

# TRANSFORM FICTION

ISSUE #0 - PILOT



Travertine  
Arrow Quivershaft  
MissMarilith  
Summon  
Here4Hooves  
Yana Caoránach

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## All that you touch, you change.

Rusty Lake: Seasons

This is it! Welcome to the Transform Fiction pilot! This is the start of a new project with the aim of sustaining a regular transformation-themed zine. Each issue will be an anthology of submitted stories. We would love this to become one of many new foci appearing within the furry community, a thing which can be posted, shared, and thus provide a thread to bring writers together.

Already, the response has been incredible. Our request for submissions resulted in a wide array of stories (both numerically and thematically), and it's been a pleasure working with the chosen authors. Please follow the links to explore more of their work!

Thanks to everyone for supporting this project. We don't want to speculate what the final vision of Transform Fiction will look like, but we're going to start simple and see what happens! This is really exciting and I hope you can share that with us!

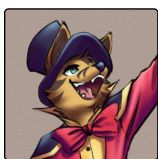
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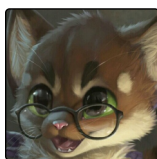
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### Feedback

We are looking for feedback! What did you like about this pilot, and what could we do better? Is there anything you want to see in future issues? To share your feedback, please drop a comment, or send us an email!

### Submissions

A call for submissions for issue #1 will be advertised in future, adding to a short backlog of stories. We'll first collect feedback on the pilot to roadmap the future of the project. Watch this space!

Are you an editor and/or graphic designer who'd like to volunteer towards making the next issue? Please reach out via email! We need more staff to grow the zine. Drop us a line and share an example of a previous project you've worked on!

Contact:

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## –Contents –

Page 1

### Going Off The Rails – Travertine

After spontaneously becoming self-aware, a light rail passenger car becomes so preoccupied with the nature of its passengers and the concept of girlhood that it accidentally transforms to anthropomorphic form. After being found by its favorite technician, Solenne, it adopts a euphoric new identity as Elle, a girl who is free to explore the world beyond the tracks.

Author Links: [A Tiny Raptor's Collar \(story\)](#)  
[A Tiny Raptor Toy \(story\)](#)  
[Throw Them A Bone \(story\)](#)

Page 14

### Workplace Harassment – Arrow Quivershaft

David confronts Kristine over their working relationship. Kristine is actually "Valkyrie", an overzealous superhero, who repeatedly summons David, her sidekick, to turn into his gryphon alternate form "SwiftStrike" to help stop minor crimes. Meanwhile, David is busy living his life.

Author Links: [hawkindawe.com \(blog\)](https://hawkindawe.com)  
[furafinity/arrowquivershaft](https://furafinity/arrowquivershaft)

Page 19

### The Fablemancer – MissMarilith

Aldous, a realm-renowned storyteller whose works quite literally draw audiences into them, works on his latest tale from the inside. Certain authorial leanings emerge.

Author Links: [furafinity/missmarilith](https://furafinity/missmarilith)

### Page 26 Writer Spotlight

We chat with Summon about their experiences creating stories within the community.

Page 30

### Suit Yourself – Summon

Len has been backed into a corner. Now a fugitive from the law, he's desperate to escape the space station he's trapped on. A local smuggler provides him with a way out that's as inventive as it is drastic. What at first appears to be a synthetic bodysuit is the perfect disguise, transforming Len into a Cenean – a humanoid lizard species with a reputation for being very, very sexually active.

Author Links: [Rode Hard, Put Away Wet \(story\)](#)  
[Posthuman \(story\)](#)  
[Diabolical Desires \(story\)](#)

Page 41

### Good Boys Get Views – Here4Hooves

Blake will do just about anything to make his online livestreaming career a success. When his audience suggests he try installing a strange new plugin with the ability to transform him into a dog, Blake is unprepared for how much his show is about to change.

Author Links: [furafinity/here4hooves](https://furafinity/here4hooves)  
[here4hooves.bsky](https://here4hooves.bsky)

Page 50

### Lighter Burdens – Yana Caoránach

Asher, a magical student, has much on his mind: his studies, his feelings. His world is about to change, but his roommate Luka is there for him.

Author Links: [yana.quest.bsky](https://yana.quest.bsky)  
[wellspring.neocities \(blog\)](https://wellspring.neocities)  
[Zero BPM \(story\)](#)

# Going Off The Rails

By *Travertine*

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After spontaneously becoming self-aware, a light rail passenger car becomes so preoccupied with the nature of its passengers and the concept of girlhood that it accidentally transforms to anthropomorphic form. After being found by its favorite technician, Solenne, it adopts a euphoric new identity as Elle, a girl who is free to explore the world beyond the tracks.

**Keywords:** TFTG / Self-Awareness / Humanoid Transformation / Trains / New Life

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It didn't know when it had first become aware.

For Car 103, experience started slight, and slow. The first thing it ever felt was a spark, jumping from catenary wire to pantograph current collector. This was a very difficult thing for Car 103 to understand, given it was the first feeling it had ever felt.

It contemplated pain and fear—without knowing the word for either—but when the spark jumped again, it knew neither was right. There was nothing to fear from the spark. It was a sharp and sudden feeling, yes, but also...

Power, flowing through its body. To lights and fixtures, through controls, into motors which moved doors and wheels; though once again, it didn't know the term for any of those things. The spark was life, it was sustenance.

Car 103 loved the spark.

Sensations became ever more familiar from that point on. Sometimes it moved, wheels spinning and pressing steel to hard steel while the rest of its body shook and rumbled. Sometimes it came to a stop with a hiss and squeal, and the energy from its wheels once again became the wonderful spark.

It became aware of an outside, which sometimes felt warm light, sometimes felt cool dark, and always felt the flow of wind across its painted panels. The first time it felt the countless tiny impacts of rain, they came as a shock. Doubly so when water pooled and ran cool and wet down its form. But by the third time, rain was a familiar thing, and Car 103 relished it.

It became aware of an inside, too. Many things within it called for the spark—though none so hungrily as the motors did—but many more things shifted loose, sometimes entering, sometimes exiting, sometimes simply lingering for a time. 103 felt them in how their presence subtly changed the distribution of its weight.

It was from inside that Car 103 first came to know words.

"Now arriving: Westlake Station. Doors to my right."

103 had heard those sounds hundreds of times before, they came from some of the things which needed the spark. But this time, it understood. That wasn't just noise, those were words! And those many things—speakers—were part of it! Car 103 had been the one to speak those words!

Not long after, 103 settled into true contentment. Purpose. Pantographs drew the spark, which turned the wheels, which moved the chassis, which accepted the passengers, and the speakers told them where they were. An eternal routine, stop after stop, back and forth. This was what life was; this was the way of things. Car 103 was of use to many people, and it was good.

The first time it had been taken from wonderful purpose, emptied of all passengers, and pulled into a large building, it had been filled with despair. Purpose was to to move, and to run, and even the brief stabling at the railyard some nights felt like a denial of purpose. The depot was something else altogether—a long nothing!

Car 103 changed its mind when the technicians arrived.

It didn't know how it knew the word, which like all words it knew seemed to enter its mind on its own. But technicians they were, and it was their job to service Car 103. Parts were checked and cleaned. Wheels it hadn't even realized were worn down to cones were swapped for fresh, healthy cylinders. By the time the technicians were done, 103 felt like a new train!

And after most of the technicians had left, one remained. There were many words 103 still didn't know, but it knew this technician was like it: a thing covered in hard, shiny panels, not just the fluffy stuff so many of the passengers were clad in.

The panel-covered technician approached 103's front, put its hands on its plates, and began stroking.

"Good girl... you're doing great out there. I'm proud of you."

And then the last technician was gone, and 103 had a new word to make sense of.

*Girl? What was a 'girl?'*

The next time it returned to the route, Car 103 couldn't stop thinking about that question. What was a girl?

For some reason, it found its focus drifting from the path, and onto the platform. The passengers, the technicians, the operators... why had it never thought about them? Car 103 was one of many like itself—it passed cars going the other way on the rails—and at first, it had thought that's just what living things

were. They had panels and windows, headlights and wheels, and pantographs to collect the life-giving spark.

But the passengers, they weren't like that. They had no windows or headlights. They had no wheels and followed no rails. Many of them lacked pantographs, and even those with something close never touched them to the wire; never sought the spark.

The passengers came in all shapes and sizes: tall, short, wide, skinny. Some trailed parts of themselves like additional cars, swaying back and forth. And most importantly, they came in every color there was. Brown, white, black, blue, red, green, pink. Every passenger 103 spied on the platform was in a new color, or several!

It was fascinated with their forms. Why didn't they need wheels? What were the things called that carried them around, the long things that bent in three places and alternated movements? What were the things on top that swiveled around, pointing in different directions from their body? 103 bent in one place—the middle—but passengers bent in so, so many more!

And, for a reason 103 couldn't quite manage to explain, it believed some of these—the colorful, articulated things it knew as passengers—were girls.

103 didn't know the word for longing, or the word for envy either. It felt both just the same.

As those emotions stirred in a car once content to simply follow the rails, something shifted in its core. A surge of potential, a thing very like the spark and yet not, began to swell and spool.

Power built in the heart of 103, and bided its time, as the car watched passengers come and go, and silently yearned to understand their lives.

103 didn't know of magic; it didn't even know the word. However, magic didn't need to be understood to be used. Among those passengers who entered and exited every day, a handful were mages. Some carried magic with them in crystals, while still others held it curled in their core; a well of mana which had been with them from birth, which they drew on with intuitive ease. If it had been able to ask them, those mages could've easily warned 103 about what would happen next. Many young mages used their magic before they knew what they were doing. Reflex casting, it was often called.

103 couldn't ask though, even if it had known to do so. All it could say was a final canned "Doors to my right," before the operator spoke through it and asked all passengers to exit the vehicle, as this was the final stop.

That meant it was time for the depot.

103 swept through stations where it would normally stop, and soon saw the familiar sight of the railyard below. It slid down a ramp and into the yard. The car lamented that for the next day it couldn't look longingly at the colorful bodies of

the girls on the platform... but at least maybe it would see that technician again, the one with the shiny panels who said such nice things.

And it was there, in the dark of the shed, with its operator departed and not a single soul around, that it happened.

There were no true universals in intuitive magic; every two mages were different. But there was one consistent truth: nothing made magic easier—nor more wild—than strong emotion. And envy and longing were quite powerful emotions indeed.

That potential which had swirled and grown within Car 103 for months, unnoticed and unfelt, finally made itself known. The car's fixtures were all off—no lights, no speakers, no motors drawing power—but it still felt the racing tingle of something like the spark flooding its copper veins. Mana filled every inch of the train, humming with power and filling 103's mind with both curiosity and alarm. Then—like a stretched-thin rubber band finally snapping—it all released in a second.

It was dark in the depot, and yet still 103 went blind. The color of magic—something most living things had never seen—drowned out the world.

Lightning consumed 103, more powerful and more aggressive than the spark. It arced and danced across its panels in great forked bolts. It stung its controls. It tore its very form apart bolt by bolt. 103 lost track of its wheels, motors, windows and doors, its pantographs, and its very chassis. Time didn't exist for the car, blind to the world and unable to feel its body. The storm could have lasted an hour, or passed in the blink of an eye. But after however long it had been, the lightening winked out all at once, the sensations stopped...

And 103 collapsed to the ground, as its limbs gave out underneath it.

Wait, limbs? What were 'limbs?'

Before its vision had even returned, 103 pushed itself up. It would only later realize how strange that was. It had always moved, but only when an operator made it. Hands on controls, which told wheels to spin, or doors to open and close. Still, agency came naturally to it, and as the dimly-lit depot returned to view, it felt the slender, smooth panels of a sturdy left thigh beneath the fingers of a brand new right hand.

It took finding the joint—a knee—for the reality of the situation to come crashing home.

Car 103 let out a yelp of surprise—half buzz and half whine, like speaker feedback—and tumbled to one side. Hard panels knocked against cold metal, and 103 turned to look at what it had struck.

Grey metal, shiny on top but rusted red on one side. Car 103 ran its hands down the smoothed surface of a long, ramrod-straight bar. It knew this feel. This was a rail; part of its path! And yet... 103 looked to the other side, and spied the

other rail. It reached out and touched that one too. It was so far away... too far away! Its rails had never been so big!

The first thing Car 103 thought was that the rails had gotten bigger somehow. It was only once it looked up and spied the towering form of something painted white, blue, and green, that it realized that wasn't the case.

It was Car 103 that had gotten smaller.

It stood up, and felt its legs unfold beneath it. It knew how to use them somehow—perhaps from watching thousands of passengers come and go every day—and yet it was fascinated by the feel of them. How many joints bent or rolled, how many components had to tense or flex. Servos and pistons whirred and slid, but the end result was far more elegant and complicated than simply spinning wheels or sliding doors.

A dozen steps brought it to the foot of that car. The massive vehicle loomed overhead, taller than it was, and hundreds of times its size. 103 reached up with a hand to touch it.

*This is me?* it thought.

A flash of orange caught 103's eyes, and it started, only to realize something was reflected in the other car's polished side.

It was a figure, tall and slender, poised atop two of those many-jointed limbs. A long tail dragged to its rear, and its body was coated in panels painted white, blue, and green, with something flexible and greyish-black showing through the gaps. It had one of those swiveling things—a head—with glowing orange dot-matrix eyes on the front, and a pantograph collector on top. One arm hung to its side, and another reached out, as if trying to touch 103 from within the reflection.

In shape and size, the thing in the reflection could only be one thing: a passenger.

Car 103 yelped. The reflection's mouth opened too. 103 froze, then slowly lifted its other arm, and watched the reflection do the same.

That was the moment everything came crashing home, and 103 truly realized what it had become. It didn't know how, or why, but the bodies on the platform it had stared at so longingly from the rails? It now had one of its own.

Any further reflection on its reflection was cut off as 103 heard a sound.

"Hello? Is someone in here?"

A voice, echoing in the mostly empty shed. 103 recognized it. That was the technician with the shiny panels! The one who always spoke to it!

103 turned, saw a distant figure, and felt its face change, twisting into a new shape to match its rising mood. It felt phantom passengers dancing in its chest.

What should it do? Memories of something it had watched dozens of passengers do on the platform came instantly to mind.

Car 103 faced the form, raised one arm high, and waved, as it took a step forward, and left its rails for the very first time.

\*  
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Solenne—silverfish woman and proud Sound Transit maintenance technician—hadn't quite known what to expect when she'd heard the noise.

It was the end of the day, but she had stayed the extra few minutes she always did. She liked to say goodbye to the trains before heading home, and her work was good enough that the managers indulged her. To Solenne, though, it simply made sense. Objects and machines did good, loyal work, and they deserved thanks for it in equal measure. It didn't really matter if they could understand her or not, they deserved it just the same.

It was being near the train shed after most technicians clocked out which let her hear the noise. Even now, she wasn't sure if it had been the sound of something breaking, or whether it had been a scream or shout. But she did know it had come from inside.

Solenne pushed the door open, and peered cautiously around the corner. *This is how you die, Sol*, she thought, as she chased a strange noise into a dark room. *This is the end of the line.*

Still, curiosity got the better of her. Besides, what if someone needed help? She was probably the only one still here.

