

All Alaric wanted was a way home.

He didn't know the place; it was dark and dank and water came from places that were not wells, rivers, or the sky. Water lay in puddles on the hard, grey ground and seeped from grey hollow vessels that clung to amazing, immense houses that kissed the moon but had no one living inside of them. He knew that because the windows told him so; the houses had tables and papers and hunks of grey that fascinated the people inside, but no beds or kitchens. If he turned his head too quickly, a bright light would shine in his eyes. There were so many painful lights that he had to keep down my head and tiptoe carefully or they'd flash in his face and take him by surprise.

He would have been able to find a bus stop more easily if there had been fewer lights. The black-haired boy remembered needing a bus because a bus was what had brought him here. Buses were noisy and smelly and crowded, but necessary. There were tons of smaller buses passing by on the road, but none of them were stopping. They were more focused on the colored lights that punctuated where different roads intersected with each other. There was some pattern of the lights that directed the buses, but he couldn't figure it out. He couldn't figure out where the buses were going, either. They just disappeared.

His pupils constricted before he knew what was happening; he hissed and covered his eyes, the mop of black, coarse hair becoming tangled between his skinny fingers. The light from the small bus loomed closer and closer until the vehicle screeched to a stop on the side of the road.

Slowly, the boy opened his eyes; first, he saw his hand, washed out of its color in the bright glare of the bus's front lights. Bewildered and trembling, he lifted his gaze to the gaggle of young women pouring from the little bus. They giggled and shouted with excitement as they wobbled away from the bus on shoes that held their heels far off the ground with thin pieces of wood—or was it metal? He couldn't tell. Just as he turned to the tiny bus, it drove away.

Alaric blinked and rubbed his eyes, sighing to himself. There had to have been a driver in that bus who knew the city. So the boy sat at the side of the road and waited for another tiny bus.

In his peripheral range of hearing, he could hear the girls' high pitched chattering and giggling. He'd never heard so many noises at once before, but, amid the din of the city, it was soothing to have a natural, human sound. Humans were kind, even if they did smell a little strange, and they were interesting to watch. They came in different heights, shapes, and colors. It was much easier to identify two humans of the same color than it was to identify two cows or two cats. These humans in particular smelled cool and pungent, but much sweeter than the stench of the surrounding city.

Much to Alaric's dismay, the chatter was trickling off. He slowed his breathing, perking up his ears for any other sound—other humans, a dog, or a cat maybe—that he could focus on until another tiny bus pulled up. Instead, the clicking of the tall shoes approached him from behind, followed by a delicate tap on his shoulder.

"Um, 'scuse me?"

He turned reluctantly to look up at the young woman leaning over him and immediately startled, his heart pounding. He'd never seen a human who looked like this—her hair was curly and wiry, though the curls were meticulously arranged to be neat. She wore a skin-tight dress that stopped at her upper thigh, revealing her long, dark legs. Moreover, her eyes were round and outlined with black and other colors on her eyes. Her lips were full and bright pink, a shade he'd never seen on any human before.

He squirmed uncomfortably; she was literally all he could see, for behind her was a streetlight that illuminated her like a solar eclipse.

"You okay?" Although there was concern in her airy voice, her eyebrows were raised skeptically. When he said nothing, she continued. "Why're you sitting on the curb by yourself? You might get hit by a car."

"I'm fine," he said plainly.

"What?" The young woman scrunched up her face and cupped her ear. The boy repeated himself, but she did it again. "I can't hear you."

"I'm fine!" He snapped, own his voice booming in his ears.

"But—really?" The strange woman stepped next to him and crouched with her knees together despite her tiny dress and tall shoes. "I mean, well. It's Saturday night and you're all alone on the side of the road. Don't you have somewhere to be?"

Without changing his visage, he nodded. "I'm waiting for the bus to come back."

"The bus..." She furrowed her eyebrows, blinking. "Doesn't... come *here*. You have to wait at a bus stop."

"This is a bus stop." He blinked incredulously. "A small bus stopped here, and you and your friends came out." Only then did he sniff the air and realize that a single human was next to him. Where were the other humans?

Her eyes widened; she glanced to the side. The subtle movement of her head was enough for him to turn around and see the rest of the young women gathered a few feet away. Some eyed him with disdain, some with curiosity, and still others with—fear?

"That wasn't a bus." Her voice seemed somewhat deeper as she punctuated every word with a digestible pause. "That was a *car*." Every time she turned her head, she released little puffs of her hair-smell into his nose, which made Alaric want to gag. "Are you cold? Tired? Maybe I can take you somewhere safe. Okay?"

