

Warren Gould was a very busy man. Every day of his strenuous schedule was micromanaged right down to the minute. Private meetings in his corner office with sweeping views of the Dallas skyline were arranged months in advance. To book one you had to call one of the many members of his staff and hope you were important enough to land a five minute window in six months. Such was protocol when you were king of the hill. The lion does not concern himself with the opinions of sheep.

One particular sheep, however, seemed to completely ignore such protocols. Warren sighed as he looked up at the irate woman standing before him.

“What the hell do you want, Ash?” She huffed, crossing her arms angrily.

“You should know, you double-crossing snake.” Warren groaned and ran his fingers through his graying hair, putting down the paperwork he was filling out.

“As a matter of fact, I don’t know what you’re talking about. And I’m very busy right now, so can you please enlighten me later? You know not to disturb me in my office.” Ash stood there defiantly.

“ Someone put a cheetah in the new safari attraction without my awareness nor consent. Our order forms never listed a cheetah. I’d like to know where he came from.”

“You and me both,” Warren grumbled, refocusing his attention towards the paperwork. He signed a fancy looking document before pushing it to the side and grabbing another, repeating the procedure. “You know I don’t make decisions related to the zoo. Talk to Mr. Hemmler.” Mr. Hemmler was the man Mr. Gould had put in charge of zoo operations and the C.E.O. of WildWorld Zoological Entertainment Ltd. Ash rolled her eyes.

“With all due respect, Mr. Gould, I doubt Mr. Hemmler is even aware the park is open. The only animal knowledge he has is how to shoot lions from the back of an armoured Land Rover. I could run this park better than him.” Warren groaned.

“Then talk to the acquisition board. They’ll give you everything you need.” Warren by now was sounding more and more agitated. But Ash wasn’t relenting.

“ I did. They have no record of a cheetah on file. He just popped up one day in the new safari drive-through enclosure. Even worse, this was before we installed the electronic barriers. He took out two impalas and a springbok before we found him. On top of that, we’ve had to pay out several thousand dollars worth of legal fees to the traumatized families who got a more in depth view of “nature in action”. This is no small matter.” Mr. Gould clenched his hands into a fist, slamming his bony knuckles into the mahogany desk.

“ I said speak to the acquisition board! I don’t know what you’re talking about! They know more than I do!” He stood up from his chair, clearly agitated. Ash just scowled.

“I don’t believe that.” Her eyes locked with his as she met his challenge. “ I think you know exactly who that cheetah is. What you did to him. And you’re going to tell me.” Warren looked slightly flustered by this statement, but stood his ground.

“Ash... I’m no fool. If I used your formula I would’ve run it by you first. You know that.”

“What I know is that you’ll do anything to get your way.” Ash huffed. “So I want you to tell me why you transformed a human without my knowledge.” Warren looked at his watch, a gold and jewel encrusted custom made rolex. The sunlight from the floor-to-ceiling windows behind him bounced and glimmered off the watch’s surfaces, rendering deciphering the time impossible. He grumbled. He had a critical meeting with a group of ambassadors from Saudi Arabia regarding a business deal worth billions of dollars in five minutes. He couldn’t be late. With a weary sigh, he got up and adjusted his tie.

“Look, there was some journalist dog who was constantly sticking his nose into trouble. He managed to acquire some critical information about the BlueStar incident, information I’m afraid we cannot make public. I ordered Mr. Barrow to take care

of him. He was only supposed to use the formula as a last resort. That's the most I know, the devil take me if I'm lying." He stormed past her towards the giant glass doors that marked the entrance to his office. "Like I said, I prefer not to involve myself in these sorts of things. If you can find evidence of foul play let me know. Otherwise, you're on your own here. Security will help you on your way out." He stalked out the office slamming the doors behind him. Ash immediately was surrounded by two gorilla-bodied guards, their faces adorned with unpleasant scowls. Ash had met them many times before. Heck, this was becoming an almost monthly occurrence. She decided to be proactive this time and save the guards some trouble, turning to walk out the doors herself.