"Hello? Is someone in here?"

Solenne heard movement. Something shifted with a clang. A dark form moved in the dim light, and orange eyes spun to face her, glowing like embers in the dark. Solenne's breath hitched with terror.

Then, inexplicably, the figure raised one arm, and waved, as if greeting an old friend from the opposite platform while waiting for a train.

Bafflement was a conservative word for what Solenne now felt. Despite her better judgement, she reached over, and hit the light.

Instantly the room was illuminated, massive and blinding overhead lamps reflecting off shiny train windows and rows of steel rails. Solenne squinted, shielding her eyes with two of her arms.

And in the distance, the figure cried out "Ack!" and threw an arm over their face.

Solenne stared. It was hard not to. She didn't think it was convention season, and the depot was nowhere close to downtown, but she couldn't imagine another reason she'd be seeing someone in full robot cosplay, standing in the middle of her train shed.

"This isn't a public building," Solenne said, before she could think better of it. "What are you doing here?"

In response, the figure perked up, moving far too naturally for someone in a suit of fake plastic plates. "I'm in for service!" they said in a chipper voice, with just the slightest edge of static to it, like playback from an aging speaker. "You're the nice technician, right?"

Solenne couldn't help it—she stepped closer. The figure was undeniably strange, but they didn't seem hostile... and, for some reason, Solenne felt a strange... familiarity.

As she grew closer, the silverfish figured out why. The figure wasn't just clad in white plates; they were adorned in blue and turquoise-green—Sound Transit's livery painted down their side. Tiny doors were etched onto the figure's tail, and three-lamp headlights sat just above their mouth. A wide pantograph projected from the top and back of their head, a smaller mirror of those on the trains stabled in the shed. If this was a cosplay, it wasn't a robot—it was one of Link Light Rail's Series 1 LRVs.

As she approached, the figure angled its head down, and bright overhead lighting cast a sharp glare off windscreen glass. Digital eyes followed her movements, each a matrix of orange-yellow dots. Overhead, text written in the same scrolled across a rectangular marquee.

#### DEPOT - GREETING MAINTENANCE TECHNICIAN

"I... what are you?"

The figure cocked its head, nearly 45 degrees to one side. A forked tongue—seemingly built from articulated sections of some shiny, synthetic material—flicked at the air like a snake's. Those dot-matrix eyes shrank to horizontal lines for half a second; a digital blink for a fur with neither eyelids or eyes.

"Car 103!" the figure replied, chipper, after a moment's thought. "In for servicing!"

\*  
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"Where are we going?"

Solenne grit her mandibles. If there was anything she'd learned about 'Car 103' in the last couple of minutes, it was that nothing dampened their mood, nor their insatiable thirst for knowledge.

Solenne had reacted as any reasonable fur might've to finding a four million dollar piece of equipment had disappeared on her watch: she'd panicked. She'd taken the primary suspect's hand in two of her own and run for the door, with the train... snake... thing stumbling after her with a yelp.

She'd 'appropriated' a trenchcoat left by some other fur and thrown it around Car 103, then torn from the building, dragging the stranger after her. It was only once they'd reached the bus station that she realized what she'd done.

"Wow, where are we?" said the snake(?), an open-mouthed expression of wonder on their face as they looked around a dingy road next to an industrial backlot.

"Aren't... shouldn't you be concerned?!" Solenne exclaimed. "I just... abducted you!"

"Why? I trust you!" the person calling themselves Car 103 replied. "You're the nice technician!"

Finally, Solenne remembered what the strange robot had said before.

"Why are you calling me that?"

"You're the one that thanks me every time I come in for service!" Car 103 replied, as if the answer should've been obvious. They hadn't stopped smiling. "I recognized your panels!" They touched Solenne's abdomen, on the tergum of her fourth segment. Metal clicked against chitin.

"My... those are my plates," she corrected without thinking, before realizing how ridiculous she sounded. How could anyone not know an insect has plates?

In response, Car 103 cocked their head again. "Oh, I didn't know that. I thought you had panels like me!" Car 103 helpfully tapped their side, making a hollow, metallic thunk. Solenne stared.

"So, are you actually—" she didn't want to voice it. If she said her leading theory out loud, someone would jump out from behind a car with a camera, and laugh at her for being so gullible.

Car 103 cocked their head again, dot-matrix eyes wide and bright. "Am I what?"

Solenne swallowed. That face... she couldn't ignore it. She'd have to live with being made fun of.

"Are you really passenger Car 103?"

The stranger nodded, eyes reshaping to twin bottomless triangles—a digital happy face. "Yes! I came into the depot for servicing, then there was a bright flash, and now I'm a passenger!"

Car 103 beamed at Solenne, what it considered a comprehensive explanation successfully delivered. Solenne kept staring.

"I... how is that possible?" Without thinking or asking, Solenne reached out, and touched Car 103's side. It felt identical to the metal of the trains she worked with. She touched the squishy dark material within a joint, and it felt like the rubber accordion diaphragms which allowed articulated cars to bend.

"H-Hey, that feels weird!" laughed Car 103, and Solenne withdrew her hand in an instant, antenna and setae quivering as she feared she'd crossed a boundary. "And I don't know! It started like a normal day, but at the end, this happened!"

That line was enough to give Solenne pause.

"Wait, like a normal day? You remember being a train?"

Car 103 nodded. "Yeah! I've been a train for a long time! I do a really good job running the route!" The robot beamed at her. "You said so yourself!"

Solenne's head spun. One of their cars—one that she'd worked on—had been aware the whole time! Was that every rail car? Was it just this one?

Oblivious to the tumult within Solenne's head, Car 103 followed its own twisty road of logic, recalling the words Solenne had said again and again.

"Um, what's a girl?"

103 may have been the train, but it was Solenne's thoughts that derailed in a great mangled wreck of screaming metal.

"What?"

Car 103 remained chipper. "A girl! You said I'm a 'good girl'. So, what's a girl?"

Solenne felt her face heat. Her antenna flagged like semaphores.

"Well, I..."

Solenne didn't even know how to begin answering a question like that. Overhead, Car 103 looked on eagerly.

"...I am," she finished lamely.

Car 103's response was explosive.

"I knew it!" it exclaimed, voice echoing down the empty street. "I knew some of the passengers were girls! I was right!"

Car 103 pumped two fists to the air, celebrating its deduction, then looked back down at Solenne with a wide grin. Its marquee scrolled a single word on loop.

GIRL - GIRL - GIRL - GIRL

"Am I a girl too?"

Another question Solenne was unprepared for; it caught her off guard. But she saw something familiar in the stranger's eyes—a barely understood need and fragility both, an expression she'd spent years failing to understand in the reflection of an unhappy silverfish boy. So she said what she'd so desperately needed to hear herself almost a decade ago.

"You can be whatever you want. No one's allowed to tell you otherwise."

She didn't even get to see 103's reaction, as the train swept her off her feet, and into a crushing hug.

Solenne blushed, and her setae quivered. 103's panels were hard, but so were her own plates, so this felt comfortingly like being embraced by another bug. One antenna boldly danced forward on its own, gently grazing 103's pantograph—something Solenne had jokingly compared to antennae many times.

103 jolted slightly at the touch, then set Solenne down. They reached up with one hand to touch the part of them the antenna had grazed, a fresh expression of wonder on their face

*She's so cute*, Solenne's mind supplied, before waiting for the bug's permission. The blush turned hot.

"I-I, um..." Solenne stammered, as she slammed her eyes up from 103's suddenly very interesting body and back onto her robotic face. She scrambled for a fresh topic. "How should I refer to you?"

In response, 103 cocked her head, forked tongue adorably stuck a few inches from her mouth. On the marquee, one word looped: 'REFER?' Solenne swallowed.

"I mean, should I use they? Or... she?"

"Is that what girls use?"

"Well they can use anyth-" Solenne cut herself off. *Don't confuse her!* "Girls usually go by she and her."

103 beamed, and nodded hard enough to make per pantograph bob.

"That one! I want to use what girls use!" The train(?) paused for a second. "And it sounds like my brakes!"

Solenne was about to reply, but in that moment, the bus arrived, with a perfectly-timed hiss of air brakes.

"That's our... we need to get on," Solenne explained, before hissing under her breath. As if a train didn't know how mass transit worked!

"She... She..." 103 muttered to herself, as Solenne pulled her through the doors of the bus. 103 didn't yet know the word for what she was feeling... but it was euphoria.

Solenne fumbled for her ORCA card, well aware she was holding up the bus.

"Can I swipe twice for my friend?" she asked the driver... but he wasn't paying attention. Instead, the haggard-looking sparrow was staring open mouthed at the robot which had boarded his bus.

"What... are you?"

103 jolted from her reverie, turning to grin at the driver. "Hi! I'm a Series 1 LRV!" She paused for a second. "And a girl!" 103 recalled something she had seen passengers do many times, as she watched with envy from the tracks. She held out her hand. "Nice to meet you!"

The poor, mystified sparrow took her hand on instinct, only jolting back to his senses as the train shook his wing thrice as vigorously as he'd expected.

"Nice to meet you..." His mind churned through 103's energetic words in search of a pattern. "...Elle Arvey?" he eventually tried.

When 103 turned to look at Solenne, she was beaming. Dot matrix eyes glowed.

A name. Elle wasn't sure how she knew, but that had been a name!

"Elle Arvey!" she exclaimed, "That's me! I'm Elle Arvey!"

Old anxiety urged Solenne to get quietly to her seat already... but Car 103's—Elle's—enthusiasm was infectious. She cracked her mandibles and smiled right back.

To their side, the poor sparrow tried—with immense difficulty—to pull his wing from Elle's tight mechanical grip.

"Can you, uh, can you girls please take your seats?" he tried, voice pinched and plaintive, as if hoping the script would save him.

Solenne babbled out an apology, scanning her card once—the driver didn't correct her—then dragged Elle with her to the back. She took a seat, and Elle copied her, repeating the motion slowly while watching her legs bend with blatant wonder.

And the entire time, Solenne stared. The glint off her plates, the cool tones of her livery, amber running lights glowing on a face painted with a pure wonder towards the entire world. The word cute came to mind again, and proved impossible to shake. This train—this girl—the one she'd been deep in the mechanical guts of a dozen times in the past with grease on her sclerites, now sat beside her in a sleek, serpentine form which could give her a hug. Her antennae wiggled out a subtle little interest-twitch, betraying the blush otherwise obscured by her fuzz

"So..." Solenne eventually said.

"Hmm?" Elle looked over. In some kind of transit echolalia her marquee now matched the bus's, text bearing the next stop on the line. "Yes?"

"You don't have anywhere to stay, right?"

It was a stupid question. Car 103 did have somewhere to stay; Solenne had dragged her out of there as fast as her legs would carry her. And Elle...

For the first time, Elle wilted slightly.

"Do I need that?"

"Yes," Solenne replied, perhaps too simply. "You'll want to get out of the weather."

*You're talking about the weather?! Get a grip, Sol!*

Elle frowned. "But I like how the rain feels!"

Solenne grimaced. "You can't just sleep outside! You need a—" how should she explain this to a train? "—A depot."

Elle's eyes widened. "Passengers have those?!"

"People," Solenne corrected, "And we call them houses. But yes."

"How do I get one?"

Simple, earnest curiosity. Solenne's stomach flipped. This was the moment she had to shoot her shot.

"Well, I thought maybe it would be easier if you stayed... with me?"

At some point, Solenne had squeezed her eyes closed. She forced them back open, feeling the vice-like clench of nervous mandibles as she looked up at Elle.

Rendered in two trios of dot-matrix slashes below the train's eyes, Elle was sporting her first-ever bright orange blush.

"I can do that?"

"I mean, that's why I—hrrrrgk!"

Another crushing hydraulic hug. Solenne's terga creaked.

"Thank you!" the train exclaimed, loud enough to be heard at the front of the bus. Across her forehead, Elle's marquee switched: "NICE TECHNICIAN'S HOUSE."

"My name is Solenne, by the way."

"Solenne! Oh wow, that's such a good name!"

*Yes, I'm quite proud of it,* Solenne thought to herself. Even after all these years, it still felt wonderful to hear it used. The silverfish smiled, and relaxed into the hug, while overhead, her new friend's marquee updated to bear her name.

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A number of passed stops and one transfer later the two disembarked Link Light Rail Car 225—something Elle had looked around at with wonder.

"Is this what I look like on the inside?"

Elle was still frozen now, standing on the platform and staring at what she'd once been. She remembered sitting on those tracks, happy to do her job, but staring with longing at the passengers on the platform.

And now she stood there. A passenger. A girl.

"You can do it too, you know!" she called to the train, as its doors slid closed.  
"You can be anything you want!"

"Elle!"

The train turned at her name. Her expression was already bright, but it still brightened when she set eyes on Solenne. The bug's heart did a somersault.

"Let's go," she managed to force out.

She held out a hand, and Elle accepted it without question. Another somersault, and a belly full of butterflies.

Elle waved to the train as it pulled out of the station with a squeal of wheels, then turned to follow Solenne, and begin her new life as a passenger... and a girl.

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# Workplace Harassment

By *Arrow Quivershaft*

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David confronts Kristine over their working relationship. Kristine is actually "Valkyrie", an overzealous superhero, who repeatedly summons David, her sidekick, to turn into his gryphon alternate form "SwiftStrike" to help stop minor crimes. Meanwhile, David is busy living his life.

**Keywords:** Superhero / Spoof / Gryphon Transformation

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David knocked on the door, rapping sharply on it and pulling in his breath as he stood there. After a few moments, the door was answered by an occupant; Kristine stood there, hair down to her shoulders.

"David? What are you doing here?" She said in alarm. "We can't be seen together!"

"That's what this is about, Kristine. May I come in?" He started in without waiting for an answer, which got more surprise from her, but she didn't stop him.

Walking into the main room, David eyed the police scanner sitting on the coffee table, on but at low volume. He briefly considered kicking it to the floor, but decided against it. Heading over to the couch, he looked at Kristine, who was shocked at his audacity. "May I sit?" he asked, pointing.

"...go ahead." she said, after a moment. She didn't seem to expect this behavior from him. She walked over to her own easy chair and sat down.

"What brings you over, David?" she asked, trying to be pleasant.

"Kristine, you know what brings me over."

"No, I don't."

"OK, well, you SHOULD."

"..." Kristine thought for a moment. "I really don't, David. Or should I call you Swiftstrike?" she said, glancing at him.

David winced as she played that card. He knew she would, but not this early...he continued. "Cut the crap, Kristine. You need to stop wasting my time."

"Swiftstrike, I have no idea what you're talking about."

David sighed, facepalming for a moment. After looking back up, he gave her a level gaze. "Really, Kristine? You don't know how you could possibly be wasting my time? How about interrupting me at school? Or at work? Or other times when I'm doing things or have plans?"

"Swiftstrike, when you joined me...you knew there were going to be sacrifices and inconveniences."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I understood that, but lately...lately, I think you've gotten overzealous in your quest."

"How DARE you, David! I suppose you'd rather people get hurt!"

"That's not what I said, Kristine! Calm down!"

She relaxed after a moment, then stared at him. "What do you mean, then?"

