Phil broke past the defensive end in a triumphant burst of speed. Fingers brushed against the edge of his uniform—then he was through. The yards fell away beneath him as he approached the end zone, entirely focused on his speed. Any second now there would be a crushing impact, driving him to the ground.

Phil was so utterly focused that he missed what was happening to him, at least at first. He might've missed it completely, if it wasn't for the cheering. This was a season-defining moment, clutching a crucial win for the Eagles that was mere inches from defeat. The crowd was a distant blur on the sidelines; he could never see their faces during a play. But something caught him up short, and made him slow for a step in his charge. Those weren't cheers—those were screams.

Even a slight break from his focus was enough to make him stumble. Something was wrong with his... shoes?

He took one step, and felt his cleats tearing under the strain, their soles giving way underneath him as the fabric split and tore. That was enough to make him stumble sideways. A less drilled receiver might've tripped, but he managed to catch himself for a step, long enough to see over his shoulder.

The entire game was frozen. Players from both teams stopped in place, staring in shock in his direction. A few actually pointed at him, or reached out as though they were about to help. Not a single Cowboys player was anywhere close to him—they'd fallen almost fifteen yards behind. Why?

"God, Phil. What's happening to you?"

To *him*? As soon he heard the words, something lurched under his shoulder—the ball deformed under his arm, as though it had just burst, and he looked down, desperate to catch it. Then he saw, in the same moment that he began to feel it. Something red peeked out from beneath his shirt, straining against the fabric there.

*What the hell is happening to me?*

Now that something had broken his laser-focus on the end zone, he could *feel* it too. Like someone had stuck his entire uniform and all his safety gear in a supernatural clothes-ruining dryer, and they were shrinking away beneath him. His uniform tightened around his knees and elbows, and he could actually hear the fabric groaning. Something shoved up against his shoulder pads from below, and somehow he felt that too. Rapidly advancing cancerous tumors? Except that theory was apparently wrong, because the whole stadium seemed to be *shrinking*.

For an instant, it seemed like he was getting taller. A few of his teammates backed away. Even in their helmets, he could see their mouths falling open. Phil’s own helmet felt more and more cramped by the second, though not in a way that made sense. Like it was pressing down painfully on something, maybe?

Then he saw it—the quarterback's own uniform yielding near the shoulders, bright blue fur poking out from beneath. The rest of the team noticed it too, and they scattered, parting from around him. A few other players made it only a step or two before collapsing to the ground, seemingly tripping on something.

"EVERYONE, REMAIN CALM," shouted a voice from the stands. It didn’t sound like either of the commentators who had been running the game so far. This voice was harsh and abrupt—maybe stadium security? "PLEASE REMAIN SEATED."

But Phil lost track of whatever they said next, because the ground spilled out from under him. Rather, the very act of keeping his balance was suddenly impossible, and his arms fell forward.

Such a violent motion was too much for most of his uniform. The shoulders tore completely and his pads fell aside in two pieces, revealing shoulders they were not meant to contain. He gasped in a moment of pain as whatever had been trapped there was suddenly released, then felt the air against his skin.

His hands touched the AstroTurf, though the sensation was dulled somehow. His fingers refused to move, as though he'd just shoved them in the thickest, most immoveable gloves. He tried to stand again, glaring down at one of his hands. Why couldn't he find his balance?

Phil saw a limb that barely even resembled what should've been there. Red fur now completely dominated, with only a few shreds of his uniform still clinging there. His hand... wasn't a hand anymore at all, but a solid red clump of... something. He wanted to reach out and touch it, but of course he had nothing to touch it *with*. *That's a hoof,* he realized, with a distant awareness not unlike watching it happen to someone else.

Ahead of him, media and support staff scattered from around the field, backing away. A few security guards in black appeared from an access door, though none of them seemed to know what to do. They bunched up on one side, staring with as little comprehension as Phil *felt*.

*What's happening to me?* He glanced over his shoulder, and found his neck surprisingly flexible—little comfort, since nothing he saw was familiar.

Phil wasn’t a human being anymore. He stood on four hooves, with only scraps of his compression pants clinging on for dear life—at least until a bushy yellow tail emerged from behind him and tore them too. Something twitched on his back, then opened. Suddenly, he felt the pressure of wind against two massive *wings* that were fully as large as his entire body.

He wasn't the only one, either. Half a dozen others were going through their own version of his living nightmare. There didn't seem to be any particular rhyme or reason to who it chose—Danny was already on four legs, with a sharply pointed horn and no wings to speak of. A member of the opposing defensive line looked even bigger and bulkier than Phil himself, towering over the still-human players like a Clydesdale. Granted, he'd never seen the Budweiser horses look that shade of *green* before.

"What's happening to you?" asked Carlos Reyes—the Cowboys’ quarterback. He nudged the green horse with one gloved hand, as though checking to see if they were real. A visible spark arced between the horse's green shoulder and Carlos's hand, then he started to wobble and swell. His fingers fused so quickly Phil could see it in real time. Carlos actually tried to get away, but it did him no good. He made it three steps before his shoes tore apart and he tripped on the AstroTurf.

