The familiar animal smell was stronger now that he was up high. Looking left and right, he decided these Light Skins were not dangerous so he walked off letting his nose guide him to where the familiar animals were. If nothing else, it would be a better place to rest than here.

Thirty Two
Penny-farthing Upgrade

When they got to the door, Henry came to an abrupt stop. "Can you ride?"

"Horses? Sure."

"No, no; bicycles."

"Yes. We have a couple back on the ranch."

Henry Larchmont pointed. There were two bicycles leaned against the fence of the swan enclosure. "I bought Schwinn bicycles for the employees to get around the zoo faster. It saves them a considerable time conducting their duties. It is thirty six acres after all."

"Oh. I suppose I can ride that." Colton started toward the bicycles. "Lead the way, Mister Larchmont; I don't know where we're going." He tied the blanket around his neck like a cape and wrapped the trailing ends around his waist, tucking them into his belt. "The breeze won't be pleasant."

When the two men moved the bicycles off the railing, a man inside the enclosure shouted at them. "Stop you two! Stop!" He barreled over the low fence. "What do you think…" His voice trailed off as he recognized Henry Larchmont. "What I mean is… I…"

"It is no problem." Henry Larchmont said. "We must get to the Elephant enclosure as quickly as possible."

"It's that way." The man said without thinking as he pointed down the path.

Colton chuckled.

Henry Larchmont just raised an eyebrow at the man. "I am well aware. Follow me Mister Maguire." He swung his leg over and sat on the leather seat. He pushed off with his feet and started pedaling.

"Good day to you, Sir." Colton said. "Here goes nothing." He mounted the bicycle and pushed off with his feet. He ran while sitting on the bicycle to get up to speed. When he finally started pedaling, he swerved left and right trying to keep his balance. "This is a bit different than my Penny-farthing!" He called ahead.

"Just look ahead instead of down," Henry Larchmont called back. "Just relax; you're closer to the ground than you are on a Penny-farthing."

As the two men rode, they came across a large group of patrons running towards them forcing them to stop until they passed.

By the time they got to the enclosure, Colton was riding mostly straight on the bicycle. Once word of the escaped animal had gotten out, most of the patrons had left the zoo as quickly as possible so there weren't very many people for him to avoid. Colton came to a stop and got off the bicycle, leaning it against another fence. "I think we need a couple of these. They're sure a lot easier to stop and get going again." He rubbed his hands together to warm them. "Okay. Elephants. They're dangerous so I don't think we should go in there." He leaned over the edge to look into the exhibit.

There were five elephants in the enclosure. One was in the water and the others were eating hay. Oblivious to the pandemonium going on around them.

"All right, we need to…"

"He's not here." Colton interrupted.

"How do you know that?" Henry Larchmont said as he also moved to the railing and looked down into the compound. "Are you sure?"

"Sure, look; these things look like they're just relaxing. If a seven foot tall predator had just come in here, they'd definitely be more skittish. And closer to their young."

"Yes. I see."

"What other large areas are there here?"

"There is a two-acre park. Trees, bushes, and flowers with paths and such." Henry Larchmont pointed. "It is on the far side of the zoo from us."

"Let's check there, then we'll head back to check on Pierre and Anna." Colton gestured. "Lead the way, Sir…. Wait!" he added quickly. He pointed. "That employee there, call him over."

"You!" Henry Larchmont shouted. "You there!" When the man looked, he motioned him over.

"Well, I could have done that; I figured you knew his name."

"Over two hundred people work here, Mister Maguire."

The man approached and removed his hat from his head. "Mister Larchmont?"

"What do we need him for?" Henry Larchmont said to Colton.

"We are searching for the escaped creature. Please go station yourself at the rotunda. When the other people looking for it get there, tell them we searched the elephants and are going to the park. Got it?"

The man looked at Henry Larchmont. "Sir?"

"Please do that."

"Yes, sir." The man said as he put his hat back on then headed toward the rotunda.

"Well done." With a nod, Henry Larchmont launched his bicycle. Colton followed close behind starting off much smoother this time.

"This is a nice upgrade to a Penny-Farthing. I'll need to look into these."

Thirty Three
On the Loose

When Colton and Henry Larchmont got half way to the park, they ran into Steve and Wayah.

"Did you see where they went?" Colton asked as he stopped next to the two men.