"Well, two days ago, you called me while I was on the phone. With my mother. My SICK mother. And four days before that, I was taking an exam at school. And a week ago, it was when I was about to go out on a date. She dumped me, because that's the fifth time I've stood her up."

"David, there were CRIMES happening. It's my job, and yours, to stop them!"

"Crimes are relative, Kristine. Really. I think you're abusing your privileges."

"I swore to stop crime, David. You agreed to help."

"Yeah, that...look, I don't mind getting inconvenienced by stopping a murder, or a mugging, or a bank robbery. Hell, even a gas station getting knocked over. But lately...Kristine, that hasn't been it."

"David..."

"Seriously, do Swiftstrike and Valkyrie have to show up at every crime?"

"YES!"

"No. They don't. Look...you know why I mentioned those incidents, Kristine? Those aren't the only times I've been inconvenienced, but they were some of the worst."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the phone call, you called me out to rescue a cat. From a tree."

"...it was stuck."

"Yeah, but you don't need to be a superheroine to free a cat from a tree! And you definitely don't need your sidekick!"

Kristine brushed her hair back, looking nervous. "And the others?"

"When I was taking an exam, that was was an old lady. You summoned me to help her cross the street."

"It's a public service! And a week ago, there was a theft in progress we stopped!"

"VENDING MACHINE FRAUD IS NOT THEFT!" David exploded. "You're summoning me when I'm not needed and you KNOW IT. And frankly, I'm getting

utterly sick of it. I can't live a normal life like this, and there's no benefit for me in being your sidekick if you're going to abuse your power like that."

"You should've thought of that before you joined! I can't work without a sidekick, and you volunteered! It doesn't work that way, you can't just quit on me!

"What, that you were going to totally abuse my trust I placed in you, for your own glory? I should've thought of that? Goddammit, Kristine! This was supposed to be a meeting of equals, not a boss-servant relationship!"

Kristine frowned a bit. "It's not my fault that you didn't consider how hard it is to do this. Still...maaaaaaaaybe you have a point...I'll have to..."

Suddenly, the police scanner kicked in, interrupting Kristine.

"Robbery in progress...suspect armed and dangerous...corner of Fifteenth and Pine, at the gas station. All units. Civilians, do not attempt to intervene..."

"YES!" Kristine shouted. "ANOTHER CRIME!" She jumped up excitedly. "COME ON, SWIFTSTRIKE!"

"Oh, no! Not again!" David said, but he was already feeling the vertigo wash over him. He staggered backwards, trying to stay on his feet. He was not very successful, falling over onto all fours in short order. His hands metamorphosed into large aquiline talons, a beak grew out of his face, his legs turned into paws and hind legs...he tried to protest, but his speech came out as irritated squawks. He looked back over himself in irritation, and indeed, just like every other time Kristine did this to him, he was a large, quadrupedal gryphon. Large enough to serve as a steed for Valkyrie, as soon as she finished getting changed. He turned back to look at her, and didn't see her. But he felt her, as she jumped onto his back, landing right behind his wings and grabbing onto his fur.

"Let's go, Swiftstrike!" she said, urging him forward. David moaned internally, but obeyed, starting for the door and pushing out, making sure to close it behind him, hearing the lock click shut.

As they moved out into the streets, he flapped his wings, taking off from ground level up to the sky. He looked down, laser vision focusing in as he tried to see the street signs. He knew where it was from the ground, but things were a bit different up here. But it didn't take too long for him to get his bearings and tack over towards the gas station, coming down fast towards the roof in a dive. He flared his wings as he came down, braking to a stop, and landing on the roof with a thump, clearly announcing their arrival to whatever robbers were inside.

Kristine jumped off his back, landing easily on the roof and materializing a large spear in her hand as she walked towards the edge of the roof. She jumped down and across to the gas station's overhang above the pumps, trying to get a view of the inside. David moved around the back, looking for an entrance as he hopped down to the ground, and found a service door. He figured it'd be audible,

so he braced, and then smashed through it into the station's back end, making a lot of racket.

The noise distracted the robbers, and Kristine jumped down towards the front bay window, and jumped through that as well, shattering the glass into a thousand pieces. A gunshot went off, but there was no scream, so David moved around into the main area for a pincer with Kristine. There were two of them, but only one gun between them, so David charged at that one first. Another gunshot, but it went wide. David slammed into the robber and bowled him over, and the gun went flying away, skittering under a cabinet. He grabbed the man with a foretalon and held him down, slamming him against the ground once to make sure it was clear he meant business...and demonstrate how strong he was. Meanwhile, Kristine closed on the other thief, trying to hold him up at speartip.

"You won't get me, Valkyrie" he sneered, and with a sudden movement, brought around a stun gun and hit the metal haft of the spear with it. The pulse traveled up, and made Kristine jerk around from the electrical current. Then he was on top of her, trying to take full advantage of the opening as the spear clattered to the floor.

Kristine screamed incoherently for help, and David heard. Conflicted for a moment...but he knew he had to. He slammed his crook down against the ground one more time, hoping that he'd knocked him out, or failing that, that he understood he would be less than pleased if he tried anything. David pounced off him and over the counter, landing on top of the pile of Kristine, the thug, and himself. 14 limbs and over 700 pounds of creature between the three of them, the stun gun skittered off. Kristine panted, trying to catch her breath, and moaning in pain at an injury. David grabbed the thug's head and slammed it on the counter, releasing it as he collapsed.

And it was over. The robbery foiled, two thugs soon to be in custody, and Swiftstrike had done it all. Kristine shakily stood up, and David looked over.

"Oh god...I think I broke something...come on, Swiftstrike, the public can't see me like this."

Leave? Now? They could get away, and regardless, he EARNED this. He shook his head. Kristine opened her mouth to argue, but the sound of approaching sirens indicated there wasn't time for it. She grabbed her spear, ran out the front door and started limping to the ambulance arriving.

David meanwhile grabbed the two crooks and pulled them together into one spot, holding them down with a talon each for when the cops arrived. He didn't have to wait long.

"Swiftstrike! Did you do this?"

David nodded, looking proud, as gryphons naturally do..

"You really saved the day, Swiftstrike. Maybe you should go into this business solo!"

David laughed inwardly at that. But maybe someday...

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The next day, the papers blared, "Valkyrie injured in battle; Swiftstrike a hero!", as David smugly sipped coffee in the morning. He hadn't heard from Kristine yet today...and he wasn't sure he was going to. It would be a welcome relief at least. Then again...he'd got to spend the rest of the day taking photos, and playing with children who ADORED him, overwatched by nervous parents. Maybe it wasn't ALL bad, being the underestimated sidekick...

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# The Fablemancer

By *MissMarilith*

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Aldous, a realm-renowned storyteller whose works quite literally draw audiences into them, works on his latest tale from the inside. Certain authorial leanings emerge.

**Keywords:** Fantasy / Imagination / Splitting / Male-to-Female / Dragon Transformation

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Aldous the Fablemancer sipped his mug of Bartleby's Invigorating Elixir and wished, not for the first time, that his favorite brand of coffee had a better name.

Sliding on his fuzzy slippers, he pulled apart the bedroom blinds and noted to his dismay that it was perfect procrastination weather. The leaves were beginning to turn and the departing summer was dragging its feet, creating a colorful, toasty morning that would devour his productivity if he gave it an inch.

He settled for taking his breakfast on the porch, greeting Pendleton as he passed through the kitchen. The kobold gave the slightest nod of acknowledgement, his focus occupied by the eggs and sausage bubbling away in their frypan. Aldous paused a moment to watch him dole out seasoning with the precision of a watchmaker.

Aldous had scarcely unfolded his standing tray and settled into his chair when Pendleton joined him, neatly trimmed foot claws clacking against the wood in perfect 4/4 time.

"What's on the menu today, my good man?" said Aldous.

"Miss Keating stopped by yesterday evening to drop off an extra carton of eggs, so I took the traditional route with today's breakfast, sir. Eggs over easy, pork sausage links, and lightly buttered toast from Mister Dubois' bakery."

Aldous had long since given up on telling Pendleton that "sir" was unnecessary, as were his crisp black suit and the imported pants he'd had modified to accommodate his tail. Pendleton took great pride in being the very model of a butler and, Aldous thought, at least some joy in how uncomfortable it made his employer.

"Miss Keating," Aldous murmured, chewing on the name along with the sausage. "Ah, Violetta from down the lane? The one with the chickens?"

"The same, sir. She told me they were, quote, 'laying more eggs than she knew what to do with' and that you were free to stop by anytime you found yourself

short." Pendleton glanced to one side and leaned slightly forward, too professional to be conspiratorial but at least mildly clandestine. "If I may be so bold, sir, I think she's rather taken with you."

"A lovely thing like her? Not to question your judgment, but surely she can do better than some decrepit old storyteller."

"Perhaps her definition of 'better' doesn't quite align with yours, sir."

Aldous gave a noncommittal hum and tore off a piece of toast, dabbing it into the mix of runny yolk and sausage grease. Between bites he asked, "Anything in the mail?"

Pendleton reached into his suit pocket and pulled out an envelope, its wax seal vaguely recognizable as some royal crest or other. After some careful claw work, he unfolded the message within and Aldous watched his slitted eyes glide down the text.

"The Lady Herbova requests a performance for her tenth anniversary celebration on the eighteenth of Minhael. She expects approximately five dozen guests and offers your usual rate plus travel expenses, with an additional forty percent if you also allow her and her husband a private show afterwards."

"Is the Lady Herbova..." Aldous gestured vaguely with the last scrap of toast, fishing for the right word. "...evil?"

"No more than your average noble, sir. I don't believe there are any moral or ethical dilemmas to consider."

"Eighteenth of Minhael, you said?"

"I did say, sir."

"And today is the first of Kolhael, yes?"

"It is, sir."

"That leaves..." Aldous' mouth worked silently, fingers rising and falling with unseen arithmetic. "Eight weeks to work," he said just as Pendleton moved to assist. "Why, that's plenty of time to whip up something new. Do you think she'd be open to a comedy? I haven't made one in ages but I'm sure I've still got the touch."

Though Pendleton's snout betrayed little of his emotions, Aldous had known him long enough to recognize a grimace. "She specifically requests a performance of Holtkopf's Folly, sir."

The hated name dawdled in the air between them for a moment before a breeze carried it to Aldous' protesting ears. His face contorted bit by bit, muscle memory kicking in to shape his trusty glower, and he sucked in a deep breath.

Then paused.

"Would you indulge me, Pendleton?" he said, pushing aside his brewing fury for the sake of an earnest request.

"Of course, sir," Pendleton replied with a smile. The expression wasn't natural to him, but Aldous knew he'd spent long hours working out exactly how much to bare his teeth before it became intimidating. "I rather enjoy your invective so long as I'm not the target."

"I," Aldous began, puffing out his chest and slipping into his performer's voice, "am the finest Fablemancer west of the Rhayneland Isles. No dream is too eclectic, no fantasy too esoteric. If you imagine it, I can let you live it. Entire towns perform on my stages and walk away unsure of whether they're returning to reality or leaving it."

He slumped. "And all anyone ever wants is a two-bit military drama I made in an afternoon thirty years ago."

"If I may, sir," said the infinitely patient Pendleton, "I'd imagine your peers would sacrifice limbs to make something so timeless."

"Well, yes, but I'd have preferred it be something that came from my heart, not two months of writer's block and a pending eviction notice." Aldous shook his head. "No idea why people are falling over themselves to try that dreck."

"Perhaps they convince themselves they can succeed where Holtkopf couldn't?"

"Well, good luck with that. Wouldn't be much of a folly if it was salvageable."

Aldous paused in his grousing to wave at Earl as he approached with his dog at his heel and a basket of milk bottles on his arm. Despite a valiant last stand, his foul mood succumbed to the combined onslaught of the latest gossip and a game of fetch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pendleton reach a tentative hand towards the dog, then offer the slightest frown as it shied away.

"No point in dwelling on it," he sighed as Earl moved on to the next step in his route. "Eight weeks is a lot of time to kill. Any of the journals open for submissions?"

"Eros' Ledger is taking entries for its autumn issue."

"Bit outside my wheelhouse, don't you think?"

"It never hurts to broaden your horizons, sir."

Aldous gestured downwards, inviting Pendleton to take in his waist-length beard, polka-dotted bathrobe, and paunch.

"Can you really imagine this ripping a single bodice?"

"Have you tried, sir?"

"I could not be so cruel to my readers. What about the Penrose Periodical? They usually announce their next theme on the first of the month."

"Indeed, sir. It's 'Knight, Princess, and Dragon' this time."

"Ah, the classic." Aldous rubbed his hands together as he got to his feet. "I can work with that." He made to head back inside, then froze in place, turning to Pendleton. "If it's the first of Kolhael, isn't your mother's hatch day just around the corner?"

Pendleton's composure wobbled for a fraction of a second as he moved to gather up the dishes and silverware. "I... yes, sir, the ninth. I'm honored you remembered; I was just about to request a day's leave to visit her."

"Hells, man, take the whole week." Aldous put his fists on his hips, projecting his most distinguished airs. "I'm a grown man and I can take care of myself."

Pendleton grinned. "Your cooking suggests otherwise."

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Aldous shucked off his bathrobe, slipped into his work robe, and sat down at his desk. His imported typing machine loomed before him; enchanted quills were still in vogue, but he preferred the thump of keys over the scratch of feathers. He carefully positioned his fingers, inhaled slowly, then let his mind flow out with his breath, leaving just enough of himself behind to work the keyboard. The rest, floating immaterial in the light of a sunbeam, took a moment to frown down at his growing bald patch before calling upon his art.

Wondrous as the act appeared to the untrained eye, breaching the infinite depth of the imagination was among the first and easiest lessons imparted on aspiring Fablemancers. Any weekend wizard with an afternoon to kill and enough beer to entice an instructor could do it. The real trick came in cobbling that boundless potential into something one could grasp and manipulate, like a potter drawing clay from earth.

Aldous' practiced hands teased a slate-blue sky from the all-encompassing white. Rolling green hills, kissed here and there with the yellow and orange of a punishing summer, took shape beneath it. Here a river, there some ruins; teases of a grand history beyond the bounds of his tale.

Looking upon all he had made and seeing that it was good, Aldous shed the mantle of demiurge and took shape within his creation. A world away, flesh-and-blood fingers translated the early afternoon heat, the soft hum of insects, and the feel of weather- and hoof-beaten road beneath his feet, into text.

Loose gravel rolled and crunched as he walked, turning the prompt over in his head. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Aldous was not one for outlines, preferring instead to boot newborn stories from the nest and see where they landed. All he needed was a starting point.

A lady knight, perhaps? Nothing groundbreaking, but rare enough in his body of work to keep him from sliding into well-trod territory.

Years, pounds, and masculinity melted away in a blink. A body shaped by frantic all-nighters and baked goods gave way to one forged on the battlefield. Leather and chain emerged from a cocoon of velvet as the earth before him birthed the sort of warhorse that inspired whole setlists at the local concert hall. He cycled through various saddles before deciding that his heroine had grown up a tamer of wild stallions and as such preferred to ride bareback.

Before him stood as foreboding a forest as he could remember making. Branches creaked in the wind and turned to claws when out of focus, while glowing eyes blinked from a canopy that eagerly swallowed all incoming light. Something almost but not quite a deer stuck its head from the underbrush just long enough to be yanked screaming back into the dark.