The remaining players scattered, backing away from the field in a disorderly blob. None of them screamed in terror, though it would be hard to tell their voice apart from the terror filling the stands.

Phil spared one glance up there, and that was all he needed to see that chaos was spreading among the audience as well. Not this strange transformation, but something much more familiar. People were fighting to get out of the stadium in a terrified disarray of fans. Phil could hardly blame them, though he could only hope nobody got crushed under the mob.

Seeing Carlos, the security guards came no closer than the edge of the field. They watched—a few with hands on their batons—though what they were going to *do* with them, Phil couldn't guess. They did nothing to stop the support staff and untransformed players from fleeing. Most members of both teams didn't go far past the field. They stopped just past security, both teams freely mingled now, watching the scene in the center unfold.

One figure moved in the other direction—one of the refs, in striped black and white. He ignored warning shouts from a security guard and cut straight across the grass towards Phil. He looked so small and frail compared to the clump of players on the center of the field.

Before he reached Phil, he came up short, bending down to the grass in front of him. Where he'd dropped the ball?

It wasn't a ball anymore, though. Instead it was a perfect sphere, made of a kind of pinkish glass. It glowed brighter than a stadium spotlight when he looked at it, with faint tendrils that seemed to reach across the field. One snaked all the way over to him, lingering for another second more before vanishing.

"I hoped this would happen in the locker room," said the ref. Phil looked down at his face—he was an older man, with a carefully groomed mustache and short white hair. Well, for a split-second that’s what he looked like.

There was a flash of pink light, briefly concealing his outline completely. When it faded, the tiny-looking referee was now taller than Phil himself, though he didn't look like anyone else on the field. He had a beak, and a pair of avian claws that could still grip the glowing pink sphere with ease.

Someone else was hurrying across the field—a reporter? Well, she dressed like one, and wore a press badge. But Phil hadn't seen a sports reporter with that particular shade of terror and determination before. "This was *not* the plan!" she exclaimed. She glanced over at the gathering clump of players. One by one, the other five victims joined Phil, stumbling over. They walked clumsily, but it was much harder to fall over on four legs.

"The Pearl wasn't supposed to take hold so quickly," said the referee—well, former referee. They did still have white fur, though it was mixed with silvery feathers now instead of black stripes. "Apologies to each of you. We imagined more a covert disappearance after the game and less a... national catastrophe." He tossed the sphere to the reporter as she approached, and she caught it in one hand.

There was another flash, and the sports reporter vanished. In her place was another horse—one Phil's own size this time, though her frame was elegant and lean, and she had a slim horn instead of wings. Somehow, the sphere didn't drop from where her hands had been, but remained in the air in front of them. "The authorities are reacting. We have to move quickly."

Phil was a bit disoriented, and barely able to stand, but he wasn't going to sit still and let this happen. "You did this to us?!" he asked. He had to yell over the terrified crowd, but he probably would've shouted at them anyway.

"Fix it! Change us back!" Without meaning to, he opened both of his wings again, spreading them out to either side. Making himself look bigger, perhaps?

"No," the mare said. Her voice was so abrupt, so absolutely confident, that it caught him up short. "Not yet anyway. We can use the Pearl of Transformation to return your humanity, but you must *first* cooperate."

Phil glowered down at the horse, though more and more he found the word didn't really suit her. Sure, they had the same basic body plan—but horses were clearly *animals*. Those eyes were huge and expressive, her face so easy to read. Even the little streak of light blue in her hair seemed natural, along with the marks on her flank.

Come to think of it, every member of his team had one of those. He'd thought they were just scraps of cloth, but no. Did he have one too? He twisted his head around briefly, and could make out something orange—but this was stupid. He had more important things to worry about.

"There are six of us, and two of you," said Danny. His voice was low and threatening. "I think everyone on this field could do with you reversing the damage you did. Then we won't stop you from running to try and escape the consequences of your actions, how about that? Sounds like a square deal to me."

"Try it," the former referee said. "Starlight here will turn your brains to mush. But if you win, you get the prize of never seeing your old bodies again. Or you could cooperate, and we'll send you home when this is finished."

"We need help," said the girl—Starlight. "Please. We had very little time, very little magic—but we found you. My home has been conquered by evil. We came here to recruit the bravest warriors we could find under such desperate measures."

"Bravest... warriors?" Phil asked, indignant. "Does this look like a war to you?"

Screams filled the stadium. A fire had started in the concession stands, filling the air with choking smoke.

But it wasn't just that. Sirens blared from nearby, and Phil could see dozens of uniformed figures hurrying out of the home team’s tunnel towards them. Riot police, from the look of it, armed with huge weapons. Some of those weapons were pointed at *him*.

"Either that, or go with them," Starlight continued. "But help us, and I swear we'll change you back."

Phil still felt like he was in a dream—any moment he'd wake up on a stretcher, surrounded by paramedics. Hopefully whatever injury had given him such vivid hallucinations didn't put him out for the season.

He didn't wake up, though, and the police were getting closer.

*They can't change me back. If this is contagious, they might have to lock us up, maybe kill us.*

"Fine," he said reluctantly. "I'll help."