"It doubled back toward the elephant enclosure when we lost it. That thing is fast."

"We were just at the elephants. They are all sitting around calmly." Colton said.

"Maybe it went past them? What's past the elephants?" Wayah asked.

"The buffalo enclosure." Henry Larchmont said. Glad he could finally answer a question.

"Oh?" Wayah said. "Anna did not take me there." He shrugged. "We have plenty of buffalo at home."

"Plenty of buffalo!" Colton said. "Of course."

"Well not plenty with how the White Men shoot them, but there are still a large…"

"No, no. There are buffalo back home." Colton said. "Oh, Anna."

"What about her?" Steve asked.

"She said she'd check that exhibit. She *knew* it would go to familiar surroundings and smells. And neither of them would see the other as a threat." He picked up the bicycle and shuffled it around to face it the other way. "Lead the way, Mister Larchmont."

"What?"

"Anna send us all on wild goose chases because she knew where it would be hiding; among animals it sees back home and isn't threatened by."

"This needs to go in the book." Wayah pointed out.

"Catch up when you can." Colton said. He looked at Henry Larchmont. "The buffalo pen! Turn around. We need to get there fast!"

"Oh!" Realization caught up with him as he also turned his bicycle around. "Follow me."

"Catch up when you can!" Colton said loudly as he rode off behind Henry Larchmont.

As the two rode, they would pass messages to employees telling them to go to the rotunda to let everyone know where they felt the creature was.

Thirty Four
Buffalo Enclosure

Anna rushed out of the pen, closing the door behind her. She knew she did not have much of a head start when the men figured out what she had done. She started running toward the buffalo enclosure. When she rounded a corner, she spied a bicycle leaning against a fence. Without a second thought, she mounted it and rode as fast as she could toward the buffalo enclosure. Which also happened to be very near the side exit.

If she was to save the creature, she had to reach it first.

After only a few minutes, Anna reached the buffalo enclosure. It was almost an acre large area with a dozen trees and a small man-made cave near one end. It housed five buffalo. As she rode the bike around to the back of the enclosure, she passed two men unloading hay from a large wagon.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," she said as she dismounted the bicycle and let it fall to the ground. "Have you seen a large animal go by?"

"We heard about the escape but haven't seen anything," one of the men said. He hefted a hay bale to his shoulder. "Sorry, Miss." He added as he walked off.

Anna looked at the wagon. It was almost ten feet tall and five feet wide. And it had two horses harnessed to it. A tarp that had covered the hay was pushed up to the front of it. She got an idea.

"Sir, I do not know if you know me but I am Anna Garnier. I am the lead researcher for the ape exhibit."

"I've seen you there, Miss Garnier." The other man said with a smile. "And it seems you are about to ask me for something. Yes?"

"Yes." Anna said with a smile of her own. "I would not want to get you in trouble by any means but I would like to know if you would take your time in reporting something."

"What would that be?" The man put his hand on the wagon, leaning on it. While he had noticed the attractive woman, and knew that she did hold some power over the ape exhibit, he was unsure what actual sway she held over the zoo overall. "Nothing too illegal, I hope."

"If your wagon came up missing, could you perhaps go get a cup of coffee before noticing such a small incident as that?"

The man laughed. "Stealing a wagon? Miss Garnier, why don't you just ask to borrow it? You are an employee of the zoo, are you not?"

"Oh. Well, I suppose I am." She said, thinking of the signed and witnessed agreement that Gerard Guidicelli was presently carrying in his pocket. "A ten percent stakeholder, in fact."

"Then let us get these last few bales off and you can use the wagon." An idea now occurred to him. "Wait. Now wait a moment. You are not proposing putting that large beast in this wagon, are you?"

"Mister…"

"Demongeot. Stephan Demongeot." The man said. "I cannot lose my job, Miss. My family depends on it."

"Mister Demongeot. I think it would be best if you just agree to my request to borrow the wagon then go have a coffee with your associate. And perhaps a pastry, knowing in your heart that the wagon was borrowed by a zoo employee for some unknown reason and would be returned in good working order."

Stephan smiled wide. "Well, when you put it like that Miss Garnier. What is a man to do besides unload hay and have a coffee?" He said. Since that was exactly what he and his partner often did after finally unloading their daily wagon of hay around the zoo, before mucking out stalls. And they would leave the wagon at whatever exhibit they ended at because after all, it was still securely on zoo property. And who would steal an old wagon anyway? He nodded to himself as he decided that would be his answer when he was asked what had happened to the wagon.