Spurs budded from his sabatons and jingled as he kicked his mount into action.

Thorns, vines, and other unpleasanties skimmed off his armor as scattershot ideas congealed into a backstory. Scars bloomed across a muscled back, growing and shrinking in turn until he finalized the beast that had dealt them. Phantom aches from punitive parenting throbbed along his limbs, then faded when he deemed that too dour a detail.

With one-third of the prompt coming together nicely, Aldous split himself further, launching a pair of shards past the wall of trees and towards the spiraling tower that emerged like an auger from the plain beyond. One of them touched down in a pair of regal slippers, the other on four sets of bone-crushing claws.

This level of multitasking, this ability to operate in real-time from multiple perspectives, separated Aldous from his peers in the field. Where most simply wrote and ran scripts for any characters outside their direct control, Aldous' skills offered a level of reactivity and customization that justified his rates.

Mindful as he was to keep his ego in check, Aldous did wish at times that the laymen knew enough of the nitty-gritty to properly appreciate his accomplishments.

He'd pulled his newest forms straight from the catalog. On one side, a billowy dress voluminous enough to hide an average-sized child, alongside a conical pink hat with a little tassel. On the other, the standard assortment of scales, wings, fire, and sharp edges. He always found it easier to start from a base and adjust than try and innovate from the get-go.

He focused his initial efforts on his dragon-self. A weathered old wyrm looking for one last moment of glory? A matriarch, forced from her ancestral territory by an expansionist empire and grown desperate enough to kidnap a royal for a shred of leverage?

Aldous tested the mouthfeel of each, then settled on a young, hotheaded drake whose eyes would swiftly prove bigger than its stomach. His princess-self idly kicked her feet as craggy, scarred scales shrank and smoothed into a hide

still brimming with the glow of youth. Hidden by a wall of gnarled trunks, always approaching but never to arrive until the scene demanded it, plate-sized hooves pounded a steady rhythm against the earth.

Actors prepared, he turned his attention to the set dressing and lighting. A platoon's worth of terminally unsuccessful rescuers, charred and gnawed to various degrees, popped into being and clattered as Aldous shuffled them around. The sun wandered lazily across the horizon, ultimately settling behind the tower to cast a suitably oppressive shadow.

Two sets of eyes took in the scene from myriad angles while the transcriber-Aldous took advantage of the lull to workshop some similes. His perfectionism wailed from the attic in which he'd locked it many decades ago, but once again found itself overruled. The true mark of mastery, he felt, was knowing when "good enough" was good enough.

Infinite distance turned finite. Knight and steed emerged from the woods in a squall of blackbirds.

Princess and savior locked eyes for but a moment before the fearsome beast interposed itself between them, flames spewing from its jaws to lap at the surrounding foliage. The knight dismounted in a single motion, drew her sword, and called out a challenge. Then tried a few more challenges until one of them sounded right.

Now came the choreography. Monster and soldier rent one another asunder, pulled themselves back together, selected a new tempo before diving back into the fray. A bespoke dance routine with an extra helping of amputation.

With little to do but gasp or swoon as needed, the princess focused her attention on the narrative. There wasn't anything inherently wrong with the chase-slay-rescue structure; classics were classics for a reason. This story just needed some sort of hook beyond the unconventional protagonist.

She elected to consider the inciting incident: why and how did this dragon snatch a princess, plop down at the base of an abandoned tower, and simply bide its time? It wasn't like the dragon got anything from the arrangement besides a few armored snacks before its inevitable hiding, unless...

Yes. Yes, that was it.

At the princess' shouted command, the dragon backed away, leaving the dumbstruck knight to turn a questioning eye towards her.

The princess smirked. She was no damsel; she had approached the dragon herself, proposing an alliance after her father named her fool brother his sole heir. It had been an act from the start: a scheme to draw out the captain of the Royal Guard, test her mettle, and offer her a starring role in their conspiracy. Together, they'd rip the crown from that feeble old man's head and craft a future of their own making.

The knight stepped back as the princess approached, half a head taller than her liege but overwhelmed by her imperious presence. She couldn't have stopped herself from kneeling if she'd tried. The princess cupped the knight's chin with a finger, forcing her face upwards.

They froze there for a moment. Unexpected feelings hit a resonant frequency as they bounced from one heart to the other.

And... and maybe, the princess offered, hesitation fading with each word, she could offer her brave knight another incentive.

The hand below the knight's chin moved to the back of her neck. The other soon joined it, thumbs coming to rest beneath the knight's cheekbones. Their hearts beat vivace as they gazed into one another's eyes.

The knight burst to her feet, grasping the princess around the waist with feral strength, all but diving for those beautiful lips and—

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Pendleton, bearing a tray of fresh biscuits, found his employer hunched in a corner amid a veritable bird's nest of paper.

Aldous steadfastly avoided Pendleton's gaze as the latter deposited his tray on Aldous' desk, grabbed a sheet at random, and began to read. The left side of his scaly brow ridge edged as far upwards as his ironclad sense of propriety would allow.

"Shall I submit this to Eros' Ledger, sir?"

"Please. And let Miss Keating know I would love to have dinner."

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# Writer Spotlight

We chat with **Summon** — a transformation enjoyer, writer, and sometimes Tyrannosaurus — about their experiences creating stories within the community. We also touch upon the inspiration behind some themes in their work, one of which is featured in this pilot! You can read *Suit Yourself* starting on Page 30.

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**Zen:** Hi Summon! Thanks for agreeing to take part in the author spotlight. I wanted to start by asking: what do you enjoy most about creative writing? Would you like to share what inspires and/or motivates your furry fiction?

**Summon:** Thanks for having me, Zen. For me, creative writing is always about giving the ideas swirling around in my head a way to escape into the world. I express myself better in writing than I do verbally, so in many ways it's a vital part of my life, a safety valve for the things I couldn't say. I've long been fascinated by the way writers construct worlds and arguments as well the characters who live them.

As for your second question, it connects to the first. Before I started writing transformation-focused sci-fi and urban fantasy stories I read a lot of historical nonfiction and struggled to stay interested in a lot of the genre fiction novels that were recommended to me. There were authors who I took a great liking to, like Jim Butcher and Brandon Sanderson (the former for characters, the latter for worlds), but I hadn't found something that really scratched that Transformation itch and combined solid storytelling with some of the excellent premises of the TF fandom's short stories and erotica. What finally motivated me to share my first short story was the realization that I wouldn't know for certain if I was any good at it unless I showed it to the public. I was delighted by how warmly it was received, and I wasn't accustomed to receiving sincere praise so it kind of activated my neurons and motivated me to keep going, keep writing, keep posting. The combination of releasing ideas from my head with the fact that people seemed to enjoy them had a lasting, intoxicating effect. Even though I've slowed down since then I'm still a little astonished by the community's support.

**Zen:** That's really wholesome and heartwarming, especially to hear about the support you've received from the community. Your honesty about initial uncertainties is appreciated — I think the drive to share stories as a litmus test for creative work is a jointly terrifying-exciting first step many writers share. I wanted to dig deeper into your preferred

genres. In many of your stories, you like to include satirical fiction and social commentary. What is it about the intersection of transformation with thicker, more intricate narratives that fascinates you?

**Summon:** To be honest, a lot of it goes back to 2020. That was a turning point for me, a real 'masks-off' moment that revealed to all of us the sheer scale of the yawning chasm between what people present to others and how they actually behave in response to challenging truths. I was right there with everyone else watching our country's institutions repeatedly fail at their most basic responsibilities, watching privileged people have emotional meltdowns at being asked to make the tiniest personal sacrifices for the sake of their neighbors, and I thought to myself: "*These* are the people I'm supposed to respect?"

It ended up clicking for me: My desire to be an animal person and my desire for a more honest society were inseparable. If I wanted a more sincere world, I had to start with myself by becoming more sincere with others. I had to start taking up space, even if some people found that inconvenient. So, I came out, returned to the fandom after a decade of lurking, met the love of my life, Reese, then started posting my stories.

Here's the short version: I write satirical, social, narrative-driven transformation fiction because I can't do it any other way.

**Zen:** I'm sure the desire to be more true to oneself is a sentiment many in the community can get behind. Pivoting towards your submission for the pilot, *Suit Yourself*, I wanted to ask a more technical question about writing smut. How do you strike the right balance between describing external, physical changes and also depicting more nebulous, erotic sensations? Do you plan transformation scenes in detail with this duality in mind, or just let the words flow?

**Summon:** I don't take a very organized process when writing a transformation, and for the most part I do just let the words flow, as you put it. I often layer in anatomy and biology to add credibility and because I enjoy it, but I know that it's more important to build and maintain momentum, whether it's a 'one and done' transformation where a character completes a full metamorphosis in a few minutes or it's a 'slow burn' that takes days, weeks, or years.

I do at least try to balance three things: What is changing, how it's changing, and how it feels. The last component is the most important to me, but I often have trouble trimming down the others. That's probably why my stories tend to be on the longer side.

**Zen:** Interesting! I enjoy hearing about how authors approach the topic. You've got a good number of stories under your belt now, so I wanted to ask: Have you developed any rituals around writing? Personally, I'm an early-morning writer with headphones on and music playing. Would you be able to share what your creative vibe is?

**Summon:** To be perfectly frank, if the first thing I do when I sit down at my desk isn't writing, then I'm not getting any writing done that day. I'm a terribly distracted person and will spend all my free time playin' vidya games or chatting with folks if I don't bring up a playlist of ambient or jazzy music and start writing. I'm a little ashamed of it, to be honest.

Supposing I have a solid idea in my head, though, most of my longer stories (anything over 10,000 words) start with an outline. It's not a map of character relationships or a flow diagram so much as a bulleted list of events and conversations in the order that they occur. Sometimes I think of a great line or a theme to explore and I have to write it down right away, so I jot it down in a private message and send it off to Reese, who's grown accustomed to my random braindroppings at this point. Then once I'm situated I add those to my outline and, eventually, my story.

It's not a consistent or easy process most of the time. I've had several stories where I got halfway into it and decided it was too grim, too tedious, and that instead of trying to find ways to fix the existing text I wiped the slate clean and started again. It's frustrating to realize when I've written myself into a corner, but starting fresh does help. A good example is *Posthuman*, which is one of my most popular stories and only exists because I endured two false starts and kept pushing at it.

**Zen:** I feel you with so many of these things. It really can be frustrating, especially needing to start over with an idea...but I can also see how the motivations and inspirations you described earlier mirrors the difficulties of being creative. While writing is often considered a solo activity, it's also a lot more: like sharing idea snippets with your partner or posting your finished story.

We've covered a lot! Thanks so much for chatting. Your openness and honesty is really admirable and I know many things you mentioned will resonate with fellow writers in the community. To close things, would you like to share something you're excited to work on next? It can be something in the pipeline, or even a fun idea you've always wanted to take a shot at writing?

**Summon:** For a while now I've been meaning to write a sequel to my big, bombastic action story *Hot Zone*, something that confronts the main character Max's shortcomings while sticking with the feel of Paul

Verhoeven's movies in the 80s and 90s. I've also been piecing together multiple protagonists for something I haven't tried before, an alt-history series set in 1920s America where World War I never ended and a strange disease that transforms people into monsters has spread across the world. The metamorphosis has become associated with pleasure-seekers, and as a result a regime has come to power that literally seeks to make America joyless as a way of combating the plague. It's a story of resistance that focuses on the stories of a petty bureaucrat, a film starlet, a scarred veteran, and a painter as they navigate and reshape this dangerous world, each in their own way.

Visually-wise, the *Sexual Tyrannosaurus* comic adaptation with Pandarita and Lomas was a big success, and I've started the process of adapting one of my most popular old stories into a comic script. It's still too early to declare what story that is (some of my readers might guess), since I need to find an artist for it and set up a way for the community to help finance it.

# Suit Yourself

By *SummonTheElectorCounts*

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Len has been backed into a corner. Now a fugitive from the law, he's desperate to escape the space station he's trapped on. A local smuggler provides him with a way out that's as inventive as it is drastic. What at first appears to be a synthetic bodysuit is the perfect disguise, transforming Len into a Cenean — a humanoid lizard species with a reputation for being very, very sexually active.

**Keywords:** NSFW / Sci-Fi / Reptilian / Growth / Instincts / Excessive-cum

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"Do I really have to put this on?"

Len surveyed the crumpled contours of the broad, flat bag laid out on the bed of his dark, musty, filthy hotel room as an invisible hand gripped the contents of his stomach and gave them a squeeze. He could already feel the flop sweat gathering in his armpits and between his toes.

"You want a way off of the station? Well here you are." A tinny voice answered, one of Len's smuggling contacts.

"I thought these were for crash-landings and survival situations." Len said, pinching the corner of the plastic pouch on the bed and fidgeting with it.

"What else would you call your current predicament?" Len's contact asked through the little comm implant tucked beneath the skin behind his right ear. "Prince Kadru made his position on piracy very clear from the moment you docked."

"I'm not a pirate. I'm a patriot. A privateer. I have letters of marque with all the right signatures." Len replied with growing peevishness. "How was I supposed to know the Terran government signed a peace treaty while I was fighting Talyxian merchantmen in deep space a billion miles from the nearest beacon?"

"I'm sure the prince will be moved by your explanation — right before he launches you out of the airlock." The smuggler quipped.

"Fine. Point made." Len sighed, rubbing his temples and tapping his foot. "What will this thing do to me?"

"Honestly? I don't know. I had an underling pick it out and instructed him not to tell me. That way if I'm caught and strapped into their neural extractor, it won't be so bad. For me, anyway." The smuggler answered.

Len closed his eyes, drew in a breath, exhaled through his lips, and grabbed the plastic pull tab on the pouch, peeling it open. The moment he did, air rushed

into the vacuum, releasing the contents and revealing them. Len expected something practical and industrial, something bulky that was fitted with rivets and sockets and festooned with tubes. What he found was smooth, dark, and enigmatic. It reminded him of a wetsuit except for the way the material seemed to melt around and adhere to his fingers.

"The funds just settled. You really overpaid, by the way. Au revoir!"

The smuggler ended the call. Len tried to reach back out to him, but by then the man had no doubt thrown whatever ancient plastic gizmo he used into the trash. *That's gratitude for you*, Len thought. He'd supplied the smuggler with top-quality contraband and all he got in exchange was a leotard. How was this going to get him out of here?

He lifted the suit from its pouch and held it up, squinting and straining in the dim light of the best, and indeed only hotel on the station that didn't check phony credentials. A charitable person might have called the place 'atmospheric'. Len understood it for what it was: an arena where microbes from all over the galaxy fought each other to decide who was the ultimate sexually transmitted illness. Even with the covers still on, Len hesitated to touch the bed.

The suit was heavy for its size, its fabric synthetic and dense, almost as if it was compressed. The material reminded him of the long-range recon undersuits he wore back in his military days, the kind designed to extract every bit of water and nutrients and use muscular movements to pump it into a shipboard recycler.

Commotion on the street outside.

