

Cargo

Ignoring their conversation was easy. All one had to do was concentrate on the passing traffic, daydream, or keep the Ipod's earbuds tucked in and the volume on high. In Adrian's case, it was all three.

It was a yearly thing; the family 'vacation'. Mom driving, Dad making comments on how mom drove, and the usual argument ensuing. Trey, the gray and brown mutt, either bouncing around next to him, or fast asleep with his head in Adrian's lap. This time, he was lucky that the dog was asleep. He tended to lick. A lot.

They'd been doing this since Adrian could remember. Every summer, taking a trip up to their cabin in the mountains, and spending time in nature's "quiet bliss". He was beginning to think that nature resented them, really, for when the Fitzpatrick family arrived, quiet bliss tended to turn into controlled havoc.

Either way, the sixteen-year-old leaned his head back and watched the cars and trucks pass on the lanes beside him, ignoring the picturesque countryside that he knew so well. It'd be another hour or so before they reached their destination anyway. As the rock-based guitar and drum sounds filtered into his ears accompanied by the wild vocal sounds of the lead singer, Adrian let his brown eyes drift over the cars and trucks that passed him, making up scenarios as to why they were on the road. His stories tended to lean much further into fiction and fantasy than reality, but how else was he to relieve his own boredom?

His mother tended to go much faster than those in the lane next to him, so as he watched a purple van as they passed it, he imagined the three children in the back were hostages, and the elder man in front (whom was obviously a grandfather to them), was their capturer. How would he save them? The sniper rifle under his seat of course. Take out a few tires, send the vehicle to the shoulder, and leap out heroically, carrying the children to the safety of.... his... car? Adrian sighed and clicked the arrow button on his Ipod, shifting to the next song, which would probably fit a storyline better. The boy's brown eyes widened fractionally as he saw a large freight truck coming into his view.

Usually, freight trucks were the most fun to imagine, often hauling a trailer of huge proportions that would make it all the more fun to guess what was inside. This one was no exception. The trailer itself was unique. The sides seemed to be made of thick metal, crossing in patterns similar to that of the side of a building. It had a domed top acting as a cover, and strangely enough had small, brick sized holes running in a lined pattern along the top of the wall. Adrian sat up a bit more, watching the un-marked freight truck as it passed, imagining the eyes of a beast from inside staring back at him. They'd be taking it to a zoo to be put on display, but they didn't know how dangerous this one was. It would break from its cage easily -

Adrian stopped thinking and didn't notice his own mouth dropping open as his eyes focused. His forehead hit the glass of the window as he tried to get a 'closer' look. Had he been daydreaming for too long? Those had been eyes he'd seen. A glimpse of what looked like a

large black feather. He watched closely as it passed by, pointedly turning his gaze to the driver, and watching to see if this one looked down at him like so many others had. Sometimes he could even get them to honk their horns, but this time he was caught unawares by the driver's appearance. Dark-skinned, yet his eyes seemed to shine as he threw a grin down to the boy. Adrian's head hit the window again as he leaned forward quickly. Had those been fangs?

"Dad! Dad!" he yelled, yanking the earbuds from his ear, and suddenly hearing a combination of Trey's barks, and the bluegrass tunes that his parents had on the radio.

"Adrian turn the damned thing down so you can hear yourself! You've got the dog all riled up." his father replied.

"Did you see that truck?"

"Trey's been barking for a few minutes now, Mark. I think he's gotta go." came his mother's voice.

"We just stopped a half hour ago!" his father's voice raised.

"Dad!"

"He did drink a lot when we stopped for lunch."

"Well so did I, but I - What, Adrian!?"

"Did you see that truck?" he asked, knowing somehow that the question was futile. He pushed the dog's body off of him. Trey was still barking, but had both front paws up on the back of the seat, looking out the back window.

"No, I didn't." his dad said simply.

"Honey, pull Trey down from there." his mother ordered in a pleading tone.