"What indeed." Anna said. She gave a short curtsy. "Thank you so much, Sir. And now I have a pressing engagement."

"We will double our efforts, Louis and I." Stephan pulled a hay bale to the edge of the wagon and lifted it to his shoulders. "Mon dieu you are brave."

"Do not mention *any* of this to my fiancé, if you please." Anna said as she walked toward the side entrance to the enclosure. All of the animal enclosures had secret entrances that zoo keepers and veterinarians could use to conveniently get into the animal's pens. These would also be used whenever there was something that needed to be added or removed from the exhibit. It was a sad state of affairs but invariably a guest would throw a ball, or popcorn box, or other item into the animal cages and it would have to be retrieved so that it did not entice other patrons to do the same.

Anna slowly pushed the door of the enclosure open. The buffalo were all standing together near the water. She looked toward the large covered area. It was for all intents and purposes a concrete band shell that faced the main viewing area so even when the buffalo went under it, they were visible to patrons. From the back of the enclosure, she could not see in it.

"Oh dear." Anna said as she slipped in and pushed the door shut. It did not latch from inside the exhibit but a spring on the hinges kept it closed so that it blended in. Only a protruding rock-shaped nob gave away its location.

The buffalo all turned to look at her as she crept toward the covering. While buffalo were indeed dangerous large animals, these had been around humans enough that they did not even become nervous when they were around. In fact, one of the VIP tours that the zoo gave allowed high-paying guests the opportunity to actually pet and feed one of the larger females who seemed to have decided letting people pet her was a small price to pay for the carrots she received.

Without realizing it, Anna held her hand out toward the buffalo. "Easy now." She said, then she caught herself. "Oh Colton, you are exasperating even when you are not around." With a headshake she continued toward the enclosure.

She could not see it but the large female turned and started toward her because when humans came into the area that usually meant they had carrots.

When Anna reached the edge of the closure, she put her hands on it, preparing herself to peek around the edge, and deciding what she was going to do when she came face to face with the Sasq'ets without the benefit of bars between them. During her interaction with the creature, it had reached out and touched her several times, and she had even let it hold her hand. She felt as if they had a connection and the creature bore her no ill will.

Anna staggered forward as the female buffalo pushed her in the back with its nose. It gave a snort.

"Oh!" Anna exclaimed, caught completely off guard by the animal. She turned to look at it. It nudged her with its nose, pushing her more into the open. "Oh, stop that."

The female buffalo looked at her then snorted again and raised its head up and down.

"What do you want?" Anna said. "Oh, I don't have any carrots, I'm sorry." She tried pushing the buffalo away but it stood its ground. Among all vegetables, carrots were its favorite. She leaned hard on the buffalo's head, trying to push it back. Then she remembered why she was there.

Anna swiveled her head around to look into the covered area.

Sasq'ets was seated at the back of it looking at her.

"Oh dear." She said. She stopped pushing on the buffalo then held out her hand. "It's me, remember?"

The Sasq'ets grunted at her. Whether it was a familiar sound or not was anyone's guess.

The female buffalo nudged Anna again.

"Honestly." Anna said as she turned to face the persistent buffalo. "I will bring you carrots later!" With a headshake, she decided that perhaps the buffalo would protect her if the need

arose so she stepped under the covered area. “We need to get out of here.” She held out her hand. “Come on.”

The creature grunted at her again.

Anna looked out of the enclosure. By now she was sure the others had figured out her ruse. If she did not get it away quickly, it would be captured again for sure. She knew that the buffalo enclosure was at the southwest edge of the zoo and if she left from that gate, within two miles she could cross the Marne River at Joinville-le-Pont. Then within ten miles of that, she would be in rolling hills and forests; the perfect place to let the Sasq’ets go. But she had to get out of the zoo quickly.

“Come with me.” She said firmly, thinking back to what Colton had told her about animals; a firm voice with no fear was how one should speak to an unfamiliar animal. “But you aren’t unfamiliar, are you?” She smiled at it. “Come with me,” she said in a softer tone. She pointed out of the covering. “I can get you out.” She took several steps forward. She was now close enough that the creature could easily grab her.