The station was extensive enough to have roads. These mostly served as conduits for freight or to ease the movement of the Prince's excessively well-armed goon squads. He could tell from the languid way they jumped from the back of the military transport to how they shuffled and dispersed that this was more of a routine sweep than a targeted assault. Still, it was only a matter of time before they started knocking on doors on his floor. *Time to shit or get off the pot*, Len thought.

He didn't recognize the language on the leaflet that came with the suit and didn't have the time to translate it. Either the smuggler had screwed him and he was about to die an especially embarrassing death, or the suit would solve his problem by finding a way to trick the station's menagerie of facial, DNA, and voice scanners. He had theories on how the suit might help him. All of them were risky and unpleasant, but he was dead for certain if he didn't take the chance.

The suit clung to his skin, gripping every part of his lean, wiry form like his entire body was squeezed into a blood pressure cuff. The compression of everything from his ankles to his neck gave him a headache. He reached a finger under the turtleneck collar and tugged at it, clearing his throat as a low, fizzy sensation started at his extremities and crept up his arms and legs.

He stood up straight to test if he still could. The moment he did his head swam. Blood rushed through his eardrums, in whispering waves at first before growing into a pounding, accelerating drumbeat. Nothing obvious tightened his throat or squeezed his lungs, yet his brain told him that he couldn't breathe. He reached up and gripped the sides of his head, head swimming. Then he heard them: soft grumbles deep beneath his skin, followed by sharp, distinct snaps.

It took him a moment to find the source of the sounds. His hands. He tested his fingers, wiggling them, and soon found that he couldn't move some of them. He couldn't separate them, either. His brain told his digits to splay outward, but his index and middle fingers refused to part, as did his rings and pinkies. He turned his hands upward, looking at his palms, and discovered the reason. Membranes of skin connected his fingers into pairs, and those membranes were growing, extending, fusing together. Through it all his palms secreted a slick layer of sweat, his shifting skin glistening as the dull, prickly tingle spread from his hands halfway up his forearms. His hands throbbed as sinew and bone fully merged his five fingers into three, yet they didn't lengthen, lending each digit a thick, brutish quality. Len flinched and gnashed his teeth as fingernails pinched and pressed into his sensitive nerves until they fell from his dying cuticles. His fingertips started to burn.

Sweat dripped down his face, breaths becoming shallow as he tried and failed to control his hands, doing something, *anything* to placate the terrible itch. Then soft sounds like the peeling of an orange met his twitching ears. Dark shapes rose just beneath the skin of each fleshy finger and thumb, then pierced through the skin, yielding a few drops of blood until the curved, black new forms formed fresh cuticles of their own. As the character of his skin began to change, drying, hardening, and segmenting, he tried again to move his fingers, turning them back and forth between his eyes, dimly fascinated by their alien, taloned shapes.

Len had theories about what the suit would do to him. He was wrong about all of them. He knew of adaptive apparel that could alter the human body, drawing from it in response to a hostile, deadly environment, but whatever technology was at work here was on a whole other level.

As the suit hugged his body it squeezed mysterious substances through his skin, secreting them into his bloodstream. The tingle and itch that started with his hands and feet now covered his body and began to plunge deeper, latching its invisible hooks into his muscles, then organs, then his skull, then his brain. He grew dizzy, falling to his hands and knees. His ears flinched and twisted, tickling at his hair. His teeth itched.

He squeezed his eyes shut as terrible, pounding pressure filled his head, then focused around his jaw. He had just enough strength to drool and make a wordless 'Guh' before the hard, tough matter of his skull loosened, turning plastic and puttylike as his own muscles yanked and pushed at them. He could feel his

sharpening teeth tug at his gums as they lengthened and thickened, crowding his mouth, building more and more pressure until something had to give. He thought his jaw snapped when the pressure released with a sickening snap so loud that it echoed off the walls.

He opened his eyes, sucking in a sudden breath as a ribbon of saliva dripped from his chin. The bleak hotel room darkened. His eyes watered, eyelids fluttering in response to his itching corneas. Then the itch vanished, and with it the room brightened again, then came alive with color. Every familiar tone was saturated, loud, and disorienting, and on top of it a chaotic potpourri of aromas filled his nose, a heady mix of alien stink and whatever powerful disinfectant they sprayed down the room with once a week. Even as the moments of overstimulation and nausea ebbed away and he adapted to the smell the colors held their intensity. It dawned on him that the room hadn't changed, only his perception of it.

The transformation should have hurt more, yet somehow the pain ebbed even as the changes intensified. Even as the strange force wove its way deeper and deeper into his system it felt more like it was happening to someone else. Perhaps it was a human survival mechanism, a cognitive defense. Perhaps the suit's body-altering chemistry messed with his brain. Whatever the reason he grew more detached, more fascinated by the way the suit kneaded and shaped him.

A new bloom of dull, distant pain washed over him as his pelvis seemed to snap in two, then reform itself in a new, broader shape with more pronounced hips. The new arrangement became an ideal environment for new muscles, with new fibers anchoring to the fresh bone while existing ones burgeoned and swelled. It was most pronounced in his butt, which he could feel squeezing and straining against the fabric. It seemed on the verge of tearing before it adapted and conformed to the new shape of his powerful glutes and the excessive thickness of his thighs.

He lacked the strength and control over his body to lift himself from the ground, so instead he crawled over to a standing mirror in the corner and pulled it to the carpeted floor, looming over it so he could get a look at himself and answer why his face felt so stretched and heavy. His pupils narrowed as he beheld the strange, contorted parody of his countenance, with its pointy, swively ears, long, drooling lips, rows of sharp white teeth, and the squashed, dripping nose that had halfway merged into a short, thick snout.

*Bigger.*

The thought confused Len at first. It didn't seem to be his own, yet it didn't take long to convince him that it was right. He needed to be bigger. He *wanted* to be bigger. This thing that he was becoming might have been enough to get him past the scanners and off the station, and the changes to his body might still be reversible, but a little itch at the base of his brain demanded more, and despite the pain and terror he couldn't think of any reason to contradict it.

*Bigger!*

His shoulders shivered. His sleeves drew tight against his arms. He summoned enough strength to tug back one elbow, lifting a three-taloned hand from the floor enough to clench it into a fist, then plunged it into the mirror, smashing it to bits. The glass sliced at the harder, scallier skin on his hands to little effect, and what cuts they did make yielded a few drops of darkened, almost black blood that clotted in an instant.

The pain reminded him that this body was still his, that he was still changing. His ears kept growing, lengthening, adding ridges of cartilage to maintain their erect shape. Blood-tinged snot trailing from his nostrils mixed with blood-tinged saliva dripping from his mouth. His whole body shivered as the dull pain from the impact of his arm swept over his body, jostling his bones, shaking everything loose.

"Aaaaargh!"

It was all Len could manage to bellow, a primal cry from an altered throat that no longer carried his voice, replacing it with something deeper, something more suited to what he was becoming. The room filled with the clamor of popping joints and cracking bones. The pain was almost unbearable. Almost. But he knew the payoff was coming.

He clenched his fists tighter, tighter, forcing the pressure to build in his arms until the accumulated energy released again with a crunching, slurping sound. His forearms thickened, first pooling with the strange liquids swirling through his system, then hardening as the busy, growing sinews beneath took over. His forearms doubled in thickness, followed by his biceps, then his triceps. Then his arms flooded and filled out again, straining at the sleeves of his suit as they doubled in size once more. He tensed an arm, discovering that each of his biceps was as big as his head used to be. They were heavy and awkward, out of place on his bony torso.

Len's head sank, eyes flying open. His face had lengthened yet again. He tried to reach up and touch the enormous new thing between his eyes but his arms didn't respond. He just sat wide-eyed, looking at the puddle on the floor and his thick, primal hands, making a mental note of how sweat dripped from his brow and trickled down his long, dolichocephalic snout. His slender but muscular tongue explored the new shape of his lips, running along dozens of sharp fangs along the way. There was no chance of anyone mistaking him for a human now.

"Ahhhn!"

He threw back his head, broadsided by a sudden, icy bloom that radiated from his spine and rolled over his body like a wave of cold water. His narrow waist and bony shoulders cracked, straining against the confines of the suit as sudden infusions of muscle burbled all over his back, chest, and shoulders. The pattern of the changes became clearer to him. The changes to his bone came first, creating

voids that filled in with fluid, which held things together until new muscles and connective tissues could catch up, anchoring themselves to the fresh bone. Every time his body pushed back at the suit it would strain and pop, but after each growth spurt it reset itself to the new contours of his body.

"Aaaagh!-"

He jerked back his head once again, squeezing his eyes shut, gasping for air. His body groaned and rippled again, but he was surprised to find that pain didn't motivate his latest outburst. Instead he'd come to anticipate the waves and look forward to them.

The dull itch at the base of his brain, something ancient, reptilian, and diminished, now throbbed with hormonal release, preceding every swell, every shift with a splash of icy-hot relaxation. He tugged the corners of his lips back into an ear-to-ear grin as the substances trickled down his back and settled deep in his groin and pelvis, bathing them with soft stimulation.

He flexed his toes, bunching them into fists. When he relaxed them they twitched and stuck together, digits merging, following a similar pattern to his hands, except that both his feet and toes grew drastically longer. Even without seeing them, Len grew more aware of their new shape and heft, how they needed to be big to support all the mass piling onto him. The enormity of the muscles bulging like mountain ranges along his back and rolling along his arms and chest filled him with strange satisfaction. Despite the density of his body and its bulk, he felt surprisingly weightless and springy, like a man lifted from the earth and plopped onto the moon.

"Mnnnngh..."

He wasn't sure if the next utterance was more pain or pleasure. Something sprouted from his backside and pressed against the seat of his pants. Confined by fabric it squeezed into the cleft of his buttocks, pushing them apart as it lengthened and thickened, following the curvature of his rear end. It pushed and jostled, straining the fabric of the suit beyond anything so far. The pressure and confinement built and built, forcing his thighs apart just to make a little more room.

He pushed his arms forward, elbows to the floor, eyes focusing on the mosaic of blue scales on his hands, like pebbles worn smooth by eons of water. He tucked in his knees, raising his butt into the air, grimacing as he wordlessly begged for the pressure to stop. His legs twitched, bones cracking again as they prepared to take on a new posture, filling out his already massive thighs even more while girding his ankles and calves with reinforced tendons. By instinct he knew that none of it would work properly without a counterweight.

Suddenly the fabric gave way, opening up a seam. With a tremendous rip, the built up tension released, springing into the air. Strange new nerves issued orders to new muscles, all of them anchored by an extension of his spine: a thick,

reptilian tail. Without thinking he hoisted it into the air, grabbing fistfuls of carpet and moaning as the liberated appendage shot forth, pulled farther and farther away from him by its own momentum. His thighs quivered as cool air passed under his tail, caressing the sensitive new skin beneath.

The torn suit mended itself, wrapping loose ribbons of fabric above and below the tail before welding back together. They cradled his manhood and egg basket in a snug, yet not unpleasant way. The trouser legs almost detached, connecting themselves to the rest of the garment through a pair of garters while transforming into a pair of tight leggings that accentuated the power of his thick, springy legs.

Pinpricks set some of his fresh scales ablaze, on his scalp and along the ridge of his tail. Thin, malleable spines shot through the skin, drying and unfurling the moment they touched the air, replacing his messy black hair with shimmering purple plumes. His body at last relinquished enough control to allow him to run an alien hand along his alien snout, testing and tickling the fresh feathers that ran down his neck and spilled over the collar of his suit. A fan of resplendent quills accentuated his tail, which twisted and swayed on its own.

He peered into the fallen, broken mirror again, examining himself in sections through each shard, and finally realized what he'd become: a Cenean.

In a twisted way the smuggler's decision made sense. Contrary to what ancient humans imagined, there weren't many sentient species in the galaxy with two arms, two legs, opposable thumbs, binocular vision, and omnivory. Among an already short list of candidates, only Ceneans had predominantly levo-amino acids like humans. There was just one problem with that. Ceneans were very, very sexually active. In fact they'd developed something of a reputation and were the reason why the universal 'no intercourse' signs hanging up in restaurants and public restrooms showed silhouettes of two pointy-eared blue lizard people doing the coco jambo with a big red strikethrough covering their naughty parts.

Len's eyes widened as a low gurgle radiated from his groin. All the pain and discomfort of the transformation were gone now, replaced by slow crescendo, an urge that was unfamiliar in its intensity. He reached between his legs and noticed right away that his bulge felt a bit swollen. As if the brush of his thumb against his modest egg basket summoned it, the gurgle returned with a vengeance. Within moments his package sat heavy in his three-taloned hand, fizzing and tingling as a thick, syrupy drop of liquid oozed through the stretchy fabric.

He quivered and grunted, biting his scaly lip as he rolled his hips. Catastrophic bursts of pleasure erupted inside him and didn't stop even when he raised his arms and kept his hands well away from the source. The subtle throb at the base of his brain seemed to dump big spurts of hormones directly into his dark blood, heralding even more changes.

Outside he could pass for a full-blown Cenean, but inside he was all wrong. What a confused jumble the human body was. Redundant organs that seemed to serve no purpose. Vital organs without enough redundancies. Way too many intestines. Withered hormonal glands, no genital-brain of any kind, and gonads a fifth the size of what they needed to be. That had to change, too.

As Len's testicles gorged themselves and grew his penis retracted, bathed in warm slickness before an aggressive tingle nibbled at its entire length. He reached into his underwear, searching the smooth, tiny, delicate scales there to find his manhood only to locate a protruding sheath and sweaty balls so big that each was enough to overwhelm his palm. His voice shifted again as those testicles sagged, but as he probed the opening of the little sheath a spike of pain rebuked him.

His insides churned and sloshed around like an unbalanced load of laundry in a washing machine, forcing him onto his sides to clutch at his slender belly. A very strange sensation bloomed. The presence of new neurons, then a new mind inside his body, something more animalistic, less reasoned, and quite a bit lower than his usual brain, a secondary core to lighten the load of his diminished main brain and dictate the happenings of his pelvic region. He'd heard it before, back when the changes were still getting started, and its message was the same:

*Bigger.*

His hips bucked themselves. They started on their own like the instinctive motions of a rutting beast, except he had nothing to rut and no penis to rut with. The sudden sensation of a red-hot rod filled the cavity of his broad pelvis, and before long he had the waistband of the little hammock cradling his manhood. Tugging it down revealed a tiny pale blue worm protruding from the sheath, oozing a steady trickle of transparent slime. He reached toward it with a careful, curious finger, and then—

The moment he touched it a violent spurt of slime gushed forth, a surge in volume and intensity. As it splattered on a nearby wall Len noticed a faint bioluminescent glow emanating from it. A short, sharp stab of pain tensed his body as the tiny blue tip shoved its way out of the sheath, tearing open a thin, sticky membrane to reveal a bright, shiny shaft that was similar to what he was used to, setting aside the color and the strange, tapered tip.

*Bigger.*

Len flopped onto his back, grabbing fistfuls of carpet with his hands and his dexterous new feet, tail flopping and thrashing to and fro. A surge of white hot heat pushed at his manhood, which quivered, throbbed, and only interrupted itself to shoot spurts of precum high into the air. Blood rushed into his penis and kept going until it ached and burned. Terror gripped him as, for a few horrible moments, he thought his manhood was about to burst. Instead it throbbed larger, harder, girthier, stretching open his sheath as wide as a water bottle.