"He's just barking at something behind us. I don't wanna stop anymore until we get there."

"Fine, but you're cleaning it up if he does go."

Adrian rolled his eyes and plugged the earbuds back in, turning up the volume again, and wrapping both arms around Trey's middle, pulling the dog back down. For that, he got a large tongue across his nose. He sneered, wiping the spot a few times, and then reached right back up to pull him down again. Something had his attention.

It was almost as if a light bulb went off, and Adrian turned himself in his seat to stare out the window, trying to see what Trey was after. Sure enough, the freight truck had shifted lanes, and was a few cars back behind them. Placing a hand on Trey's head, Adrian decided to keep that truck in his view, and hope that it was going to the same place they were (no matter how likely that was).

“Now that was stupid.” Her voice held the normal sarcastic ring to it, but when he glanced to her face, he had an idea that she was a bit more serious than normal.

“Just a kid, no big deal,” he heard himself say, though he felt his own skin tingle as he cloaked himself more.

“Yeah, well kids have sharp eyes, Vade. You gotta watch it.” she said again, her bright green eyes staying focused ahead.

He kept both hands on the wheel, pursing his lips in a frown, but not disagreeing with her. He could see the boy staring at them through the back window of their car, a hyperactive dog doing the same. It was the animals that tended to pick up on their cargo the quickest. Especially the larger ones, and this particular cargo was large indeed.

“Forty minutes. How's she doin' sweetheart?” he said into the tiny microphone that connected to his ear.

“She's walking around a bit. I think the sleep medicine is wearing off.” he heard a feminine voice that seemed to slide through his earpiece. His eyebrows lowered and he shook his head, suppressing the deep growl that wanted to come from his throat. The girl could be unnerving. Plain and simple. But she was about the only one that could keep their usual cargo calm, and that was something they couldn't give up.

“Well, feed 'er more if ya have to. Just keep 'er down. Damned kid in another car saw somethin'.” he practically growled into his mic.

“Got it.” she said, and he heard the 'click' that signaled she'd finished the conversation. All the better for him. He shrugged.

He looked to the right to make sure Triel had nothing to add, and then looked back to the road, narrowing his own yellow eyes as he saw the young boy still watching them like a hawk. “Want me to slow down?” he asked.

“No,” she said in a soft tone. “Just keep a low profile, will you? This one's our biggest catch yet.” He heard her sigh and shift her position in the truck's seat next to him. “I'm taking a forty minute nap. Just yell if you need me,” she said, and seemed to slide herself into a tight ball.

Glancing to the side, Vade frowned and shook his head when he saw the human in a very inhuman position next to him. The leathery wings that she usually kept hidden were now wrapped around her like a blanket.

He hated when she did that.

They called him the ring leader, but that didn't make him the leader of the place. In reality, he didn't even dress like a 'ring leader'. There were no whips or leashes, no leather pants or other expensive clothing. Though, it wasn't to say he didn't simply look good; a tall lean frame and a mane of white blonde hair made him out to look as if he'd walked right off of an LA photoshoot (dark shaded sunglasses topped off the look nicely). Except that he was busy hammering another layer of metal shingles onto the roof of the new enclosure.

He was everything a female would want in a male, and that was all the reason she was watching him. Yet again. It was a routine for him on days when cargo arrived. Preparing the area for whatever new arrival they'd be introducing to the rest of the refugees. It was his job to do the introducing, for he was the only one who they seemed to listen to.

An elbow bumping her arm broke her reverie, and she turned to glare at the suspect, but she was already trotting past her, eyes on the male she'd been watching. "Tau!" The male looked up at her call, even looking over the dark shades. The action made it easy to catch sight of his odd eyes. The left was a bright sky blue, the right colored a deep green. It was a fascinating thing to behold, even in a place that held many such wonders. His eyes moved from Zamira's to hers and with a shift of his chin, he beckoned her.