Instead it sat, looking at her without even a grunt.

Anna reached down and took its hand. “Follow me.” She said as she gently tugged on it.

The creature allowed Anna to pull it to its feet and when she started to walk out, it followed. When they got to the edge of the covering the female buffalo was still there. Waiting. Whether it considered the Sasq’ets to not be a danger since the human was with it and humans weren’t a danger, or it was still hoping for a carrot, Anna wasn’t sure. “Honestly.” She said to it as she led the Sasq’ets by.

Just in case there were carrots to be had, the buffalo fell in step behind them as they made their way to the exit. “I hope Mister Demongeot has that wagon empty.” Anna said to herself, still unsure how she was going to get the Sasq’ets into the wagon. Or allow itself to be covered by a tarp.

Thirty Five
Gate to Freedom

Colton, Pierre, and Henry Larchmont stood atop the building at the back of the buffalo enclosure.

"Are you sure she's in there?" Henry Larchmont said.

"I'm sure she was leading us away so she could get to that thing." Colton said. "I'm sure of that anyway."

"They've become extremely attached during the journey." Pierre said. "I asked her not to."

As they watched, Anna came into view. She was leading the Sasq'ets by the hand. There was a very large female buffalo following behind the pair.

"What is going on?" Colton said. "Now there's something you don't see every day, gentlemen."

"What is that woman doing?" Henry Larchmont said. "She is going to get herself killed."

"Oh Anna." Was all Pierre could say.

"Not if we don't do anything." Colton said.

"What?"

"Mister Larchmont, if we try to grab that thing while Anna is with it, it's liable to attack. Friend or not, Anna will be the closest thing to it when it lashes out. When all is said and done, it's still just a wild animal."

"Well we have to do *something*." Pierre said.

"So what is her plan?" Colton asks. "She has to have a plan."

"The wagon." Pierre said. "We rode past it. I'll bet you she is taking it to the wagon."

"For what? To give it a ride around the zoo?" Henry Larchmont said.

"She's taking it out of the city." Colton said. "She's going to hide it in the wagon and just drive the thing right out of here in broad daylight." He tilted his hat back on his head as he whistled. "Man I tell you, if she ever decides to rob banks, you're going to be rich, Pierre."

"Colton please." Pierre said.

"No, I agree with his assessment." Henry Larchmont said. "Your fiancé is a force to be reckoned with."

"Okay. So we let her get it in the wagon. Cover it with that big tarp. Then when they are separated with her in the front and it in the back, we'll get her out and douse the tarp with the Ether Sulfate."

Anna and the creature were almost to the door. The buffalo was still following them.

"Is she stealing one of my buffalo as well?" Henry Larchmont asked. "Perhaps I could focus her attention on banks. We could split the proceeds."

Colton looked at the man. "You're becoming more okay in my book, you know that?"

"So when do we stop the wagon?" Pierre said.

"Is the Ether Sulfate here? It should be here by now. We can't risk stopping it until we have it in hand."

"Let us go check." Henry Larchmont pointed. "I suspect she will use the side gate then cross the Marne. It is the shortest way out of the city from here. She could be out in the countryside in fifteen miles."

The three started down the two flights of stairs from the top of the building quickly.

"So here's the plan." Colton said as he moved down the steps. "You go straight to that gate and get them to stall her if she beats us there. Pierre and I'll go get the Ether and meet you there."

"D'accord." Henry Larchmont said when he reached the bottom. He jogged to a bicycle. "See you there."

"You sure he's as bad as you say he is?" Colton said. "Maybe he's just misunderstood."

"I'm sure." Pierre answered. "Let's go see where those crates are. I'd like to think they brought them here."

The pair jogged in the other direction to the main path.

Steve and Wayah were standing on the path holding two horses. Each had a small wooden crate tied to the back of the saddle.

"We heard it was at the buffalo pen. What's the plan?" Steve asked. "Where's Anna?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Colton said. "We need to head them off at the gate. Anna's taking that thing out of the city."

"More details later are in order." Wayah said as he swung up onto the horse. He held out his hand. "Let's go, Soquili Agina. Once again we ride."

Colton swung himself up onto the saddle with Wayah's help.

"I don't think I can do that." Pierre said. "I'll catch up with you there. Just get going."

"No. I don't know where this gate is," Steve said as he offered the reins to Pierre. "You go. I'll be the one to catch up."