He heard the Prince's goon squad trudging up the stairs long before they started pounding on doors. He rolled to the side, then climbed back onto his hands and knees even as the terrible, insistent throb radiated through his pelvis. He almost flopped to the floor when his unexpectedly large dick brushed against the carpet, firing a burst of electric sensation straight to his loins. Another big spurt of lubrication splattered onto the floor, calling into question whether Len would ever get his room deposit back if he kept making a mess.

How could Ceneans live like this? He began to feel sympathy for them.

Slowly, gingerly, he pulled his awkward new feet beneath him and tested his bendy legs. It turned out to be much more stable, well-balanced, and familiar than he expected. What he'd long assumed to be backwards knees were in fact just ankles, and his new posture was not all that different from standing on tiptoe. His tail counterbalanced his body's tendency to lean forward, and it seemed obvious now that his wide hips didn't just offer stability but also space for his huge gonads. The way the air passed through the gap between his thighs and tickled the skin down there was not unpleasant.

Just thinking about it instigated another round of hot, urgent throbbing. Amongst the thick veins along his shaft conveying his dark, dense blood back into his body was another shape like the tip of a foreskin, a ring of raised skin. When he reached down to touch it, he discovered that it was even more sensitive than the rest of his shaft and prompted yet another growth spurt. To his astonishment his cock grew even longer, thickening steadily. The new development telescoped outward, leaving the raised ring closer to the middle of his shaft, doubling his length. He looked down through the cleft of his broad, overdeveloped pecs with a puzzled curl of his lip, idly scratching at the valley where his navel used to be as he surveyed his bright blue monster. It seemed impossible to hide something this huge inside a sheath.

He didn't intend to touch his dick again. His genital-brain made him do it. At least, that's what he told himself.

Shivers ran up and down his back. His feathers stood on end. Air hissed in through his teeth and out through his throat. His enormous sinuses drank in the scent of his own musk. He took his manhood in as gentle a grip as he could, and before he knew it his hips started to roll and buck, thrusting into his hands. His mind went dormant, submerged in a flood of hormones so intense that his tongue dangled from his mouth without his notice. Every part of his body urged him onward.

Heavy boots tromped closer. Len knew they were near, near enough where he needed to stop, to pull himself together, or maybe slip out the window. But that little voice wasn't in control now. There was so much cock to hold, too much for one hand, more than enough for two. His teeth chattered. His butt quivered. His every breath grew ragged and urgent.

The rising, inescapable urge vanished. An unseen gate flew open. Len thought he knew what an orgasm was, but he'd been oh-so wrong. The unexpected gift of his new body — that provided by the Ceneans' unique biology — was how the little brain in his pelvis made sure nothing got in the way. His chest heaved and his tail thrashed as every deep, smooth muscle squeezed in perfect sequence, belting one thick string of cum after another, effortlessly blasting it across the room. He'd expected the grip of his release to slacken after a few moments, but to his growing alarm it went on. Fifteen seconds. Thirty. *Sixty*.

His ears stood on end as an alarm went off. A red klaxon descended from the ceiling, bathing the room in a swirl of red light. A synthetic voice repeated a message at regular intervals.

"This is a security patrol. This is not an exercise. For your safety, please stand facing the intercom, spread your legs or equivalent appendages, and place your hands or equivalent object manipulators on the provided circular markings."

The cum went on and on. There was absolutely no chance that he'd get his room deposit back now, not after turning the walls into a horror show of bioluminescent baby-blue goop. Despite everything, he had to cooperate. He couldn't run, not now, not when his body was trapped in a cacophony of ecstasy. The spurts of cum slowed down, but they didn't stop as he took one labored step forward, then another, pointing his toes inward as something hot, wet, and gooey trailed down his legs.

He assumed the position just as a heavy, cybernetically-assisted fist pounded on his door. He placed his hands on the circles, parted his legs, and bit his lip, doing his very best not to cry out in bliss.

"Sir, are you classified as human?" A deep voice asked through the thin wall.

"Negative." Len answered in a wavering voice, looking down at the sputtering thing between his legs. "I am meat on a stick."

"Run the scan again." Another voice joined in from the other side of the wall. "There. Traces of human DNA."

The first voice resumed. "Have you seen this place? There's DNA everywhere of all kinds, on the beds, on the floors, on the walls. All over the walls. Wait, is he—? Ugh!"

"Cenean degenerate. This is a false positive. Let's move on."

When Len's orgasm finally abated after about two minutes and fifteen seconds, he wasn't sure it was for real. He'd started to convince himself that this was his life now. Walking around in a permanent state of orgasm. Even with a new secondary heart his body could only endure so much, though, and as the lust slackened its grip on him he flopped to the floor, legs shaking, chest laboring for breath.

It worked. The suit had worked. He'd shed his fugitive identity in a way that fooled all the biometric scanners. All that it cost him was his human body, which he could get back. Possibly. Maybe. After all, it was just a body, a biological coincidence of flesh and bone, an interchangeable meat suit. So what if this one was a little on the horny side? The important part, his mind, was still human.

Wasn't it?

\* \* \*

# Good Boys Get Views

By *Here4Hooves*

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Blake will do just about anything to make his online livestreaming career a success. When his audience suggests he try installing a strange new plugin with the ability to transform him into a dog, Blake is unprepared for how much his show is about to change.

**Keywords:** Canine Transformation / Unknowing / Reality Shifting / Implied Permanence / Loss of Control

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"Hey there Chat! What are we trying today?"

Blake smiled for the camera and did his best to act like he had even the faintest idea what he was doing. His career as an online live streaming personality had been off to a bumpy start. Playing video games on camera for strangers was supposed to be easier than this, right? Admittedly he actually had one or two regular viewers that Blake was pretty sure weren't just his real life friends giving him a sympathy follow, but something just hadn't clicked yet.

What he really needed was a niche to fill. Or at least a gimmick. Blake had tried a mixture of everything at this point. He had streamed big popular games all the way down to small indie titles. He had done multi-part narrative journeys and casual one-off co-op sessions with his roommate, Chris. (Thankfully, Chris had begrudgingly humored him into coming on stream.) Blake had even started dabbling in weird plugins and overlays for his stream.

The less said about his exploits with virtual avatars the better. He had enough trouble attracting viewers when his expressions weren't limited to three canned reactions. Blake had settled on being an on-camera performance for now. But he was still looking for that special something that would make him a star.

Right now Blake was leaning hard into audience participation. Anything his stream's chat suggested he play or experiment with was on the table. Blake had run through all the typical engagement bait, and was now just willing to do whatever his regulars wanted.

**Greggornator42:** "Have you checked out that new #TFTuesday plugin?"

No? Hmm. Blake smiled at the camera again and did a quick web search off to the side of his monitor. Transformation Tuesday was mentioned in a smattering of random online hashtags, but it was apparently also a stream category on

Blake's live streaming platform. He quickly took a peek at the stream thumbnails to see who else was currently broadcasting with the plugin.

To his surprise, a dozen smiling faces were looking back up at him. That was good! The category wasn't dead, but it wasn't saturated to the point that Blake would be at the bottom of Page 5. The thumbnails all looked a bit strange though. They showed various streamers all sitting at their desk with odd special effects or photomanipulations applied to them. Most of them just had furry ears, but one of them was in a freeze frame showing off a bushy fox tail. Huh.

As much as Blake would have liked to dip into one of the streams and see what they were all about, there was nothing worse than watching a streamer watch a streamer. He'd just have to jump in relatively blind.

Blake clicked back to his search results and found a plugin listing for #TFTuesday. It looked like it was a pretty standard piece of overlay software with some really hokey marketing slogans. "Transform Your Livestream™!" Okay, sure. Despite the marketing fluff, the example thumbnails did look pretty impressive. There didn't seem to be any limitations as to what kind of CG effects this plugin could overlay on top of a video. Either this thing used a ton of GPU processing power, or AI video filters had gotten more advanced than he had given them credit for. Hopefully Blake's gaming rig would be good enough to handle it.

Towards the bottom of the plugin description page, Blake noticed a small feature to allow your audience to trigger different effects in exchange for donating to the stream. It was a common enough offering, but that sealed the deal for him. Blake tapped 'Install' and did his best to keep his stream engaged while the progress bar slowly marched across his screen.

"Okay Chat, I just got the Hashtag TF Tuesday plugin installed. How do I get this thing working?"

He still wasn't sure if you were actually supposed to pronounce the "hashtag" part out loud. Despite hosting an internet TV show, Blake wasn't the biggest techie. All of this stuff was plug and play. Literally, he played video games for most of his streams. Still, things looked simple enough. He just clicked the "Open Prompt" option and set the entry price to 4 Coins (\$1 USD) for 5 minutes of Transformation (overlay effects). Minus the platform's 30% cut, of course.

"Alright y'all, have at it." Blake gave another forced smile and switched his stream's category over to #TFTuesday.

To his surprise, a few new viewers popped into his chat almost immediately.

**CoolKid88:** "Good Boy!"

> *Requested Change: Dog Ears*

"Welcome to the show! And thank you?" Blake laughed. On his video preview, he could see the image of his ears growing out and shifting in real time. A soft coating of yellow fur formed on the back of his ears. They grew impressively pointed before flopping over due to their own weight. "Oh wow, I guess I've got a bit of golden retriever in me."

*Or the system just picked up on his blond hair.*

A few more messages flew by in his chat. Everyone seemed happy with the plugin so far. His stream must have gotten picked up by some regulars to the #TFTuesday category on the site. Blake saw a few more names join the chat that he didn't recognize.

**CoolKid88:** "Did you seriously leave the prompt open for a dollar?"

> *Requested Change: Dog Head-Fur*

> *Requested Change: Dog Nose*

> *Requested Change: Dog Tongue*

> *Time Extended: 45 Minutes*

"Woah, I didn't think you'd all be so eager," Blake laughed. "Maybe I should up that to 20 Coins?"

He tried to do the mental math of how much he'd already raised while he clicked around the plugin's interface. Meanwhile, the video preview continued to shift. His usually fluffy hair flattened in texture and spread uniformly around his scalp and the back of his neck. Just watching the preview made his head itchy. Blake's nose was the most substantial change. It shifted into a glossy wet black and took on a glistening texture. Just how much processing power was this plugin using?

"Alright, lesh see how thiff worfs," Blake slurred into the camera.

**ShadowFan12:** "Yo, here comes the tongue!"

> *Time Extended: 45 Minutes*

Blake went cross eyed. Between him and his monitor, something was picking up the light from his LED panels in a new way. His face had pushed out ever so slightly. Just enough that he could see a glistening black smudge on the end of his nose.

He reflexively reached up to rub it off. The smudge stayed put. It also felt a little wet? Blake stared at his reflection in the window. He slowly slid his fingers up

the side of his head, and was startled to feel the same furry sideburns as the video preview. His breath hitched as he moved his hands further up the side of his head. His fingers felt an enormous amount of furry cartilage. The sensation went up and up until Blake was holding up a pair of pointed dog ears for the camera.

"What the fussyh!?" Blake tried to swear. Instead his tongue lolled out of his mouth. It was suddenly two or three inches longer than what his mouth could reasonably contain. He sat there panting awkwardly as another donation jingle played from his PC.

**TFFan27:** "Speak Boy!"

> *Requested Change: Barking Speech*

Blake's eyes went wide. He felt something primal build up deep within his chest. "Ifss real! Stop! I-I- Arf!" Blake let out an authentic canine bark on command.

He clasped his hands over his mouth. What the hell was that!?

"Not a filt-arf! Ruff! Arf!" Blake did his best to protest. More of his speech was becoming barks with each passing moment.

**CoolKid88:** "Should have read the README, bro!"

> *Requested Change: Dog Head*

The hands covering Blake's mouth suddenly pushed forward. The fur that was framing his head lost its boundaries and washed down over his face.

**ShadowFan12:** "Don't do it all at once man!"

**TFFan27:** "Good boy!"

**DougBowWow66:** "Gotta get my credit card out!"

**Greggornator42:** "You okay dude?"

**TFFan27:** "Let's see that tail wag!"

> *Requested Ch-*

What the *arf* was happening!? Blake shot out of his seat. His whole spine suddenly felt like someone was pulling on it. The sensation tugged harder and harder until-

"Awooooo!" Blake's jaw shot out into a full canine muzzle. His eyes shot open wide and shifted into a wild amber. The rainbow RGB colors of his gaming rig faded into a few muted shades of gray.

"Arf arf ruff!" He barked at his computer in confusion. None of his words were coming out, and something behind him was nudging his pants down. He almost knocked over his expensive gaming chair as he spun in place and looked over his shoulder. He glanced down just in time to see a long yellow tail finally free itself from the confines of his blue jeans.

The video preview on his monitor showed a man with a golden retriever head chasing his own tail.

**GameAndWatch99:** "Just joined, what are we doing?"

**TFFan12:** "Dog TF."

**GameAndWatch99:** "Oh cool."

Blake finally managed to grab ahold of his tail. His tail! He could feel every inch of it! The new appendage momentarily short circuited his brain. He could feel something new moving of its own volition between his legs! It was covered in fur that felt like he was brushing his own hair. This was impossible!

He cocked his muzzle over towards his computer. He had to find some way to shut this thing off! He leapt at his desk just in time for another donation jingle to come through.

**GameAndWatch99:** "Nice try pup!"

> *Requested Change: Dog Paws*

The #TFTuesday plugin didn't seem to have any obvious "*Holy shit I'm turning into a dog stop stop!*" button. Blake frantically scrolled through the plugin's settings when suddenly the computer's mouse slipped out from under him. He reached down to grab it again, only to discover that his hand couldn't grasp it.

The back of Blake's hands were growing a fine coat of yellow fur. The tips of his fingers shifted from well trimmed fingernails into small blunt claws. He tried to flex his fingers, but it was hard to wiggle anything individually. He turned over his hand and stared in disbelief as a set of paw pads grew in on his palm and fingers. His thumbs awkwardly shrank down and grew around the backside of his wrist.

Then Blake promptly fell over.

**ShadowFan12:** "Great, now we can hardly see him."

**GameAndWatch99:** "My bad!"

The donator hadn't specified which parts of Blake should turn into paws. His feet had undergone a similar change. Blake scrambled up onto all fours and let out a confused canine whine. He did his best to stand back up, but his legs just weren't working! He awkwardly tried to climb back up into his gaming chair, but some unseen pull on his torso kept him tumbling back down. At least he could see the monitor now.

**CoolKid88:** "Sit boy!"

Blake shifted his stance again. This time he sat on the floor and plopped down onto his haunches. It was far more comfortable than any two legged stance he had just attempted.

**DougBowWow66:** "He'll do tricks via text?"

**ShadowFan12:** "Well sure, he's a good boy!"

Blake let out an awkward whine. The computer jingled once more.

**CoolKid88:** "Let's get this show on the road!"

> *Requested Change: F-*

Arf! They had requested fur! Blake could feel it before he even read the screen. His entire body erupted in a hundred minor itches. He pawed at his shirt and whined. He wanted to scratch himself everywhere, but his paws could only reach so many places. Plus his clothes were in the way.

Right?