Michi frowned and moved forward, angry not only at having been caught, but at the one who'd given her away without a second thought. She took slow steps toward the two, watching as Tau easily leapt from the roof to the ground, wiping his hands and listening evenly to Zamira. Tall, pretty Zamira. She was as close to albino as one could describe. Her skin was almost baby-white, and her hair was so light that it was close to silver. Her eyes were tinged pink on the outside, but that was all the evidence of an iris one could see. She was almost angelic, and apparently had a voice to match the look. Zamira was everything Michi wanted to be.

"Could use your help, Meech, since your lazy brother hasn't shown his face in days." Tau said in an annoyed tone, looking to her from behind the dark shades. He spoke of one of Michi's two brothers, one older and one younger, but only one with an excuse to get out of work. Koda, the eldest, was busy on a scouting mission. Shou on the other hand was likely still asleep. That or hiding somewhere to get out of work.

Keeping her eyes off of Zamira, Michi nodded, her own blonde-streaked black hair sliding into her eyes. "Where to?" she asked, knowing already that her task would involve flying. Her dark eyes followed Tau's finger as he pointed to three different spots. "One there, two there, and one there," he said, before turning back to her. He lifted his shades up to his forehead, and Michi desperately hoped her awe didn't show through. Both eyes, each a different color, focused on her as he spoke in a tired tone. "The usual surveillance equipment. They're bringing her in in about an hour."

Michi mumbled an 'ok' and took the bag he handed her. With an easy motion, she opened her dark feathered wings and stretched them a bit, flapping a few times before taking off. They weren't graceful motions. In order to get to her destinations and stay put to attach the cameras, she had to flap them quickly, even erratically as she tried to keep her body balanced in the air. Even with years of practice she and her brothers only really looked like the ethereal winged-beings they were when it was a decently windy day. She focused, hoping Zamira would wander off into the woods and Tau would find something else to look at. She'd just passed her

teen years but was still as self-conscious as ever.

It took her a good half hour. One was strung from a very high point on a tree, another at a junction in the fence, and the third was well hidden within one of the high walls of the new enclosure. Within that time, a much younger version of Tau (his little sister, Sanura) had some running up to them announcing "They're here!" in a high voice. Tau must have sent her on her way, for there was a decent lack of sound when she reached the third spot.

"Meech, c'mon! They need us at the truck!" she heard Tau's voice just as she had finished wiring the third camera. Wings in motion once again, she landed as neatly as she could near Tau. To her relief, Zamira had left, and Michi finally found her voice. "What'd she want?" she asked as the two began walking, her wings folding tightly at her back.

"Just to let us know they were back. She offered her services with unloading, too." his voice was low as the two walked with wide strides down a wooded path. She was shorter, but he was walking a bit more slowly.

Michi gave him a look and he smirked, shaking his head as he lifted both arms to tie back the mass of white blonde hair into a ponytail. "Don't give me that look." he huffed. "You know they're bringing in a Sphinx, right?" At Michi's nod, he continued. "Aggressive. Not easily tamed. She may very well be needed." he spoke as he ducked under a low branch in the well-hidden area. "Her voice can effect just about anything with ears if she sets her mind to it" He trailed off for a moment as they walked, and then added, "You may be needed as well, though I wish Koda was here...."

The girl frowned as she was again compared to her elder brother. Koda was nearing his thirties and well known around the facility for his strength and leadership. Though not one to befriend easily, he was reliable, and stronger than both of his siblings combined. Self-conscious thoughts flooded her mind as they reached a clearing, the familiar engine of an 18 wheeler cutting off.

Michi and Tau greeted both Vade and Triel as they stepped out of the truck, Tau intercepting and lifting a smaller girl in his arms, hugging her close and ruffling her mass of hair. It was the same white blonde color as Tau's, though her eyes were an odd tinge of yellow. "This one might be dangerous." he said, his face serious as he eyed the young girl in his arms.

"Yeah, she could bite your head off and swallow it whole." Vade quipped, smirking in Tau's direction. He also seemed to ignore the answering look that Tau sent back.