Ash felt uncomfortable as she walked past layers of shimmering offices and cubicles packed together like sardines. It really wasn't her element. Everything felt... artificial. She wasn't sure whether the endless rows of computers or the humans operating them were more robotic. Barely any one of the tired men and women in business suits shot her a passing glance as she walked out of the building. It filled her with relief to finally return home to the zoo.

However, there were more important things to do. It didn't take long for her to find what she was looking for. Nestled deep within big cat mountain there was a service area, a backstage enclosure for the cats to live in while their regular enclosures were being cleaned. It had access to all the big cat enclosures, but only 4 of them were there

now, the snow leopards and the leopard pair. Their heads perked up as she unlocked the cage door.

“Hello Josh, Abigail, Danielle, and Brock.” She addressed each of them by name. She sat down on a rock and watched them plop down in a circle around her, watching with curious eyes. She could still see the spark of human spirit in each of them.

One of the snow leopards cocked his head and chuffed inquisitively. Ash hurriedly ran through the pages of scribbled notes she had brought with her. Lately she had been trying to understand how felines talk with middling success.

“Let’s see...” she mumbled as she pulled out a flash card. “ Head tilt of 45 degrees and medium pitched chuff equals... “I’m hungry.” She looked up at the leopard hopefully, and to see him shake his head disappointedly. She groaned, continuing to flip through her notes.

“What time is it?”

“I have to use the bathroom.”

“ The water temperature is too cold?”

Each of her inquiries met with a negative response, causing Ash to sigh in discouragement. Someday, she swore, she'd figure out their secrets. But right now she had something else on her mind.

“ So, I'm assuming you're wondering why I called the four of you here...” She began, resting her elbow on her knee.

“*That's what I was saying!*” Josh huffed angrily. “ *For a scientist, she's dumb as rocks.*”

“ *Shh, be quiet.*” Abigail purred next to him. “*She won't tell us when you're mewling like a cub. You're just giving her more ammo.*” Josh sighed as they both turned back towards the woman in front of them.

“*I hope this is about TV night,*” he whispered at a sound only feline ears could detect. “*I've been asking about that for ages.*” However, what they did hear made their hearts fly up into their throats.

“This may come as a surprise to you, but there's been a new resident added to the park. One who may know where your friends Cecil and Brittney are.” The air immediately flew from the room as the four looked amongst themselves in shock. But that wasn't all. “ The new cheetah in the park, Flash... he may have some information

but it was wiped during the transformation. I need you to try and coax it out of him while I work on a cure,” She stated solemnly.

The four big cats shared a glance, their minds sharing one thought. However, they each drew different conclusions.

*“ Holy hell, this crap’s still going on?”* Josh yowled in disgust, baring his fangs. *“ I thought we were done with the whole turning people into animals thing.”*

*“ I don’t think she was involved with this one.”* Danielle the leopard mused. *“She sounds pretty upset about it.”*

*“ The hell I care!”* Josh growled. *“ Whoever did this to us is still out there and there’s nothing we can do about it!”*

*“ Relax Josh,”* Abigail murred, padding up beside him. *“ I thought you enjoyed this life?”* She had a sly grin on her face as she winked at him. *“ I see you bouncing around the enclosure performing for the guests each day, don’t try and deny it. You love the attention.”* Josh sighed, his tail drooping behind him. For a few seconds, he was as still as a statue.

*“ I do...”* he paused, kneading his paws into the dirt. *“But I can’t just sit around like this, you know? We all had our lives stolen from us and the zoo people act like they did nothing wrong. I’m kinda sick of it.”* Danielle nodded in agreement.

*“This zoo is hella wack, and I’d love to get to the bottom of this.”* she murred, padding over to Josh. *“So let’s go find out what that cheetah knows. That feels like the best we can do right now.”* Josh sighed as Danielle began to groom behind his ears. His ears were his weakness, and everyone knew it. He began to melt under a wave of pure pleasure. He sighed happily as her rough tongue caressed his head, splaying out like a rug on the floor.

“ Gaaahh...stooop” He purred halfheartedly, his objections dissolving into rumbling purrs as a wave of bliss assaulted his body. It got even worse when Abigail joined in, rubbing her head along his cheeks and running her tail under his belly. He put on a fake pouty face. “Fiiinnneee We’ll goo tallkkk ttoooo hiiimmm ohhh yeaahh thaaaat’s the spoooot.”