"There's a bike back around the corner." Pierre took the reins and stepped into the stirrup and mounted the horse. "Let's go then." He kicked the horse in the sides moving it to a very fast trot.

"Paris is an exciting town." Wayah said as he coaxed the horse to catch up.

"You haven't even seen the night life yet." Colton said.

Thirty Six
An Escape Narrowly Averted

Wayah and Pierre reigned in their horses and skidded to a stop on the gravel path; they had moved to a gallop once they were sure there were no zoo patrons around.

"Where is she?" Pierre asked.

"She's on her way, I'm sure." Henry Larchmont said. "Perhaps she was delayed convincing that beast to get in the wagon."

"You think she was successful at that?" Pierre said as he got off the horse.

"Oh, without a doubt."

Colton slid off the back of the horse then began untying the strap holding the crate. "No chit chat; we need to be ready. She could be here at any moment."

"I'll lead the horses away," Wayah said. "So she does not suspect anything." He reached out for Pierre's reins.

"Good idea." Pierre handed the man the reins then unstrapped the box. "Go. We'll get out the bottles."

Henry Larchmont moved to a wall of shrubs that blocked view of the gate from the path. "I hear a wagon coming. Are you ready?"

Pierre ran up to the man. "Take two of these. We need to pour them all on the head of the creature." He handed Henry Larchmont two unstopped glass balls. "Do not breathe in the vapors." He turned and ran back to the case.

"We'll pour; you set up with a slingshot in case it stands up, Pierre." Colton said. He gestured with one of the balls he was holding. "To the side over there, Mister Larchmont, behind that shed. When she

gets to the gate to open it and Pierre confronts her, we move to the wagon."

Henry Larchmont peered around the corner again. "There she is. There are tall sides to the wagon. Be prepared to climb up the wheel."

"Got it." Colton said. He stepped back and crouched behind a shrub. "Okay, Pierre. It's all up to you."

Pierre looked left and right. He really had no place to hide so he put his hands behind his back, shielding the glass ball and the slingshot.

After only a moment, Anna steered the wagon around the corner. "We're almost there." She said.

"Anna." Pierre called to her. "Please."

Anna's eyes got large. "Open the gate, Pierre." She still had not stopped the horses. "Open it."

"I can't do that, Anna."

Anna drove the horses right up to Pierre. "You must."

"So you are going to let it loose in the countryside. And if it kills someone? What then?"

"That won't happen."

"Anna, if it kills someone, *you* will be responsible. It's like setting a lion loose. Or a tiger."

"It won't kill anyone."

"Tell that to Joseph or Bill."

Anna's head drooped.

Colton stood and moved quickly to the wagon.

When Henry Larchmont saw him stand up, he moved to it to. With his hands full he had a hard time climbing onto the wheel so the wagon rocked back and forth.

Anna looked back just as he and Colton poured both of their bottles on the head of the creature. It's feet were sticking out from under the tarp. "No, stop!"

The creature sat up as the liquid hit the tarp but thanks to it being so large, it remained wrapped around it.

"Okay, get down and grab more." Colton said as he hopped off the wheel.

"Stop it!"

"Anna please. I cannot allow this to happen." Pierre moved around to the seat of the wagon. "Now come down, I insist."

Henry Larchmont ran around the back of the wagon to Colton as the creature fought to get the cover off its head. It pushed it down and moved to a seated position using the sideboards to keep it upright. The gas was making it dizzy.

Colton grabbed two bottles and unstopped one with his mouth as he stepped onto the back of the wagon. He dumped the liquid onto the creature's face as he spat out the first cork and then pulled the second one.

"Mister Maguire, do be careful!" Henry Larchmont said. He got to the crate and took out two more balls. There were only two left in it. The other had four. "We are almost out of them."

As Colton dumped the second bottle on the creature's face, its eyes rolled back in its head and it fell backwards. "It's out. Save those two." He rolled out of the wagon. "Whew, that was exciting."

"That was very foolhardy."

Colton shook his head at Henry Larchmont. "It was already groggy. If it let go to try and grab me, it would have fallen backward." He looked down at the two empty glass balls. "I should have just used one. How many are we down to?"

"Six."

"Well, that's plenty for now." Colton returned the glass balls to the crate. "So we can refill them later." He looked around for the corks. He spied one on the wagon. "Cork!" He said as he climbed back onto the wagon to grab it. "Got it."