"I wanna see!" The little girl, Sanura, grinned. Tiny, sharp teeth split by a playful tongue afterwards as she squirmed in Tau's arms until he set her down.

As if in response, the being in the truck let out a screeching howl that seemed to pierce the calm surroundings. The entire group seemed to start at the sound, and Tau moved his hand down to his sister's shoulder. "Stay here, Sanura." his voice and eyes left no room for argument.

His gaze lifted to Zamira, who stood closest to the door of the truck. "Keep her quiet." He gave the girl a serious look before pulling his sunglasses back down over his eyes. Some often

wondered if they made him self conscious, for he usually kept them covered. "We'll bring her out the back and lead her to the enclosure." Turning, he looked to the others and nodded.

Michi took hold of Sanura's hand as the girl wandered over to her, and both watched with anxious eyes as Tau, Vade, and Zamira went to work on getting the Shinx out. Once Vade had the large doors open, Tau was the one to go in. When he stepped out, he held a large chain-link lead, and it was then that they all got their first view of the great beast.

It had the body of a lion, though it was a fraction larger than a full grown male, and wings of the same tawny color had lifted in what seemed like a defensive maneuver. Michi's eyes widened as she saw how well they'd done in creating this creature. As well as the wings, it did indeed have the head of a human female. Though slightly marred with slanted feline eyes and larger pointed ears, wild tan hair flowed from the skull and she had a very human looking nose and mouth.

Claws extended, the Sphinx began to turn in place, slanted yellow eyes shifting around at her new surroundings. Michi noted that they hadn't quite mastered the mythical creature after all. She had a quite 'normal' lion's tail, rather than a snake as the myth often said. At once, her mouth opened in what seemed like an impossibly wide yawn, revealing teeth even sharper than Tau's. The scream was clearer this time, and a few of them reached for their ears.

What stopped the Sphinx was Tau's answering roar. His was a lion's roar, coming from somewhere deep in his chest, and getting the attention of all around him as it left his mouth. It looked strange when he did it as a human, but there was no mistaking the sound (or the fully grown sharp teeth that were bared when he did so).

The Sphinx stopped and stared at Tau, her wings settling against her back. Tau simply stared right back. After a moment, he turned and gave a pull on the immense harness and the Sphinx followed, her slitted yellow eyes observing each of the companions as she walked by. Michi conveniently avoided her gaze.

"Follow at a distance." Tau said in a fairly soft tone. "I want to make sure she doesn't react badly to the enclosure." All of them did so. Vade and Zamira walked side by side, and Sanura let go of Michi's hand, taking off in a short run to catch up with those two. The winged girl turned, looking back to see if Triel followed and found her standing in place, dark shades covering any hint as to where her eyes were directed.

"My work's done. I'm going to bed." she said simply, running a hand through brown hair that reached just below her ears. Michi simply nodded and began to follow the others, remembering that Triel was quite nocturnal.

They made it to the enclosure without a problem. Tau only had to growl and bare his teeth to convince the Sphinx to enter her new home. Once in, he made short work of closing and locking the great door. It was simply a huge vented area, wide and long enough for the beast to run around in, but capped at the top by a combination of fencing and high tree branched to prevent her from flying out.

Zamira gave them all a short wave and left soon after, since she had a few chores to do before she could sleep. Tau had insisted that they would be taken care of, but Zamira claimed she needed to walk after such a long trip. He sent Vade to rest as well, for it had been a long drive,

and told his younger sister that she could watch the Sphinx from behind the thick glass window. With a final once over, Tau turned and walked away from the enclosure again. Michi bit her lower lip as she saw the sour look on his face and heard him mumbling angrily to himself. "Makes me sick. She can't even clean her fur." he seemed to hiss.

Looking toward the enclosure, Michi realized his thoughts to be true. While her body was that of a feline, she had a fairly human head. It would be just about impossible for her to clean herself as a normal feline would. Those who had created her had obviously not cared much for the quality of her life. It was like that with many of the inhabitants of their home. Created only as trophies and experiments for those who had the intelligence to bring them to life in the first place.

