

The Gift of Change

by

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The flashing, cool-toned light from the monitor spilled over the figure laboring away at the keyboard, his thoughts a jumble of the imagery before his eyes and the incessant complaints and rambling messages in his email box. Diligently viewing hundreds of minutes of footage compiled from his homemade digital video recorder, he retained only the shows or movies that he deemed worthy or needed to be included in his collection.

His client chimed, fourteen new email messages. Rumors posted on several forums led fans of his website to believe that he was going to release new clips soon, and dozens of fanatical, yet anonymous, people wanted to be first in line to receive the downloads of his encoded videos.

Was it truly worth the headaches of trying to respond to the impatient downloaders, never appreciative of his effort or his response? With his chin propped up by his nearly numb arm on his desk, he continued through the classification and saving of the clips he would later add to the future site.

With a grunt he minimized the software screen for the videos and pulled up the interface filled with mostly annoyance. Dozens of new mails since this morning, all but one asking for when his site would

return or could he send them copies of videos for which they had been searching.

But that one, the non-request, he kept. Reading through it once more, he wondered who might have sent it. Rather than a request or demand, it was a gift, a present for all the work in the past and near future he had given tirelessly to those who liked the content, but often ignoring the man.

The artist's style and name he could not place, but the artwork had the merits of a professional. The emotions of the facial features and poses, the anatomically correct workings, the likeness to himself and the actual animal during the comic-style transformation, all had to have taken the artist a bit of time to perfect.

Though only one page, the artist managed to show the entire shift, from human to nearly full animal, without any difficulties in transition or inability to showcase the parts that did change. He saved the file to his hard drive and opened it in his art manipulation program, for the sole purpose of blowing it up to print on his large format printer.

Within a minute, the black-and-white-computer-toned image eased out of the hardware and into its catch tray, and the man picked it up to view in all its glory. How lovely it truly was, perfect for what he wished more people would give him rather than complaints and irritants that plagued his mail server. Even the species depicted, unusual for his tastes, was a wonderful choice.

He leaned back in his chair, the paper resting on his keyboard, and relaxed into a state of passivity. Gone was the tension of viewing all those clips to weed out the needless; gone was the headache of reading relentless requests and demands; gone was the abhorrence of a vocal few who made him loathe the remainder of those who never said a word to him, positive or negative.

Soon the passive nature of his relaxation turned to rest, and his eyelids could no longer hold themselves open. He gave way to sleep, the noises of the computer equipment and the faint sounds of the highway nearby disappeared.

Soon the world of his darkly lit room with all its technology gave way to a bright, hot landscape of beige grass and harshly brown trees,

the humidity of the land a contrast to the cool temperatures of his Canadian home. In the distance, a small gathering of giraffe ate hardened leaves off a tree, while gazelle managed a respite at a watering hole to his left.

He shielded his eyes with his hand, the sun bright, much more of a luminance than the monitor in his room, baking his pale skin while he stood in the savannah's waist-high stalks. Such intense fragrances unfamiliar to him, sounds of far away animals and unseen insects, it truly was a change in world for him. And such a welcome one, after all that he dealt with.

The gazelles' heads turned in unison, a distraction from their mundane refill somewhere behind the displaced man. His curiosity took hold and he wondered what could have bothered the herd en masse like that.

At first, the grass simply blew with the winds, nothing extraordinary that would have spooked him. Then the blur of the tuft of hair waving just above the thistle tips of the dried plants alerted him to the origins of the gazelles' concerns.

The lioness crept ever so slowly toward them, concealed behind the plants, patiently plotting her kill.

The young man grinned, realizing now the instance of this situation. The scene, the first frame of the sequence, looked similar, the lioness in wait, and his change then succumbing him. Now, he wondered, would the rest of the sequence play out?

He looked down at his hands but saw nothing. The gazelles took off, some splitting to limit the lioness's chances of felling one, the large cat racing after what she thought would be an easy kill.

His view kept wandering between himself and the carnivore. She sat back on her haunches, unable to catch any of the creatures, before she noticed the human standing in the middle of the savannah. She sniffed the air, downwind of him, and found that he may just do for her today.

As she took the first step, he felt a sudden warmth fill him, far more than the sun beating down on his light peach skin. Good, about time, he told himself, gripping his shirt and ripping it off his frame.

His skin turned a dull gray hue, hardening as it washed over parts

exposed and hidden beneath the rest of his clothes. As with the comic, his hands clenched and stiffened, nails blunting as they grew from their digits.

In a matter of moments, with each step closer she made, his body continued to change, without pain or discomfort, becoming a whole new species for him. His back contorted and pulsed, making him much taller, until his hips could take no longer and threw him onto his clumsy hands. The earth shook under his weight and his muscles contracted with their new power. Pants burst off bulking and shrinking legs, new muscles forming under hard leathery skin to support his heavier body. Feet became nothing more than stumps, much like his hands.

As the lioness charged, he grinned, new teeth exposed in his growing muzzle, pulsing out in front of his spreading eyes. His ears, now atop his shifted skull, flicked, just as his new tail did as it realized it now existed. His eyes crossed to watch his horns grow out of his face, his changes nearly complete.

When she leaped toward him, just as the final part of the sequence showed, he readied his stance and lowered his head. The horns found their mark as the beasts collided, and with her inertia and his strength, he was able to throw her far behind him. He turned and glared at where she fell in the grass, ready for her next attack.

This was where the comic ended, so he was unsure how it would play out after this point. He tried to growl, only an odd sound from his throat, to sound more menacing than his looks allowed, but the lioness only dashed away.

The rhinoceros's ears twitched as an annoying tone filtered in through the savannah. Instead, the man sat up from his seat, in the dark abysmal room back in Canada, and saw that his monitor was alerting him to another series of emails, the paper with the comic having fallen to the floor during his dream.

If only one of those were as good as the gift email. Well, he would only find out by sifting through the junk. With a sigh, he pulled his seat toward the computer and went back to his work.