



## The Keeper

*an odd little story*

It is night, and the gorillas are sleeping. At times like this, when the stars make the jungle seem like a strange and ethereal stage for a magnificent play, I feel like a man possessed of special talents, of qualities not often befitting a mortal being.

I have watched over the animals of my land for many years, in this twisted alien landscape that transforms from savannah to forest to wetland in mere steps. It is a strange and beautiful place, and it is home.

Voices in the distance alert me to the presence of the Others, khaki suited kin of mine, my one true enemy here. As long as I have known this place, they have known of me, and rejected my honest claim to this domain. With nets and magic lanterns they beckon, with food and umpteen gifts they lay traps, but I am wary, and I am wise.

There came a point once when I had almost been caught. Nay, the darkness of eternal torture and imprisonment was suffocating my very vision when my tribe of avian comrades sprang from the bush and blocked my potential captors, allowing my escape.

Only when my massive gorilla friends came to my rescue did their searches stop. Surely then they had to admit my divine connection to the true natives of this world. But not these khaki suited mongrels; no! Yet the wildebeests, the cockatiels, the cobras, the capybaras, even the giant elephants and winsome giraffes, all are allied to me!

Having drunk my fill of the gentle gorillas, it is time to render my nocturnal ritual at the sacred shrine where I feast. But when I reach the perimeter of this holy place, I stop, my nose and eyes assaulted by the fetid wastes before me. Metallic papers and discarded paper goblets litter the ground. Have the khaki ghouls forgotten their gods? Have these decadent savages no shame?

I stand for a moment, and let the anger empty from my veins. All that is important is the ritual, all that matters now is the nourishment of my body. With respect, I trace my fingers on the worn wooden map of my world, a relic that the khaki tribe has neglected as of late. The primitive paints which color its form are faded with age, and as my fingers trace lines others have before, I realize it is also worn from the tender caresses of love and innocence.

Shaking my head clear of these distractions, I make my way to the empty hut which houses my prize. They have laid traps here before, and I must be wary. With a quiet click, I push a window open and easily slip inside. It is dark in here, so I open more windows and let the bright light of the stars guide my way. But something is amiss, it does not match my recollections!

With curiosity overriding my hunger, I seek out the cause of this change. It is the light... something is wrong with the stars! Frowning, I peek outside and see the offending star. It has dimmed greatly, its inner fire little more than a flickering flame. I will have to mark it for the khaki's shamans to attend to. But later. My belly growls, and so I prepare my feast of native chips and their lovely yellow sauce, garnishing the dish

with potent green vegetables that set my tongue aflame. However much I detest the khakis, I cannot decry their culinary culture. With reverence and delight, I dig into the meal, and soon my hunger is gone.

I exit stealthily and close the windows that I had opened. Once again, the detritus arouses my anger, but when my eyes fall on the broken star, I realize the debris will serve a purpose. Moving as fast as possible, for I am exposed in the open, I collect the trash near the base of the star and then steal away.

My stomach fueled, the star taken care of, I retire to my lair atop the mountain of the bears. Atop this stronghold is a formerly neglected rift upon which I have lavished my attention. In the rain, I am dry; in the cold, I am warm; in the heat, I am cool. And from these heights, most of my domain easily meets my eye. Truly a perch for a king.

Mayo the white bear bellows her welcome, and I smile in return. Soon, Chips and Buns, her brown bear cousins, sound their hello as well. Patiently, I wait for the sweet sound of Oreo's tiny growls, but hear nothing save the wind. Concerned, my gaze falls to the bamboo grove of her home. Her black and white bulk is nowhere to be seen. I drop down to the dirt with nary a sound, violating the sanctity of her space out of concern for her well-being, but still I see nothing. I creep forward through the dark shadows, whispering her name softly, but hear no reply. Pausing, I breathe deeply, eyes closed, focusing on the smells and sounds around me. Within seconds, my senses locate her labored breathing, and I rush to her side. It does not look good, and her eyes glisten with tears of pain. I check her belly, but feel no young kicking inside, and her breath is taking on a rasp.

