

"Conversion"

by Christopher Shaffer

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Lawrence sighed as he stepped out into the quiet night with his motorcycle helmet under one arm. A warm spring breeze ran down the street and lightly ruffled the red fox morph's dull orange fur. His tail swayed lightly in the wind as he made his way down the steps to where his bike was parked out front. The headset he wore displayed a status screen over one eye with digital readouts regarding his father's medical scanners. He hated leaving like this, but his father was sleeping peacefully for once and Lawrence could no longer put off this trip. He'd done too many questionable things to deal with his father's increasingly degenerative condition not to put some newfound doubts to rest.

Despite the warmth of the night he zipped up a light, russet-red leather jacket he wore for basic protection when riding. It helped hide the fact that his form was lanky bordering on scrawny, even more obvious now that he'd finally shed his winter coat. Cargo pants ran down his legs down to bare digitigrade fox-feet. A dull finger claw tapped at a button on the headset as he took it off and transferred the connection to a display in the helmet he held under one arm. He pulled it on and felt the familiar structure of the helmet accommodating his ears. The visor showed him important weather information, traffic reports, and an up-to-the-minute report on his father's biosigns.

This wasn't one of his better days, Lawrence thought to himself as he started the bike and glided out into the street. *That's why I'm doing this. For him.*

The night was oddly quiet for the hour, like some greater power wanted to give him room to think on his ride. Only a few other vehicles shared the road with him and most of them were the newer, quieter cars with fuel cells as opposed to the dwindling numbers of aging gas burners. As he leaned into turns and weaved around other vehicles, he felt his tail held against the seat by wind drag. It sometimes swayed in the breeze and in his introspective mood he was a little more aware of the sensation than usual.

Lawrence gaze flicked to the corner of his helmet's HUD that normally gave him directions. He hesitated and remembered he'd left it empty this time. He didn't want to risk someone somehow reading his 'address search' history and using it against him. He made do with a decent memory and street signs. Even with that, however, he had to turn around a few times to get to the right block.

Lawrence pulled up in front of the brownstone and locked up his bike. A few bits of trash blew down the street and as he removed the helmet his sharp vulpine nose caught the distinctive odors of less-than-careful dog walkers earlier in the day. This was one of those rare neighborhoods where people felt comfortable walking their dogs. He replaced his headset and it automatically clicked back on with his father's data so he could monitor him.

He rang the doorbell and waited. No name over the mailbox but that jived with what he'd been told about the man who lived here.

The intercom by the door clicked to life. "What?"

"Charles Landau?" Lawrence asked. "Doctor Charles Landau?"

"It's almost eleven." The intercom muffled the man's British accent, but only slightly.

"So I'm aware. My name is Lawrence Murphy."

A slight pause. "I told you I didn't want an interview for your paper."

The fox sighed and spent a moment indulging an internal debate.

"I don't work for a news service, doctor," he said. "I lied to get your attention."

"Well, you got it. Now you've lost it. Piss off."

"This is about my father."

"Am I your father?"

"No." Now Lawrence was starting to get annoyed.

"Then piss off."

"My father is Peter Murphy. He was one of the Plague Converts."

Silence from the intercom. Lawrence pounded his fist against the door once.

"I know who you used to work for, doctor! The company folded and vanished into the ether. But I know who you are! I need to talk to you and *you damn well know why!*"

Lawrence raised his fist to hit the door again and it opened. An old, stooped male human with white hair and glasses stood on the other side of the doorway, a bathrobe on over pajamas and a piece of flexible plastic folded in his hand. He smelled of scotch and the only thing shining in those old eyes was resigned weariness as he wordlessly waved Lawrence inside. The plastic flickered with text and images from the day's news reports.

"You're the first to track me down," he said after a few steps down the hallway, gesturing to a sitting room with a roaring fire in front of a pair of nice chairs.

An end table with a bottle of scotch and a glass flanked one of the chairs. Lawrence sat down at the other and waited for the old man to return to his seat. His tail swung around to rest against his own thigh, as the chair's shape didn't allow for it to go anywhere else, and he tried to keep the tip from twitching impatiently.

"Doctor, if I thought it was safe to approach you during the day, I--" he started before the old man cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"How did you find me? Answer that for me and I will tell you as much as I can about whatever you think you need to know."

"I work for RothPharmTech. We make medical devices. That gives me access to certain records and literature. It was just a matter of knowing where to dig. It took me the last six months of dedicated searching in my spare time to find your name and address."

And then another week to work up the nerve to come out here, he thought.

"But between your job and your father, you don't have a lot of spare time. Do you?"

"We both know the answer to that. I'm here to find out why."

"What stage is he in?"

"They're still finding the medical language to describe it." Lawrence leaned forward. "It's like what they used to call Alzheimer's. At first, it was just issues with managing sensory input. 'Intermittent synesthetic periods.' But now he's having trouble with memory and body image. He forgets that he was turned into a fox morph because of the Genehack Plague and thinks he's supposed to be human."

"There are a number of conditions that can be caused by aging." Charles sounded like not even he believed that.

"Oh, sure." Lawrence shrugged. "They've seen it before in older people who underwent Conversion at some point, which is why they didn't identify it at first. But now there are people who were Converted to escape the plague that ravaged massive chunks of the civilized world -- before they found a cure --and they should be far too young to have something like that. And there's more of it happening, all at once. All in the last two years and change."

"And why do you think I should know something?"

"Because eight months ago I sold a few of my company's secrets to NUBio Research to get my father into an experimental drug trial for his condition. And I sold a few more to get around any 'conflict of interest' issues and make sure he didn't wind up in the control group."