"Anna," Pierre said. "You have to listen to reason. You couldn't just drive out into a strange country like the hills around Paris and let that creature go. It would have killed some surprised farmer within a week."

Anna sat back on the seat, eyes watering. "Oh, I… I don't know what I was thinking." She looked over her shoulder at the unconscious animal. "It seems so…"

"Human." Pierre said as he took her hand. "I understand why you did what you did, I truly do. That's why I love you. But because I love you, I couldn't let you live with the guilt that would invariably come when it hurt or killed someone." He held out his hand.

Anna took his other hand and let him help her out of the wagon. "Oh, I know." She looked at Henry Larchmont. "But he needs a proper exhibit."

"Yes, I agree." Henry Larchmont said. "I see that the one we used was woefully inadequate."

"If you had allowed me to…"

"Anna," Pierre cut him off. "Perhaps this could be discussed in a more appropriate location and time. Right now we need to get Sasq'ets safely confined."

Anna nodded as she wiped her eyes. "Yes, of course. Before someone gets hurt."

"Yes." Henry Larchmont said. When all was said and done, he was impressed with the woman. "First and foremost let us get this creature somewhere safe."

"For the time being, I would suggest a very large cage." Colton said. "While decisions and modifications are made."

"That's a good idea." Pierre said. "There must be an extra cage here in the zoo somewhere."

Henry Larchmont did not answer. Truth be told, he had no idea if there was one. He did not get involved in the day-to-day operations of the Zoo; that was his son's department.

Steve rode up on a bicycle. "What'd I miss?" He looked at the sleeping creature. "Oh. Well, all right then."

"There is a large cage in the ape compound. I had it ordered two months ago when we had an ape develop mange. We quarantined it there until it was better." Anna said.

"I see." Henry Larchmont said. He had no idea than an ape had even been ill. "Thank you for taking care of the animal."

"You mean the ape?"

Henry Larchmont nodded at her. "Yes."

"That's my job, Sir." Anna said. "Well, Colton can easily drive this wagon there with me guiding him."

"That is true." Colton said. He moved to the seat. "We should get him in a cage and save the Ether Sulfate for emergencies."

"That is prudent." Henry Larchmont said. He looked at the wagon. "And the employees who parked the wagon here?"

Anna nodded. "Steve, if you and Wayah want to ride the horses back to the rotunda so they can go back to the stables, have an employee go to the cafeteria and tell a Mister Stephan Demongeot that his wagon is now behind the ape enclosure."

"We'll take care of it." Steve said. "Wayah?"

"We will meet you at the ape enclosure." Wayah said. "The horses are over here, Steve." He gestured behind a shed.

Pierre sidled up to Henry Larchmont. "You do not strike me as a fool, Sir and yet you do not put Anna in a position where she could best benefit the zoo."

Henry Larchmont looked at him. "Perhaps that can be rectified after a proper enclosure is established. Are you sure you want to be married to such a strong headed woman?"

"Oh, in the worst kind of way, Sir." Pierre said. "I'm going to ride in the wagon with her just to remind her of that."

"Let's go." Colton said from the wagon seat. "I can tell you from personal experience this thing's going to wake up with a hell of a headache. And it's pretty grouchy on a good day."

Thirty Seven
Permanent Home

It had been four days of round the clock work at the original enclosure but thanks to guidance from Anna and Steve, the rocky wall had been replaced with smooth limestone from the water level to the very top. There were now no handholds anywhere on the wall. To deal with the perimeter fence, the original fifteen foot fence had been augmented with double strands of razor wire strung along the top of it hanging down on the inside to discourage the Sasq'ets from trying to climb out. Since as Anna had pointed out, it was very adept at climbing trees.

Since the building at the rear of the enclosure was smooth rock (for appearance's sake) it was left alone.

Anna and Pierre stood at the top of the building looking down at the newly renovated area.

"Just like you wanted it?" Pierre asked.

"No. And yes." Anna leaned on him. "It is the best compromise to a difficult situation."

"Agreed." Pierre looked at her. "I think from now on our expeditions need to be animals with four legs or perhaps ancient artifacts for the museum. Nothing with two legs."

Anna looked back at him. "Agreed."