*“ All right, we’ll do it!”* Abigail chirped happily. Ash, who had been watching them talk, looked up in surprise and frantically flipped through her notes before speaking.

“ Ummm... Yellow birds ride bathrooms.”



All four cats rolled their eyes.

Flash the cheetah was not having a good day. His meal had been interrupted by a horde of screaming two-legged beasts and painful magic. Then he had awoken in a strange cage that was dirty and a bit too small for his liking. On top of that, he was still hungry. So when the strange felines entered his territory, he was understandably pissed.

“ *What the hell do you want?*” He growled in annoyance, slinking to the back of his enclosure. He arched up his back as his fur stood on end, in an effort to appear intimidating. Of course Flash knew that as one of the smallest species of big cats, there was no way he could win a fight against four bigger and stronger enemies. However, he hoped that his efforts at intimidation would scare them away.

“*Flash, is it?*” One of the snow leopards, a female Flash could tell from her scent, cautiously approached him. Flash hissed and swung his paw at her. She stopped tentatively in her tracks but refused to back off. “ *We’d like to talk to you. The real you.*”

“*The heck are you talking about?*” Flash growled, baring his fangs. His muscles tensed, ready for action. He saw some of his enemies do the same. “*St-stay back or I’ll bite you!*”

*“ We’re not here to harm you.”* The female cooed in a reassuring tone. Flash couldn’t make heads or tails of her behavior. There was no way he could trust her. She was only here to steal his food! Or his territory! His mind was flashing all sorts of danger signals at him despite her behavior. But he couldn’t attack. A cheetah couldn’t win a fight against a snow leopard, much less two of them and a pair of leopards. Running wasn’t an option in this small cage. So there wasn’t much he could do other than dig his claws in the dirt and pray none of them decided to pounce first. However, what happened next was not what he expected at all.

*“ We’re here because you used to be a man. One of the things that feed us and clean our enclosures. You’ve suffered an injustice, and we want to help you rectify that.”* Flash staggered back, mind racing as he struggled to comprehend her words. What the hell were they talking about? He had vivid memories of wrestling with his siblings in the tall grass of the serengeti before the two-legged beasts captured him with their evil magic and brought him here to this place filled with strange sights and smells. He growled.

*“You’re full of crap. I have nothing to do with those two legs and their magic and I prefer to keep it that way.”* The intruders looked amongst themselves as if pondering what to do next. Finally the female leopard padded forwards.

*“Like it or not, your past was intertwined with the humans that brought you here.”* Her tone was soft, her words smooth as molasses. In other words the opposite of the hunched up cheetah in front of her. *“I hope some day you’ll remember that.”*

The other cats soon returned to their respective exhibits, leaving Flash alone with his thoughts. He knew he wasn’t a human. He ate, he slept, he groomed his fur. That was the way it had always been. He shook it off and began pacing around his cage. He was hungry. Where was that filthy human with the food bucket?

The nightmares returned that night as Flash tried to get a much needed nap. He’d been experiencing them lately but tonight the dreams were at their strongest. He was in a rhino made of iron, one of those that frequently made their way through his home. However the colors were off, the blues and greens much brighter and more vibrant than what he was used to. The sky was the most offsetting thing however, it was the color of gazelle blood. He growled in annoyance at this revelation, but his voice came out wrong. His paws were off too. They were small and furless, with five dextrous appendages sprouting out like tall grass. He clenched them together, making a fist. His heart plummeted into his hind legs as he remembered the conversation from earlier. Somehow, in this dream, he had taken the form of a twoleg.

Much like in previous nightmares, he wasn’t alone. He looked up in front of the vehicle and sure enough it was there. A demon. It haunted his dreams and sometimes even his waking moments, but as of right now he was just a shadow. A

demonic figure with red glowing eyes the only feature breaking up his silhouette. Mist swirled in and around his form as he stood unmoving in Flash's eyes. Even in the dream he shivered.