"Is there anything I can do?" Michi finally asked. Tau had passed her, but it had taken her that long to figure out that she hadn't really been given a 'task' as the others had.

He turned, his face still a mask of anger, and nearly snarled. "Find Shou and make sure he gets his chores done today." He turned quickly when she nodded and kept walking. "And if he goes beyond our borders again, I'll throw him in with the Sphinx." Tau added over his shoulder.

Michi nodded once, her slanted eyes hardening as she spread her wings again. She was sick of having to cover for him, find him, and yell at him when he was found. It made her angry that because she was his sibling, that somehow made her his 'keeper' as well. Brother or not, Shou was going to have to learn his lesson sooner or later. At this point, she didn't quite care if he learned it the hard way.

Even in a widespread vacationing community, he was well known. Many of the families often came back for weeks in the summer, staying in huge, well kept cabins and spending their time on the lake. They had children of all ages, which was most of the reason a community center had been built, equipped with the latest of arcade games and several flatscreen televisions. On Saturday nights they even held a 'dance', where local bands were invited to play, and chaperones were only a few years older than the attendees. It made for some interesting stories.

Though, he couldn't tell his. At least not to anyone he lived with. If they found out that he'd even crossed their borders he'd likely be sent back to the facility he'd been rescued from years before.

"Yo, Birdman! It's my turn," came a familiar voice. Shou spun and grinned at the larger male, running a hand through his hair and shrugging. "Don't see your name on the schedule Burke." he said, leaning back on the arcade game he'd been playing. The plan worked for a few moments, as Burke looked around for the schedule he spoke of, but soon angry eyes met Shou's amused ones. "Don't mess with me, kid."

"I'm older than you are, *kid*," Shou responded, even daring to lean in for a moment as he

spoke. He leaned back quickly when Burke lifted a hand to make a show of his words.

"All you Chinese people look like you're four years old!" he said, smirking at his own racial slur. "Do they all wear stupid fake wings on their backs?"

"I'm not sure. But the wifebeater look's not exactly all the rage either." Shou's voice had dropped and he lifted himself from the arcade game. "S'all yours Hulkster." For Burke truly was the classic eighteen year old jock. He tended to gather all of the attention he could, whether it be with his parent's expensive gifts, or picking fights with others. Shou was often the center of his crosshair since the older male tended to draw the eyes towards him. Brightly colored and spiked hair, tight t-shirts and chain-adorned pants, not to mention his fantastic set of black faux wings made him nearly impossible not to stare at.

Shou made his way out of the community center, glad that Burke hadn't pushed him any more. Though he'd given up the arcade, he'd also had the last word, and Burke didn't usually let him have that much. Plugging a pair of headphones into his ears, he threw a wink here, a wave there, and stepped out of the wide doorway, taking in a long breath. He'd been out most of the night, and the realization of exactly how late he'd be made him shift to a trot as he made his way to the thick wooded area that held the path to his home. Well, it wasn't exactly a path that anyone else could find their way through.

He let his wings shift and stretch a bit as he slowed to a walk. If he was in trouble, there was no use running to get to it. It felt good to move his feathered extensions, since he'd kept them still and even limp at points during the night. In order to fit in, he'd had to pretend that he was trying to make a fashion statement. His wings were "fake", and these days he went so far as to tie strings to parts of them, just in case anyone saw them twitch or move.

Shou was in the midst of lip synching to music, walking slowly, and untying one of the strings when he stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes went quickly to the taller male who stood in front of him. He had longer black hair but the same face as his brother, though his demeanor was something completely different. He stood straight and tall, dressed in well-tailored black clothing, and was staring down at Shou as if he were the most menial bug he'd seen all day.

"Koda! Ah..." Shou stumbled on his words, not having expected this meeting at all. "What are you... doing here?"