

worry

When Julia arrives after the show, she brings three thick books, one pencil, and something she calls Magic Markers.

"Here, Ivan," she says, and she slides two Magic Markers and a piece of paper into my domain.

I like the sundown colors, red and purple. But I don't feel like coloring. I'm worried about Stella. All evening she's been quiet, and she hasn't eaten a bit of her dinner.

Julia follows my gaze. "Where is Stella, anyway?" she asks, and she goes to Stella's gate. Ruby extends her trunk and Julia pats it. "Hi, baby," she says. "Is Stella all right?"

Stella is lying in a pile of dirty hay. Her breath is ragged.

"Dad," Julia calls, "could you come here a minute?"

George sets aside his mop.

“Do you think she’s okay, Dad?” Julia asks. “Look at the way she’s breathing. Can we call Mack? I think there’s something really wrong.”

“He must know about her.” George rubs his chin. “He always knows. But a vet costs money, Jules.”

“Please?” Julia’s eyes are wet. “Call him, Dad.”

George gazes at Stella. He puts his hands on his hips and sighs. He calls Mack.

I can’t hear all of his words, but I can see George’s lips tighten into a grim line.

Gorilla expressions and human expressions are a lot alike.

“Mack says the vet’s coming in the morning if Stella’s not any better,” he tells Julia. “He says he’s not going to let her die on him, not after all the money he’s put into her.”

George strokes Julia's hair. "She'll be all right. She's a tough old girl."

Julia sits by Stella's domain until it's time to go home. She doesn't do her homework. She doesn't even draw.



*the promise*

My domain gleams with moonlight when I awake to the sound of Stella's calls.

"Ivan?" Stella says in a hoarse whisper. "Ivan?"

"I'm here, Stella." I sit up abruptly, and Bob topples off my stomach. I run to a window. I can see Ruby next to Stella, sleeping soundly.

"Ivan, I want you to promise me something," Stella says.

"Anything," I say.

"I've never asked for a promise before, because promises are forever, and forever is an unusually long time. Especially when you're in a cage."

"Domain," I correct.

"Domain," she agrees.

I straighten to my full height. "I promise, Stella," I say in a voice like my father's.

"But you haven't even heard what I'm asking yet," she says, and she closes her eyes for a moment. Her great chest shudders.

"I promise anyway."

Stella doesn't say anything for a long time. "Never mind," she finally says. "I don't know what I was thinking. The pain is making me addled."

Ruby stirs. Her trunk moves, as if she is reaching for something that isn't there.

When I say the words, they surprise me. "You want me to take care of Ruby."

Stella nods, a small gesture that makes her wince. "If she could have a life that's . . . different from mine.



She needs a safe place, Ivan. Not—”

“Not here,” I say.

It would be easier to promise to stop eating, to stop breathing, to stop being a gorilla.

“I promise, Stella,” I say. “I promise it on my word as a silverback.”

*knowing*

Before Mack, before Bob, even before Ruby, I know that Stella is gone.

I know it the way you know that summer is over and winter is on its way. I just know.

Stella once teased me that elephants are superior because they feel more joy and more grief than apes.

“Your gorilla hearts are made of ice, Ivan,” she said, her eyes glittering. “Ours are made of fire.”

Right now I would give all the yogurt raisins in all the world for a heart made of ice.

*five men*

Bob heard from a rat, a reliable sort, that they tossed Stella's body into a garbage truck.

It took five men and a forklift.



*comfort*

All day I try to comfort Ruby, but what can I say?

That Stella had a good and happy life? That she lived as she was meant to live? That she died with those who loved her most nearby?

At least the last is true.

*crying*

Julia cries all evening, while her father sweeps and mops and dusts and cleans the toilets.

When George sees Mack, he runs to him. I can only hear a few of his words. *Vet. Should have. Wrong.*

Mack shrugs. His shoulders droop. He leaves without a word.

When George wipes the fingerprints off my glass, his cheeks are wet. He doesn't meet my eyes.