His tail had done a good job of pushing his pants down around his knees. Everything was suddenly feeling less constricting though. Blake tilted his muzzle down just in time to watch the garments fade entirely from view. They disappeared into nothingness, revealing a chest half-covered in fur.

Blake glanced up at his monitor and finished reading the changes from before.

> *Requested Change: Fur*

> *Requested Change: Clothing Removal*

> *Requested Change: Species Update (Dog)*

**GameAndWatch99:** "Woah, that's not against the ToS?"

**CoolKid88:** "Nah, dogs don't need clothes."

The messages on the screen were making less and less sense to Blake. People had stopped sending words and were just posting unintelligible squiggles. However, he was far more focused on dealing with the increasing itchiness across his body.

The fur wasn't rippling out from his paws and head. Instead, it was like someone was just slowly turning up a big dial labeled "Fur". These strands of blond fur grew out over his chest, fore legs, and hind legs. It started as thin amounts of body hair, but quickly grew thicker with each passing...

Hmm. Blake looked down at himself. Fore legs. Hind legs. Something felt different about his four legs, but he couldn't put his paw on what. His limbs shifted in proportion as the fur grew thicker over his body. He wanted to get a better look at himself, but for some reason he stayed seated. He was propped up nicely on his haunches though. If he bent his head down far enough...

Ah, that was the stuff! Blake eagerly scratched the side of his head with one of his hind legs.

The golden retriever's figure slowly shrank to fill just the bottom half of the camera's frame. The dog's new tail wagged eagerly back and forth as his paw zeroed in on the perfect scratching spot at the base of his ear.

**ShadowFan12:** "Aww man, you did it all at once again!"

**CoolKid88:** "My bad!"

**TFFan27:** "Here comes the fun part."

> *Requested Change: Reality Shift (House Pet)*

A bright blue collar slid around the dog's neck. A small metal tag with the name "Blake" appeared dangling from its clasp. Behind him, the gamer's limited edition collectibles were turning into well chewed squeaky toys.

**GameAndWatch99:** "Woah, what filter is this?"

Blake's bed in the deep background shimmered. It lowered onto the ground and shifted into a much smaller, much more plush dog bed. All around him, the dog's former bedroom was shifting into a cozy home office.

**TFFan27:** "No filter. We really turned him into a dog."

**GameAndWatch99:** "Wait, really?"

**TFFan27:** "Yeah, go download #TFTuesday."

**Greggornator42:** "I thought he was just playing along!"

**CoolKid88:** "The good boy needs a treat!"

> *Requested Addition: Dog Treat*

Blake sat back up at the sound of a soft jingle. He glanced at the glowing square to see if there was anyone else in the room. He didn't see anyone, but a moment later a small dried salmon treat appeared on the end of his muzzle.

Arf! He knew this trick! Blake concentrated for a moment before flicking his muzzle up. He caught the delicious morsel of fish mid-air.

His tail wagged with the satisfaction of doing a good job. There was no one around to call him a good boy though. With his "Sit" disrupted, Blake looked around the office. He lazily trotted over to his usual spot and climbed into his bed.

**TFFan27:** "Aww, such a good boy!"

**CoolKid88:** "Let's make sure he enjoys it!"

> *Time Extended: 24 Hours*

Blake yawned and arched his back before spinning around three times.

**DougBowWow66:** "Aww, big stretch!"

**TFFan27:** "Woah dude! Didn't that cost a few hundred bucks?"

**CoolKid88:** "He'll have a nice treat waiting for him when he snaps out of it."

**GameAndWatch99:** "Good boy!"

**GameAndWatch99:** "Hey, I just got the plugin setup. Wanna raid my stream?"

The sound of a creaking door filled the room. Blake's owner née roommate Chris wandered into the stream's frame holding a fresh glass of water. He glanced

down at the computer and jumped a bit. Thankfully, he managed not to spill the entire glass on camera.

"Whoops, sorry about that Chat!" Chris leaned down and spoke into the microphone on the desk. "I thought I left the stream on the Starting Soon screen."

He sat down and quickly got himself settled. Chris slid on a pair of gamer headphones and did his best to transition into a smooth show intro. "Today we're going to be continuing Quest for the Kingdom 3."

Blake lifted his head up. He could sense that the human was feeling stressed. He trotted over and got a nice few head pats for his trouble. "You keep the stream entertained during the pre-show boy?" Chris chuckled. "Good boy, Blake."

The new host of the stream settled into things naturally. Chris's career as an online live streaming personality had been smooth sailing. He didn't have any flashy gimmicks, but his sizable audience of regulars seemed to value his authenticity. Well, he didn't have any gimmicks outside of his pet dog. People loved giving Blake a treat in exchange for following his channel or making a donation.

Chris quickly scrolled through the chat history for the few minutes he had accidentally been live. It just seemed like the usual live stream banter. Someone shilling their own channel, some good boys directed at Blake, nothing too out of the ordinary. Then he saw the big "25h 18m 22s Remaining" countdown on the video preview.

"You jump on the keyboard boy?" Chris asked Blake in a teasing tone of voice. He clicked on the UI element and found the offending plugin. "I don't remember installing this." With a simple pair of clicks, he disabled #TFTuesday and uninstalled the plugin. The timer disappeared entirely.

**CoolKid88:** "Uh, what happens if he turns off the plugin mid change?"

**TFFan27:** "I dunno? We better bounce."

The streamer's view count dropped a bit. No big deal, he was just getting started.

"Alright, so last night I finally snuck through the castle gates..."

Blake gave his owner's leg a nuzzle before padding back over to his dog bed. The streamer's webcam was set up so that the pup would always be visible in the corner of his frame. Chris may have hosted a popular livestream, but Blake was the real star of the show.

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# Lighter Burdens

By Yana Caoránach

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Asher, a student of runic magic, has much on his mind: his studies, his feelings, whether the downstairs neighbor will break anything structural with her new tail. After magic returned following the Bloom, he never expected that he'd end up living right next to one of the epicenters. He soon learns that living in such close proximity has *draconic* consequences. Luckily, his roommate Luka is there for him.

**Keywords:** Urban Fantasy / Magic / Romance / Identity / Dragon Transformation

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Asher rested his head against the cool wood of his apartment door. Fumbling for his keys, he lamented the headache that had already started to take hold. His trip home on the Plum Line had been mostly uneventful. Mostly, save for the snow leopard woman who decided to be his new best friend. One of the faetouched; that's what the papers called them. Someone whom the Bloom happened to change, in a minor or major way. She'd gotten on all the way up at Blackcurrant, leaving Asher as a captive audience while she talked at him about her experiences as a freshman at New Helvetia Academy. She'd seen the university pin on his bag, and *oh boy*.

Asher was no stranger to the faetouched. He admired a fair few. At least they all seemed to know who they were. But he'd just finished his shift in the university library, and his head was elsewhere. He'd limited his dialogue to brusque and closed-off responses. The poor woman couldn't take the hint. The most one-sided of conversations followed. First about her life, then asking about his before butting in with her experience at university. She raved about how 'welcoming' NHA was compared to her previous institution. It'd all blurred together.

He clutched a small wrapped box with one hand while fishing his keys out with the other. Hopefully he'd have a little time to set something up before Luka got home. After a moment more of readying himself, he opened the door into the dark and quiet two-bedroom apartment. Winter had come to New Helvetia, and it had stolen away much of a late afternoon's light. Asher stepped in, and listened for signs of life. Nothing. Not a thing stirred, save for the soft ticking of the kitchen clock.

The silence confirmed that his housemate was dead asleep, or elsewhere. The observation was backed up by a handwritten note sitting on their coffee table, made visible as he flipped lights on.

Ash,

*Going to be out late tonight, alch. lab requires we render a solution for 15 hours and we're taking shifts. Probs back around midnight. So don't wait up for me when it comes to dinner, but if you watch the new SF without me I know where you sleep.*

*Hugs,*

*Luka*

His heart fluttered at the note. A flare of nervousness. A hint of disappointment. He'd not expected his roommate to be out 'til midnight. His day would be early tomorrow, which would put off the ask even longer. "Hey Luka, do you think you might want to... go out sometime?" Here he was, talking to himself in the living room.

But maybe it was best to put it off. He could just *never* ask, that would keep things steady without rocking the boat. Leaning on the couch, he thought of his roommate's color-streaked hair, their bright yellow eyes, the way their laugh lit up the room. Luka had once explained their yellow cat eyes as 'not a faetouched thing, just a potion gone wrong'. Honestly, it just made them look cuter, even if they sometimes hid their eyes away behind sunglasses.

Asher had fallen for the short alchemy major. The options were either a hard no, or a mutual sharing of feelings. Sure, both of these required asking Luka the question. He'd get to that.

In any case, he needed to clear his head. Time to get it out of the clouds and ward off the impending migraine nagging at the back of his skull. "Tomorrow... I'll ask them tomorrow." A quick rummage in his bathroom's medicine cabinet retrieved some ibuprofen, which he downed dry. Ugh. There was also his presentation due soon. Always more. Always things to do.

Might as well get some practice in to avoid thinking about Luka saying no. To avoid thoughts of ruining his friendship with the roommate he'd found a few months back, one who made him feel special and cherished. To stop thinking about their smile, or the way they laughed at even his worst jokes.

Luka? What Luka? Who's Luka? Nobody he knew. Not anyone he'd want to hold-

With a sigh he jumped into his working draft. "Runecrafting is, in a way, reversing the principles of the Blooms. We think of these places solely as vast magical forests compressed to a point hidden from our eyes for centuries. Runes themselves are visual, they imbue an object or a place or even a person with a physical mark, something utilizing and drawing from local Blooms. Runes work on proximity to such forests. Wellspring, just south of us, gives us plenty of energy to study and craft new spells based in the old runic language." His practice continued. No mistakes, no slip ups. Perfect.

It wouldn't be an earth-shattering speech. Most of his fellow students would either be too nervous about their own presentations or too tuned out to care. But, what better way to stand out to his professor? Perhaps it would lead him to a spell theory graduate position. Each achievement was an opportunity to break through.

His shared bathroom didn't share his lofty aspirations of perfection. Dim yellow light shone upon tiles that needed another round of bleaching. Thin green lines of moss and lichen crawled down from the ceiling. Soon it'd be time for another round of 'de-greening' with the scraper. He'd cleaned the place pretty religiously since moving in, but living this close to Wellspring made for some compromises.

*THUD*

A muffled sound from under his feet was followed up by a muffled string of obscenities. He winced. Levvie had grown her tail a month ago, but hadn't quite gotten the hang of it. It must be so strange, to wake up with a new appendage, or even a new body. To learn how to move and exist as a person again.

Living in Southern Market—right on the doorstep of Wellspring—made the risk of change higher. Upside: rent cheap. Downside: how attached are you to your body?

Asher stared at himself in the mirror. That headache hadn't gone away. If anything, it'd invited a whole band of aches and pains to play a symphony within him. Odd. Maybe he was getting sick; his reflection did look a bit worn down. Not like that was a new phenomenon. Nothing there he didn't know, and nothing he really wanted to look at.

Luka had offered to dye his brown hair with the same alchemical dye they used, but the ache in Asher's soul pulled at something deeper—an unfulfilled need he couldn't find words for. Splashing some water on his face, he turned away and went to make dinner. Nothing to be done, and nothing he'd not faced before.

The rest of the night was a quiet affair. Bowl of noodles, reruns of Juniper's Game, and quick glances to the door whenever he heard noise in the hallway. The student set his planned gift to Luka on the desk in his bedroom, next to the secondhand computer Luka helped him scrounge for.

Tomorrow. He'd ask Luka on a date later. Not something he could do on the University Messaging Service. He'd need to do it in person. Tomorrow. He'd totally do it. Just. Then. Not...

The thought never arrived; Asher slept.

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Asher's dreams were wild and hectic. Flashes of scales. Cries of animals. A lupine hand reaching from a forest stretching out in every direction. When wakefulness

came, it was a surprise. One moment adrift in a lush spring. The next, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

Lethargy clung to him. Usually he counted himself as an early riser. Today he struggled to lift a heavy blanket off of his consciousness. When he did open his eyes, the stiff crust of salt at their corners made him grimace. Had he been *crying* in his sleep?

His room was blurry. He blinked. Then blinked again. A whole fluttering of the eyes didn't manage to clear his sight. "I better not have gotten pink eye," he groused.

Through a petroleum jelly haze, Asher's vision smeared across his room. While raw forms—the rectangle of his window, the light of his alarm clock, the blue smear of his left arm—he had no focus or clarity—

Wait. Blue?!

The sudden confusion pulled at a new muscle behind each of his eyes. His vision cleared, but what it revealed didn't compute. Sunlight streaming in from the half-closed blinds of his window sparkled off of smooth, overlapping scales. Bright, sapphire blue occasionally flecked with specks of silver had replaced the tanned flesh of his hand.

And his arm.

And his everything else.

Asher yelped, a surprisingly high-pitched noise, and leapt back as though he could escape his very being with enough force. His sudden movement scattered sparks of light around his small bedroom.

He tumbled from the bed. *Thump. Rattle.* His bedside lamp wobbled with a death wish. More of his body than should have been body hit the floor. Not just his side, but a length growing from his rear.

"I have a fucking TAIL?" His cry, once again, carried not the gruff growl he might expect of a large changed lizard. It sounded as though his voice had never cracked. Still him, just light. Free. The pitch pinged something deep in his chest.

No. Priorities first.

Asher craned his neck to look down at himself. The patterning of his scales continued downward toward his chest. Silver-white scales increased in number on approach to the larger flat scutes of his torso. It gave the illusion of something like sea-spray. White splashing on an expanse of blue.

His tail had thwacked against his dresser on the way down. Pain radiated up his spine, but quickly diminished like he'd stubbed his toe, or bit his tongue. Its agony was nearly mundane. The whole series of events left him with a detached curiosity. A shock that hadn't quite settled in. A line of cream-colored fur traced

from the tip of his tail upward. Like a mane, it grew all the way up his head, though seemed short enough to not fall into his eyes.

He had just noticed the strange way his new legs bent when a soft knock came at his door.

"Ash, are you okay? I was making breakfast and heard something?"

Luka's voice came muffled through the door. Thank the stars for the old building getting in the way of sound traveling. Luka couldn't see him like this. They simply *couldn't*.

He counted the reasons in his mind. They'd think he was a freak. They'd not be able to take him seriously. They'd treat him like the woman he endured on the train. So many reasons checked off, so many things he'd been building up since those first few years post-Bloom.

He swallowed tears. Bright flames of shame and uncertainty lashed at the sides of his face. Spikes of fear plunged down his spine. All he needed to do was ward off Luka. Then he could find a way to disguise himself. He was studying runes. Enchantments. Couldn't he just whip up some kind of illusion spell on something? Maybe he could practice some of the reflexive rune casting his upper division courses were studying.

He pulled himself out of the spiral with a new sense of determination. He could do this. He had to do this.

Clearing his throat, he responded. "Fine! I'm fine!" It was nearly an octave high. Needed to be deeper, like himself. Adding some gravel, he tried again. "Woke up and there was a spider." Each word came out slow, measured, and fake. "Freaked me out."

For moments it was still. Quiet. Asher only heard the staccato rhythm of Luka's heart through the door, sensed the warmth pulsing through arteries and veins. New senses lingered at the periphery of the newly faetouched's comprehension.