Flash ran his tongue over his teeth as he did many times before. No fangs, just stubby, useless teeth. His new paws were devoid of their comforting claws, leaving him defenseless against this mysterious entity. That was the part he hated most. He felt naked without a protective coat of fur covering him. He felt exposed without claws and fangs with which to defend himself. He bared his fangs at the figure, knowing that his attempts were in vain. Who could be afraid of such a defenseless creature?

In each of his previous nightmares, the figure had remained silent. But this time was different. It appeared to be ... laughing, if that's what the raspy noises emanating from no discernable point in his body were supposed to be. The noises echoed through the truck and off the walls of the dream itself, assaulting his ears from every angle. Flash could only whimper as he pawed at his ears with his strange limbs. This only seemed to make it laugh harder. Just when Flash had reached his limit a voice replaced the incessant laughter, sending a chill down his spine.

“ You really are a dumb beast aren't you?” The voice was condescending, mocking even, and his jeers reached the very depths of Flash's ears, penetrating into the depths of his consciousness. No matter how hard he covered his ears the voice

filled his mind completely, drowning out all other thoughts. The words filled his brain and flowed out his eardrums. “ I must say, I hadn’t expected you to embrace it THIS much.”

“Rrggh, w... what do you m...mean?” Flash groaned, clutching his head in pain. His words came out sloppy, like someone who had just gotten their wisdom teeth removed. His body felt so foreign and yet real at the same time. Everything hurt, much more so than it should’ve. “Get... out...of my head!” he growled furiously. The mysterious entity merely chuckled at Flash’s behaviors, which only served to make him more mad. He tried to lash out at the figure but grabbed an armful of air instead. Even worse, there were two of them now. The man-like demon was accompanied by another entity, this one more naturally shaped. It stood on four legs and had a tail. But it looked just like the other figure, demonic and unnatural. Two glowing red eyes sat perched in its visceral skull. Somehow it looked more menacing than the first.

“ You’ve adapted quite well to this lifestyle.” The voice taunted. “ I think you much rather enjoy the stupid bliss of bestiality than the cesspit of your old life.”

“What are you talking about?” Flash cried out in a rage. His head felt so muddled and the voice wasn’t letting him think. Why did this feel so real?

“ But then again, that’s what I was hired to do. And I’m very good at my work,” the man-like figure continued, seemingly unaware of Flash’s agony. “ But...” The demon stretched out a gaseous tendril, reaching out across the entire length of the vehicle and

resting on Flash's shoulder. Its touch was cold like that of a long dead cadaver. He couldn't help but shiver. "That's not fun now, is it? I've hidden a small pocket of memories in the far reaches of your subconscious, memories of your old life." He motioned towards the animal-like figure sitting beside him. "You've sampled the troubles of human existence and the simple life of a beast concerned only with his own pleasure. I could have ended it there, but I wanted you to make that choice yourself. It's so much sweeter that way!"

As Flash... no, Scott... no, Flash struggled to make sense of the pounding in his brain the being erupted into a fit of hysterical laughter, clogging up his thoughts even further. Who the hell was he? What the hell was he? Various jumbled images flashed through his mind like lightning, each more fleeting than the last. His head felt like scrambled eggs. Somehow he knew that any decision he made here would be absolute, that he would never have these nightmares again. If he chose the cheetah, his human soul would leave for good, never to return. Was that what he wanted?

But through the flashes of memory he knew one thing. The figure standing before him had harmed him. Was this who those intruders were talking about? Was this the injustice he suffered? His mind felt like a volcano about to explode.

He turned towards the two figures, standing still as statues on the other side of the vehicle. His vision was blurry as darkness crept into the corners of his eyes. But he ignored it, feeling only an immense, burning hatred for the shadow man in front of him. It

bubbled up from his chest and took over his whole mind as he let out a low growl. He knew the choice he had to make, as little as he understood about the decision. With a yowl he rushed forwards, throwing himself into one of the figures. The darkness enveloped him and all went silent.

Everything was a blur when Flash reopened his eyes. Smatterings of color danced across his field of vision like confetti. His body felt like it was glued to the ground, his heart filled with lead. Memories of last night's dream began to seep into his mind like tar. What the hell had happened? He vaguely remembered the truck, and he still felt chills from the shadowy demon he encountered. But through the haze's grip on his mind, other memories surfaced, memories long since pushed away. It was like a bandage slowly being pulled off his brain behind a wall of blurs.