Pierre kissed Anna. "So let's go find the others. From what I hear, Steve and Wayah have been lighting up the town for the past four nights. Colton too."

"Well, how could any girl resist an Englishman explorer, an American cowboy, and an actual Indian? It's almost not fair."

Pierre laughed. "There will be sobbing in the streets when they leave. Colton and Wayah, that is."

"I imagine so."

The pair turned and started for the exit. "Well, Steve isn't far behind," Pierre said. "He showed me a telegram from Jeanne. He has to get back to the home office right away because she's going to look for Frank."

"Still no word from Frank?" Anna said worriedly. "That is odd."

"Do you think we should go with her?"

"So she doesn't have to travel alone? Most certainly." Anna looked back at the Sasq'ets enclosure. "Besides, the exhibit is set up properly so I wouldn't feel bad about leaving for a week. A calm vacation would be a nice change of pace."

"Staying in hotels and eating in restaurants does sound nice." Pierre agreed.

"I'm quite tired of ship's galleys." Anna said. "I can send a telegram to Jeanne and let her know we'll meet her… where was it again?"

"Odorheiu, I think it was. Odorheiu Secuisec?" Pierre thought back to the telegram. "In any case, it's a small village in the Carpathian mountains."

"Then we'll meet her in Romania," Anna continued. "And help her track down Frank. After all, it's a modern country so it shouldn't take anywhere near a week to make *that* happen. Once we get Colton and Wayah on a boat, we can take a train there."

Pierre sighed. "That does sound nice. Beautiful countryside going by while in a private coach." He smiled at her. "Since you're on the zoo board, we can easily afford it now, I'm told."

Anna laughed. "I suppose we can. I can't believe Colton harangued poor Mister Larchmont into doing that."

"Yes, well..." Pierre said. "I wouldn't mention it to him. It might make him feel self-conscious." He made a mental note to tell Colton right away to just go along with Anna's belief on who got her on the board of directors. "You know."

"I suppose." Anna put her arm through Pierre's elbow. "Maybe we can join them tonight out on the town. Since it's their last night."

"That sounds like an excellent idea, my love. Then a week's vacation awaits."

The End

Sasq'ets, Sasquatch and Other Aliases

The author would like to point out that while the "Big Foot craze" really took off in the late 1950's when journalist Andrew Genzoli of the Humboldt Times in Eureka, California mentioned a reader's letter about loggers in northern California who said they had discovered mysteriously large footprints; stories of giant men go back thousands of years across the entire Earth.

Here in North America, the Cherokee, Shawnee, and the Iroquois in the Appalachian Mountain area have a rich folklore about giant hairy men and women. And Native American Tribes in the mid-west and the Pacific Northwest have also stories about these mysterious giant creatures.

In Europe they are called 'Wildmen' and were prominent in literary and artistic pieces since the late Middle Ages.

In the mountains of Asia, these creatures are called a Yeti or Abominable Snowmen, with stories going back generations. Stories of them continue to this day. There is even a verified story of the famous American actor Jimmy Stewart getting involved by helping sneak what was at the time believed to be a mummified Yeti finger out of Nepal for a friend in his wife's luggage (hidden in the underwear section). Incidentally this made Mister Stewart's wife, Gloria Mclean the first 'Yeti mule'.

The common denominator is that all these separated-by-thousands of miles, very different people *all* describe large hairy creatures that move like a man.

It makes it hard not to believe.

About the Author

Robert Wills is a retired Army Chief Warrant Officer Four with twenty five years of service. He lives in Central Florida with his long suffering wife of thirty six years. Along with wandering the various theme parks, he spends his time driving the trails in his Jeep Wrangler with dogs he doesn't even own.

Along with his ongoing comedy fantasy series *Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop* he is enjoying writing this *Alternatives* series where he puts his own twist on common subjects; giant apes, Bigfoot, and the land of Oz. He has already started working on two different *Alternatives* projects: his explanation of how Mary Poppins and Maria von Trapp are actually the same magical person; *Poppins von Trapp,* and the machinations of Henry Potter's guardian devil long before George Baily's guardian angel Clarence comes on the scene. That will be titled *It Was a Wonderful Life*. If you are a fan of those movies, he believed you will enjoy the books greatly.

Unless he is eaten by a shark first, that is. Or since he has bought a small boat that he often gets out of on the lakes of Central Florida, an alligator.