"You know, I'd buy that excuse from anyone but you, Ash."

*Shit.*

"I mean, a spider, really? I've heard you talk to every single bug you've found in our apartment. You really think I'm going to imagine that you woke up so afraid as to—"

"I JUST NEED YOU TO NOT COME IN HERE, OKAY?" Asher's voice leapt from his new muzzle before he could stop himself. No filter, no façade of gruffness, just the fragile soprano of someone teetering on the edge of a breakdown.

Moments stretched into seconds, stretched to minutes. Luka sighed. "Okay. Okay. Just, tell me if anything is up? Here for you, Ash."

He let out the breath he hadn't known he was holding. He needed to focus up. Figure out his options before walking out into the living room. Before scaring off the person he wanted to date. Before. Before—

Anxiety bubbled over within him, becoming a soft whine he didn't know how to stop. A high keening sound filled the air. Was that him? He felt unmoored. Outside himself. The whine continued.

Hopefully it wouldn't summon Luka back.

Eventually his noise petered out. He caught his breath. Perhaps this was all a dream. Or maybe not a full change? Maybe just some kind of temporary shift that could be reverted? With a grunt, he rolled to his front. His tail whipped around as he did—some change-induced muscle memory? Oh, how he wished he'd done more research before something like this happened!

On shaky legs he reared up to grab the mused duvet of his bed with both palms. He tried to get a hold of himself. Sitting on his hind legs was comfortable, like it'd be a resting position for any other creature. Hind legs. Haunches. The words came to him as though they'd been with him his whole life. He knew he'd not been an overweight gecko, but some part of him worked to fit his body into the strange puzzle of himself. It was all too easy to hold these new ideas of self alongside the old.

Unsettling.

His hands were humanoid, if not fully human. Fingers longer, palm narrower, three fingers, one thumb. Pearlescent white claws tipped the ends. "At least I still have opposable thumbs." With a sigh the drake thumped back to solid ground. It was the final straw for his alarm clock. Already off kilter from his fall, the digital clock had been hanging onto the edge of his nightstand for dear life.

While falling, the hour ticked over. 7:59 became 8:00, and the clang of rattling bells and digital noise clouded all thoughts but the most reactive. That new hearing of his was good for some things, but the bright hot pain of ice-pick noise through his skull was not one of them.

Something happened next. In one moment he rested on all fours, thinking through his next move and spiraling as his life unraveled before him. The next, his clock was in pieces, shattered by the downward momentum of one hand.

Thwack, thump, slam.

Claws dug gouges in the carpet.

Fibers ripped. Wordless grief rose like bile in his throat.

The noise ceased, but still it rang in his skull.

A new noise behind him. It was lost in the echoes of his own head amplifying each and every anxiety. The clock had long since scattered. Screws and plastics in all corners, shards of glass in his palm. Pain. Was he hurt? He didn't care, Luka couldn't see him like this! *People* couldn't see him like this! Why couldn't he handle it? Why couldn't he be normal? Why couldn't he even handle a simple alarm! Why—

"Ash..."

The soft sound of Luka's voice shone like a beacon through fog. A beam of light clearing everything in its path, only to make Asher realize that he stood on train tracks with the engine coming right at him. He turned to face it, bright yellow bearing down. Trapped. He was trapped. He—

"Hey." Luka sat on the ground, folding their legs in one fell swoop. Elegant, like always. "Breathe."

Simple words. Simple statements. A knife through the rope tying him to the tracks. Asher stared at him, nictitating membranes doing their best to clear his eyes of tears.

"Luka, I..." His voice came out raspy. Had he been yelling? Even in fear, his voice failed to register as masculine; the heavy bass had been stripped from his vocal cords. Some numbing weight had been lightened. He hadn't the mind to dwell. "I—"

Luka hushed him. "It can wait. You're hurt."

The tone of Luka's voice confused him. They were so patient, why were they being so patient with him? With the monster he'd become? Lost in dazed questioning, he missed Luka running off and returning with a first aid kit. They got to treating Asher's hand, removing the few shards of glass and plastic embedded in his palm.

Animal noises left him. A soft whimper, an uncertain growl. He wasn't like this! He had kept so buttoned up. He had been *normal*. Why was it all coming out of him now? Tears threatened to wage their campaign against his composure once more.

"Hold on, this one's a little deep. Deep breaths." Luka re-centered him.

Forceps clamped around the last shard. Right. He'd been hurt.

"I'll pull it out on the count of three. One. Two. Th—" Luka yanked, early. Ash whimpered and only by the grace of the stars managed to not claw at his roommate.

"You never finished three!" he whined, pulled back to the ground by a simple betrayal.

Luka smiled, dropped the bloody thing on a plate, and got to wrapping his palm in gauze. "Oh bite me, you big baby. You'll survive." One more wrap of gauze and the hard part was over. Luka gently squeezed one of Ash's claws.

"One thing I've heard, Ash, is that a lot of faetouched folks heal a little easier. So you shouldn't need stitches."

"Luka, why would you do this for me?"

Luka merely laughed and rolled his beautiful golden eyes. "Oh yes, let me strand my roommate to deal with getting broken glass out of his palm with a physiology he barely understands. Yes. Yes, I should have left you to wallow. I should have stranded this sweet dragon. Oh, *woe*."

Sweet?! Dragon?!

The words did somersaults within his gut, and flushed his face with a warmth he wasn't sure showed on his scales. *His* scales. He had *scales*.

"You're not... scared of me? Or upset with me?" Of all the reactions, he'd not expected this warmth. Before Luka could stand, Ash pressed his head into their chest. An instinctual action, a simple outpouring of physical affection that could not be held back.

Luka pet over his mane. Fingers quickly found knots in the fur—tangles from his morning's escapades. "Ash. *Scared of you? Upset?*" His hand moved under Ash's and tilted the new reptile's snout up to look into his eyes. "Is that my fear you're worried about? Or yours?"

The question hung in the air. Ash squirmed, eye contact making him feel all too exposed.

"B-but. This can't be me... can it? I have my studies. I have responsibilities. I—"

"Breathe. Take a moment, Ash. Exist in the moment. How do you really feel? Forget society. Forget everyone. What is your body saying to you?"

Ash closed his eyes. He lifted one paw, then set it down and lifted another. He sat back, stood up and settled back down upon his haunches. He rolled his shoulders, feeling the shapes that they now took, the muscles they now moved. Nothing felt *wrong*. Different, yes, but not... *wrong*.

"You've read the same articles I have in the Daily. Low regret rates, high satisfaction," Luka continued. "Most people are more annoyed about accommodations and the stares from others. Not with their own bodies."

"But why can't I feel satisfied and happy? If they're all so carefree and unanxious why do I still feel so— so panicked? Why didn't it fix me? I should be fixed, right? I should be happy. I *should* be happy." He opened his eyes, settling

back down onto all fours when he did. "Why is it so scary? Why am I so scared?" His chin arced to look up at Luka. Luka ruffled his mane, then pulled him closer.

"Ash, are you telling me that if, stars, if you won a million dina in a lottery that you wouldn't be overwhelmed? Anxious? Good things can still be *too much*. At the end of the day, you're still you. You're just now more you."

More him? More *him*. More— More...

Emotion welled up. Something had been missing. He'd felt it just the night before. He'd felt it every day. A weight he couldn't put words to. The unease, the jealousy. A need unaddressed, unknowable.

*This*. He'd needed this. He couldn't hold it back. He didn't need to hold it back. The dam broke. The self he'd walled off flowed like water into every inch of him. The dam washed away in the flood. He sobbed and sagged into Luka's embrace.

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"So that's... me?" Ash considered himself in the body-length mirror in Luka's room. His roommate didn't respond. They didn't need to. Behind him, the room faded into obscurity. Alchemical supplies on a desk, laundry tossed haphazardly into a hamper, the lava lamps that Luka claimed would come back into style 'any moment now'. None of that mattered.

An azure dragon stared back. Silver scales splashed up from his scutes, dappling him with seafoam over chest and legs. His eyes were like sapphires, bright and piercing with black slits splitting their middle. That creamy fur grew longer on his back, flopped off to one side.

He was *short*, though that had been obvious before this moment. Even Luka, petite Luka, still towered over him. Stood at the shoulder, he perhaps reached Luka's waist?

Ash lifted his tail, marveling at the paintbrush tip it ended with. A tail... he had a tail! A wide grin split that muzzle of his, and had him investigating the ways his teeth overlapped, the fork of his tongue, and the curl of his dark jowls.

Luka sat on the bed and paged through an encyclopedia. It was one of the newer ones, mostly a quickly compiled compendium of amateur research from those who lived around more concentrated pockets of magic. Required reading for both of their studies.

It was simple. It was downright domestic. Ash took a break from examining himself and looked up at his roommate instead. Even from this angle they were glorious—handsome and beautiful in equal measures. Their oversized hoodie and streaked hair gave them all the air of a boy-band heartthrob with none of the ego.

Luka looked down at him. They smiled, which warmed Ash's face and chest. A few seconds stretched just looking at each other before Ash realized what he

was doing. "O-oh! I— Well! I seem to look healthy. And I can fit through doors, more than can be said for some. Means I can get to schoo—"

A bolt of mental lightning. "Oh shoot! My presentation!"

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"Alright, Dr. Thán. Yes, I'll see you in class next week. With my presentation, yes. Yes, I'll call the dean's office. Yes I'll— Alright, thank you. Thank you, thank you!" Luka held the phone for Ash as he finished the call with his Methodology of Magic professor. They hung it on the receiver when the call ended.

Ash sagged in relief. Sweet relief. "I'm off the hook. 'Til next week. Need to call the Dean's so they can get the school's Ombuds team to contact city resources on my behalf to get me registered with the city. Then we can get accommodations looked at for testing and whatnot. We'll also need to test how my magic flows again but that's going to be— we'll cross that bridge when we burn it."

Luka chuckled. "You and that saying. Are you ever going to get the expression right?"

"It was intentional this time! Who knows! I might burn a bridge down when we test out what I can do! I *am* a dragon now, you know." Ash bumped his flank into Luka's shin. He underestimated his strength and almost knocked his roommate to the floor. They both laughed.

The exhaustion of it all hit Ash at that point. He sighed, spent emotionally and physically. His forepaw still ached, and the whiplash of emotions from distinct ends of a spectrum finally caught up with him. Laughs became another round of tears, for which Luka was all too happy to comfort the dragon.

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The rest of the day was spent in the soft fragility of too many emotions and too few guardrails. At some point the pair made it to the couch. Ash's body took up nearly two-thirds of the thing, and that ignored the tail he'd left hanging off the side. New discoveries came with intention and by accident in equal measure.

He had to learn to rally things to and from where he carried them. A sandwich on a plate became a game of set, walk, turn back and grab, and set further. That is, when Luka wasn't helping him.

Luka, who sent the e-mails to his other professors. Luka, who held the phone while he called the Dean's office. Luka who reached the highest cupboards. Ash may have been long, but it did not translate to vertical height. Standing on his hind legs and holding to the counter for support only brought his reach to fourteen decimeters or so.

Ash didn't think about any of that while in the moment. Luka had discovered something wonderful: the deep magic of petting Ash's mane and down his back.

Delight radiated off the pair. Tingles and radiating warmth flowed over his scales. Ash closed his eyes.

He opened them again when a deep rumble rattled forth from his chest. Like the low thrum of an engine, Ash *purred*. He had thought the most magical thing was Luka's fingers through his fur. Wrong. Luka's chuckle at Ash's pleased purring sent a whole new wave of sparkle through his core. Had he not already been falling for them, he may just have done so again. He closed his eyes and drifted.

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"So... who's the special someone?" Luka's voice roused Ash from the light haze of sleep he'd found himself in. In their hands was a small box, wrapped in parchment and tied with twine. *The gift. He'd forgotten about his gift.* It must have fallen off his desk in his tumult.

Awake now. Very awake. "Well, I— uhm..." Ash ran the gamut on verbal stumbles before finally running head first into the truth.

"You." No fanfare, no qualifying, and Ash was sheer out of the mental energy to dance around the issue. He lifted his long neck and looked into Luka's eyes. "I meant to surprise you with it last night."

Luka let him speak, their face growing rosy.

"You've been really good to me and I like spending time with you. We go on walks, we watch shows. I wanted to see if— if you'd be interested in going out on a date sometime. You can open it, if you want. It's nothing speci—"

"Shh." Luka's fingers slipped under rough twine after he hushed the anxious dragon. "It's a gift. It's from you. That's more than special." A tug, a pluck, and the little box came unwrapped. Lifting the lid revealed a pair of smooth black stones each attached to a loop of black leather. Luka picked one up and turned it over in his hand. A small runecircle had been inscribed on the inside, radiating the faintest red glow. "Oh, wow, it's warm."

Ash's tail thwumped against the couch. "Yes! You've been complaining about how cold your hands get when you write notes. And with winter... I needed to test something. Turns out you can make localized minor enchantments that don't need much mana to function. You can put one on each wrist and it should radiate some ambient warmth through your hands. So your fingers never get cold."

Luka slipped the bands on, tightening the slipknot on each strap. Asher felt a spotlight upon him. The warmth and nervousness pooled in his gut. Unable to sweat, his mouth dropped into a pant—another new *feature*.

"I've not done too much testing. And— and they could fail. I don't know long they'll last. Also we don't have to date I just thought it'd be a nice gesture but if you're not interested that's fine too."

"Ash. Hush. I love them. This is... this is such a thoughtful gift. C'mere." Luka wrapped their arms around Ash's neck and hugged him close. "I was wondering when you'd pick up on the hints."

*What.*

"What?" Ash, head now pressed to Luka's slender chest, heard his own heartbeat as much as theirs.

Another chuckle arose from his friend. His *more-than-friend*? "We take turns cooking for each other. We watch our favorite show together. I even took you out to dinner last week, just you and me. To be honest, I thought it'd become something unspoken between us. Granted, I'll have to look up some *specifics* on dragon anatomy—"

"LUKA?!"

Luka leaned in and soothed Ash's racing heart with a kiss to the top of his snout. "*Relax*. I'm teasing. Though if things do progress..."

Ash was on fire. From nostrils to tail-fluff, his body flared with simultaneous joy, embarrassment, and more than a little excitement. His paws tingled. Was he hyperventilating?

Warm hands found his mane and began stroking once more, petting to settle him down. "What I'm trying to say, Ash, is that I'd love to date you."

"Even with my... everything?" One big oceanic eye looked up at Luka.

"Especially with your everything." Tender lips brushed against soft scales, another kiss upon his new body.

Logistics were for later. The trials of life could continue apace tomorrow. Tonight was for them.

"Now. How about we catch up on *Storied Fleets* and I cuddle you on the couch?"

Ash nodded. That sounded pretty good to him.

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Thank you to all the writers who submitted a story for the pilot (even those who didn't get a spot this time) we hope to work with you again in future!

A special thank you to our editors:

**Marquis Orias**

**Nall**

And thank \*you\* for reading!

We would love to make Transform Fiction a semi- regular 'zine that features stories, interviews, and more — offering a creative space for our community of transformation writers. If you enjoyed this pilot and/or have ideas for what it could become, we'd love to hear!

All the best!

**Transform Fiction**

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