"I'm already trying to get somewhere safe." He pulled the corners of his lips into a frown, just as he'd been taught—don't pull them too far back or people will think you're about to bite them, Lisa had said. "I'm trying to find a bus and get home."

The fluffy-haired woman squinted at him incredulously. She glanced at her pack of human friends again, pointed to the side of her head, and twirled her finger almost urgently. A short human with purple hair

took something small and metal out of her bag. The boy reared up and scrambled back from the humans, baring his teeth. At his reaction, the fluffy-haired woman did the same.

“What’s your problem?!”

He bared his teeth and, with a tremulous finger, pointed to the small, metal object. “What is that.”

“A phone!” A few of them snapped at him, backing away.

A phone? Phones weren’t like that. They were big, plugged into walls, and had buttons. They had big screens on them so that you could see who was calling. Phones didn’t fit into bags and didn’t work when unplugged. “You’re lying. It’s a Taser, right?”

“No!”

The frantic movements made the cold, sweet smell scatter everywhere. The buses on the street were noisy and refused to stop. Everywhere there were lights and people zipping by as though he and his human adversaries were invisible. The shouts of the women were blending into its own cacophony that skidded above the din of the city like oil on water. Dizzy, he plastered his palms to his eyes in an effort to drown out everything. The talking was ceaseless. His mind reeled. Vaguely he heard the words, “call, hurry!” before the fluffy-haired woman’s voice was audible.

“We’re not gonna hurt you,” she said slowly, stepping forth from her friends. “We’re just gonna call some people who’ll take you somewhere safe—”

“Don’t call anyone! Leave me alone!” he roared, feeling his neck sprout with scales and his sabers jut out. His tongue burst forth, long and sticky and forked, to snatch the metal object out of the girl’s hand.

A chorus of yelps and shrieks greeted him as he retracted his tongue, unhinged his jaw, and devoured the device whole. Breathing heavily, he snarled and clenched his teeth, which no longer fit in his mouth but poked in every direction without, his jaw flared and thick. His body and hearing pulsed with his pounding heart.

“I want to go home!” he bellowed, flicking out his tongue and lunging at the group. “Home is safe! Take me home!”

The women shrieked, hobbling away on their tall, loud shoes. Somewhere in the distance were other voices—high ones, deep ones, gruff ones, and the noise of many shoes clapping on the ground. They wrapped up the cacophony and slowly sucked it down until all that was left was the din of the city.

Alaric gingerly placed his hands on the sides of his neck, where his scales were swelling and bristling. If only the city were quieter; he’d be able to think, then. If only there weren’t so many lights. He turned and pressed himself against one of the tall houses, breathing in the scent. Even the earth used to build the houses smelled horrible; he gagged and simply leaned sideways upon the wall, taking deep breaths.

He glanced at the side of the road again. The tiny bus still wasn't back, and there wasn't a new one to replace it. He curled up against himself and scrunched up his face, taking a deep breath and rocking back and forth. It would clear his head if he could for a while. Just a few minutes. He licked his eyelids and tucked his tongue back into his mouth, behind his teeth. A few more deep breaths and his fangs retracted once more, leaving in place his standard, human-looking jaw.

A wail pierced the dull din of the city, ripping him out of his trance with a start. The wail continued, bringing with it flashing blue and red lights. Everywhere the light ricocheted and burned his eyes. Clenching his teeth and growling, he covered his eyes with the palms of his hands. The lights and wails came closer and closer until the sound of brakes was virtually right by his ears.

He pulled his hands from his face and gasped. "Buses!"

There were three of them, blue and white, with flashing light bulbs on their roofs. Men in blue clothing burst from the vehicles. Faintly, he heard the words, "that's gotta be him," followed by the fluffy-haired woman exclaiming, "that's him!"

The humans in the blue clothes charged, cornering him against the wall. In defense, his jaw unlocked and his scales flared, teeth breaking forth from their sheaths once more as he roared. Immediately, there was a cloth over his head and hands grabbing his limbs and body; the world was dark and all he could smell was dirty, filmy cotton. He thrashed and snorted and hissed, opening his mouth to rip the fabric. Instead of a hole for more air, he got an arm around his neck, holding him still. Something sharp pricked his arm and the world began to melt and trickle into incoherent puddles.

"Ladies free... go... taking... station..."

Home... home... home...