"And it didn't work and now you're blaming me because I helped develop the Conversion process in the first place?"

"It *did* work." Charles' eyes widened at that and Lawrence continued with a grin. "Oh, not a miracle cure. But it's been suspiciously effective. So I had a few tests quietly run on the medications they've been giving him. And believe me, getting that analyzed, with people knowing what my connections are, that wasn't easy."

Charles stood up, retrieved another glass from a nearby cupboard, and poured a drink for Lawrence. He accepted it and sipped at the scotch. He wasn't a booze expert but he strongly suspected it was older than he was. As Charles sat back down Lawrence pretended not to notice the gun he'd tucked between his thigh and the arm of the chair.

"So I traced it back a bit," Lawrence explained. "Early versions of the drug treatment were developed by BodyShape, your old company, as an 'aftercare drug' for people who underwent the full-body Conversions you pioneered. It was tested and a supply was stockpiled. But it was never implemented or marketed and nobody ever published what sorts of conditions it was meant to treat. So where did it come from? And did your people know this was coming?"

Charles sighed, finished his own drink, and poured himself another.

"The world's governments forced us to make Conversions available at a fraction of proper cost to help victims of the Genehack Plague," the old man explained. "Certain aspects of the process cured the subject but those aspects could only be introduced to the body during a full Conversion. Nothing less than that would do it, until someone else developed a process that undid the damage."

"Yes, I know this," Lawrence said, fidgeting with the glass, agitated.

"I'm getting to the point, but you need context because people don't talk much about what happened to BodyShape." The old man's tone was equal parts placating and condescending. "We lost money on every Conversion and the public became so afraid of the technology afterwards that we folded." He sipped his drink. "Its components were broken down, bought up by different companies, and so forth. So someone at NUBio might have gotten that drug. And apparently they figured out what it was intended for."

Lawrence was on the edge of his seat. One paw painfully gripped the arm of the chair while his tail lashed back and forth behind him against the back of the seat. His eyes asked the question he was slightly afraid to voice aloud.

"Before we knew so many people would need to undergo Conversions," the old man continued. "We wanted to make sure our company would stay relevant to those who did. A genetic... 'program' might be the right word... was added to the body templates. So about thirty-something years later, anyone who underwent the process would develop certain conditions and need care for them. It would look like whomever developed the process wouldn't have foreseen some side effects of the aging process combined with the conversions. And when the Plague hit, we had no means of subtly removing the program. We tried, believe me, but there wasn't time to change the templates in the midst of the crisis."

"But this was *deliberate*?" the fox growled. "I was just willing to assume that you predicted the problem and decided to profit off of it rather than fix it. Or maybe that you discovered too late that it couldn't be fixed and simply kept quiet."

He stood up and flung the glass into the fireplace just for the satisfaction of hearing it shatter. The aroma of scotch stung his nose.

"But you made my father sick *on purpose*?" he yelled, bearing his sharp teeth.

The fur on Lawrence's neck stood up as every fiber of his being resisted the urge to tear the old man's throat out. A sudden beeping distracted him and he immediately glanced to the HUD in his headset's eyepiece. His father was fine.

"That's not you, that's me." Charles produced the pistol he'd hidden but kept it pointed at the floor rather than at Lawrence. "Somebody is breaking in through the upstairs."

"Why?" Lawrence swiveled an ear towards the hallway and realized he could hear faint footfalls upstairs. At least three people.

"Because you're here. Either my people are after you, or yours."

"My people?"

"You said you used your own company's resources to track me down. Maybe they have something to hide, or they just now found out about your dealings with NUBio."

"But how do they know I'm here?"

"They probably traced you through the datastream from your home." Charles gestured to the headpiece. "Sloppy."

"Oh, son of..." Lawrence yanked it off and resisted the urge to break it as well. "So now what?"

"Now they kill us both. They make it look like I shot you in self-defense and you managed to kill me before succumbing to your wounds." Charles turned the gun around in his hand and offered it, grip-first, to Lawrence. "You may be able to fight your way out. I don't have much time left anyhow."

"I can't fire one of these." The fox's paw shook as he took the gun from Charles.

"Safety's on. Steady yourself before taking it off. Squeeze, don't pull." The old man got up and made his way to the cupboard where he pulled a derringer from behind a bottle. "If you make it out of this... I don't know where you could find it..."

"What is it?" Lawrence steadied the paw holding the gun and thumbed off the safety as he faced the doorway.

"Look for a project or protocol called 'Breakdown Disposition,' and then--"

The first shots rang out. Even through a silencer it was like hearing a car door slam. Lawrence and Charles both dropped to the floor. Lawrence's ears flicked back and he smelled blood coming off of the old man's body. He aimed the pistol he'd been given back through the doorway and fired off a pair of shaky shots to warn the attackers back as he scooted back to Charles.

"Doctor?" he asked, whispering, ears ringing.

"Reginald should still be in there, he'll get you in," Charles wheezed. He handed his derringer to Lawrence.

"We have to get you some help." The fox pocketed the derringer.

"If they want me dead, I'm dead. If they don't... they can fix me."

Lawrence watched the doorway and fired at what turned out to be a flickering shadow from the fireplace. The gun felt warm and sure in his paw; at least more than it had a moment ago. The smell coming off of it tickled his nose but he resisted the impending sneeze. The old man pointed to a corner with a wooden panel.

"Old... dumb waiter, you look thin enough..." He broke down into a coughing fit. "Go!"

Lawrence fired a couple more shots into the hallway as he ran for the dumb waiter in the hopes it could carry him to freedom.