He was once a human, a "reporter" was the title given to him by other humans. He lived in a human house made out of brick and concrete, and drove a human car. He raised his head and gazed upon the first streaks of dawn peeking through the chain link bars of his "enclosure". Yes, that's what it was called. And it's where he was currently trapped.

He groaned, hoisting himself up on four paws and shook himself off. He paced around in a circle, trying to get a good look at himself. He could see the specks of sunlight caught in his spotted fur and his tail bobbing as he walked. He was still a cheetah, much to his disappointment. His body felt unnatural, like he was watching

himself from afar. Yet, the sensations of claws pushing against dirt and the weight of his tail on his backside felt all too familiar as they gradually returned to him. Had he truly once worn clothes and gripped items with dextrous front paws? As he padded around his enclosure he was distracted by the sound of the door being unlocked.

It was the same intruders from yesterday, their faces as familiar as their scents. And yet, something was different about them. For whatever reason, as Flash studied them cautiously the danger signals in his mind never went off. Sure, they were a lot bigger and Flash was cautiously scanning the room for any sudden moves, but something deep down inside told him these animals weren't going to threaten him. They managed a safe distance as the female snow leopard began to speak.

“ *How was your night, Flash?*” Her voice was comforting, like a verbal bed of moss perfect for an afternoon nap. She gave an encouraging smile. “*Did you sleep well?*”

Flash couldn't respond, not at first. There was a tense silence as the five felines stared at each other. All Flash could manage was a weak “I-it was f-fine” before slinking to the back of the enclosure, tail tucked between his legs. He was scared, trembling against the bars of his cage. Scared of what he had seen, what the future might hold. Could these strangers help him?

“ I-I remembered. Not everything, but part of it.” He stammered quietly. At first he wondered if they'd heard him but gauging by their reactions that was a resounding yes.



“ You’re serious? You remember it? Your life as a human?” The male snow leopard interjected enthusiastically.

“ S-some of it. I had this really weird dream last night, where...” he stalled, not wanting to relive the nightmare he just had. Somehow he knew he wouldn’t see the shadowy phantom again but it still gave him shivers. He hurriedly continued in an effort to change the topic before someone else probed him further. “Well...uh...yeah, but anyways I think I remember a bit of it now. Most of it’s still foggy though.” His companions looked euphoric.

“Great!” The male snow leopard chuffed happily. “So what the heck happened to you?” This was immediately met with a paw swipe to his shoulder by his partner. He yowled and leapt back into a defensive crouch. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Josh you idiot, be more sensitive! You can imagine what he’s going through right now.” The female hissed angrily at the male, who folded into a submissive wide-eyed pose. She padded forward with an apologetic look on her muzzle.

“ I’m sorry, ignore him. I swear he acts like a total cub sometimes.”

“Hey!” Josh growled but the female hissed at him again and he fell silent.

“I’m sorry about all that, my name’s Abigail. I know this all seems quite scary to you and that’s ok.” The female snow leopard purred, gently padding up beside the shivering cheetah and nuzzling his head. Flash found his muzzle buried deep within her thick spotted fur.

“Aaack Mmglmf get off!” Flash pushed her away before he suffocated under her pelt. “Geez what’s wrong with you all? I’m fine!” Abigail trotted back a few steps and tilted her head.

“ It’s always tough when you wake up in a new body. Trust me, we know.” She nodded towards the other felines, and Flash gasped in realization.

“ You mean... you were humans too?” All four of them nodded. Flash scrunched up his face in confusion. He vaguely recalled searching for something, but there was nothing about other former humans.

“What the hell is going on? Are we about to be a part of some crazy circus here? Who did this to us?”

“Hopefully you’ll help us answer that question.” Abigail chuffed, arching her back as she stretched out on the floor. “ We’ll tell you what we know and you’ll tell us what you know. Once your memories fully return I hope we’ll know who did this to you.

Then we can rip their hearts out and devour them alive. Deal?" Flash thought for a moment, then smiled.

"Deal."