I stand to think. I do not want Oreo to pass into the earth, but it is night, and the khaki tribe are only here in the day. They would be able to take her... to where? A painful memory strikes my brain, one of lights and shouts and running. My first day in this world, where was I?

Mentally I examine the areas of my domain, and with a shudder I know where I am to go. The Beginning Place. The Shed of Steel and Pain, hovel of the animal shaman of the khaki tribe. For these many years I have avoided that terrible blight on this landscape, fearing the man within. But from tremulous passes in its shadow, I know that the shaman remains awake throughout the night. And though it strikes fear in my heart, I must communicate with the savage and bring him to dear Oreo.

So resolved, I stroke the flickering ear of the supine bear and begin to run. Leaping the chasm at her doorstep, I jump a final barrier and then dash down the hard trail, flinging my dreadlocked hair out of my face when it gets in the way.

In mere minutes I arrive at the long, dark path to the Beginning Place, and spend a few more hammering my will into iron. With steady steps I progress, ever closer to the bright lights within, and soon I stand at the corona, my tattered clothes more comfortable out of its glare. And though it pains me, I move into the light and towards the sound of the shaman, who is sitting down and scratching papers somewhere.

He jumps to his feet in fright when I enter, then peers at me closely.

"Luther?" he asks.

Quickly I seize him and cover his mouth with my hand. Suddenly, seeing his face next to my hand, I realize how clean he is, how unnatural his scent. Shaking my head, I put my finger to my lips in imitation of the khaki hunters I have seen coming for me. He nods, and I nod. Good. We are communicating.

Letting him go, carefully, I look around his room for something resembling Oreó. Seeing a poster on the wall, I look at it closely, and see a bear. Trying not to get excited, I point at it and peer at him. Does he understand?

He moves closer and looks at the bear, then looks at me. I nod my head, grinning. Excellent. Then I motion for him to follow, and he points at the bear again. Curse these savage intellects!

After a few rounds of pointing back and forth, I get him to follow me as I take off down the trail, checking to make sure of his progress every couple of heartbeats or so. We arrive at Oreó's home and I leap over the chasm, and wait impatiently as he goes 'round to access his secret tunnel. I am tapping my foot with crossed arms when he finally emerges, and after I think he has understood my impatience I take him to Oreó, who is still breathing with a rasp.

The khaki shaman springs into action, using a metal device to listen to the insides of the poor bear. He then checks her eyes, nose, and mouth, moving with at an accelerated pace that I did not know was possessed by the so-called natives. Looking at me, he speaks again.

"How long has this been going on?" he says.

I do not reply, but merely gaze at him. It is better to have no answer than the wrong one. For a moment, he seems disappointed, and then stops to consider something. And, with resignation, he pulls a giant needle from a pack on his belt. Alarmed, I gesture at him to display my disappointment with his course of action. Shaking my head with a growl, I push into the broken bamboo to find her resting place, and then, as the bamboo sways back and forth, I see a plastic jar alternately revealed and obscured by light and shadow. Going back to the doctor, who is about to inject the needle, I roar, and he jumps back in fright. I point into the bamboo grove, and grunt. His look is confused, and I shake my head again.

In a few moments I return with the jar and show it to him in the light, and point at Oreó. His eyes grow wide, and he points at the jar and at Oreó. I shrug with a look of disdain. How am I supposed to know if she truly ate the contents of the jar? I am not the shaman here!

Nodding with what I can only hope is understanding, he looks back to Oreó, who's breathing is slowing down to a peaceful pace. Whatever it was, it must have been a temporary setback. Curious, I sniff the contents of the jar. My goodness! The potent green vegetables!

Set back by the fumes, I hand the jar to the doctor with watering eyes and a smile. He takes it, and looks at me with an odd gaze.

"Luther, do you understand me?" he says.

My eyes narrow as I detect a trap. Faint footfalls on the hard trails far away verify my fears.

"Please, Luther, come with us. Let us help you."

With a howl I leap the chasm and jump the barrier, dashing into the foliage beyond and disappearing like a drop of rain. They will never take me back. I must get to the gorillas. Only they can save me now.