

# Shining Shield, Something Real

(Octransfur Day 9: Reflection)

An Eursulon (Worlds Beyond Number) TF/MG/WG/PMC story

By Ponky Kong

How did Baron get here?

It was the middle of the evening. The museum loud-speaker had already announced its closing time, the other people visiting had already dispersed, filed out. Every *reasonable* part of Baron urged him to do the same, to turn away and leave with the others, else he may be locked in, caught by a security guard who would be patrolling by every second. If he followed his compulsion to avoid trouble, he could escape the embarrassment of having to explain to the cross security guard who found him why he was here after closing hours, get back to his room to rest before dark fell, and maybe even stop for tea or a treat on the way. Baron had any and every reason to leave, hurry himself out of the building before he broke those expectations baked into him, but he couldn't move.

He was in the Knight exhibit.

Baron could hardly remember why he'd even come to the museum that day, he never thought himself someone with much interest in the historical past. Neither did he think he had much time to visit... *anywhere* after work, aside from the bar he always stopped by on the way back to his room. His routine was exhausting, but kept him going from morning to night, collapsing into bed once he stumbled home from the bar and waking up the following morning to just start it over again. And again. And again. And again.

Something Baron had noticed in the news, he struggled to recall. A piece about how the local museum had accepted a host of new exhibits and relics, and were set to be unveiled that very day. He would have put it down and gotten on with his work, if not for the list of exhibits that caught his eye- one of which being a mighty suit of medieval armor, allegedly made of *gold*.

The very armor that he stood in front of now, unable to move or look away.

It must have been cleaned and polished for the spectacle of the exhibit, Baron realized distantly, from the way it gleamed and *shone* even in dim evening light

through the museum windows. If he were feeling cynical, he would have balked at the inaccuracy- surely no suit of knight armor would ever be *this* clean, in *this* noble a stance, even when not in use or in times of ceremony.

But no cynicism, no societal compulsion to do the courtesy of obeying the law could tear his focus away from how **real** it stood, there in front of him.

The gleaming golden helm with its visor down and renewed, orange plumage bursting from the top, the sheathed sword at its side, the plates of gold that caught the fading, dazzling sunlight to reveal itself, in all its roughened, battleworn splendor... it all carried such a *history* and *weight* that Baron could hardly begin to understand. Even the restored shield, bearing the magnificent crest of a deep-rooted, steadfast tree, bearing flowers of blue among its branches, almost seemed to *glow* in its significance, its connection to the world and the history the very tool itself had a hand in writing- not even to speak of the hand that *wielded* it.

Baron was shaking, he hadn't noticed until then. His own life, his own self felt so *hollow*, in the face of this *monument* staring back at him through that visor of gold. He couldn't think of a single part of himself, not a part of his own past that felt as clear and in razor sharp resolution as this suit of armor, muddled and blurry in comparison. What he liked to do, the foods he'd tried before, the friends he'd made? Where he'd grown up? His favorite *color*?

How could he live like this? How *long* had Baron lived like this? He couldn't remember the last time he'd looked in the mirror and felt like a person. Looked in the mirror, and felt like he was looking at *himself*.

Except...

A beam of sunlight streamed through the museum window, grazing a line across his face. And in that tickle of illumination, his face lit up in the reflection of the armor's polished breastplate.

And for but a moment

the face he saw reflected

was **real**.

It was there for a flash, before his traitorous eyes blinked and his reflection was human again. Baron didn't dare tear his eyes away while his mind raced, wondering what he could have meant. He *was* already human, wasn't he? But that detail of him felt as blurry and muddy as the rest of his person, that he simply couldn't trust to hold any weight on his behalf.

So Baron grit his teeth, stamping down even those implicit, thoughtlessly fundamental truths about himself that he'd taken for granted, and watched his reflection with new resolve.

"Please," he breathed, while the face shining back at him in the armor did the same. "Who are you...?"

He stood there, struggling with everything he had to keep still, but reassured by the clarity and *presence* of the knight armor... when he felt something. The realization came so suddenly he almost gasped aloud- but there was nothing visible to see, no grand vision in the armor to answer why he felt such detachment to who he was... but the tiniest prickle on his tongue.

He shut his eyes, his vision all too distracting from the crucial, real sense he needed. He honed his attention *inward*, moving his tongue with utmost caution to keep his mouth from becoming a frenzy in his fervor to find what it was, before it came to him again.

Almost from the edge of his tongue, in the way an aftertaste would rise back to the mouth even after the meal had long since been swallowed, came the faintest taste of honey.

Honey, honey, honey- something *real*, it struck him like a blow. He couldn't swish the taste around in his mouth or convulse his stomach to return more to his senses for fear of dispersing what little he had, so Baron simply let it peacefully consume his attention instead, shining all his focus down onto it.

He... quite liked the taste of honey, it occurred to him. More than liked- honey was *delicious!* The sweet, thick, syrup dribbling around his mouth and down his throat in ravenous gluttony, the weight of it that sat pleasantly in his stomach, the joyous mess it could make and the pain that came with taking it for himself from those that had made it and how so *worth* it all that trouble was, for that sweet flavor of nature. He couldn't remember eating honey once in his life- but how could that *possibly* be true, when now that he knew the taste he could so easily imagine himself gorging on such fresh honey to the point of ruin? To grave error?

And with that honey, with his eyes closed and imagining the guzzling on the golden ichor to his heart's content, he heard it... the song. Perhaps a bar, or even barely a solitary note, but that glimpse of song sent a yearning so strong he felt his body shudder in relief. A note of something wonderful, grand, joyful, jubilant in its key and abundant wonder, a song so rich and incalculable that there would be no hope for even the most knowledgeable of composers to describe the structure or composition or make. No, such a song could never be defined, only *played*.

That drip of honey, that note of song, were so *real* Baron felt he could almost touch them. They were so close, so tangible, he needed them more than anything... Baron reached out with his mind, with his heart, so desperately wishing they would become his, to desperately call something within himself **Real**.

And when he hitched his breath once he felt something brush against his outstretched hand, his eyes flew open, meeting the wide eyed gaze of his reflected face. His *real* face.

The color gold looked quite nice, he took note of absently. Maybe he could pick that one as his favorite.

Baron's hand touching the polished gold of the breastplate before him shuddered, something invisible passing through him. In an instant, the hand making contact *grew*, the joints contorting into something more beastly, and with strength and claws to match. Earth-brown fur brushed over the broader, mightier breadth of his hands- *paws*, rather, and Baron grit his teeth despite the strain wearing him down. There would be nothing stopping him from attaining what was *his*, not when he'd tasted too much *reality* for him to leave it behind any longer. The man's arm bulked, the mass and fur growing to mirror the one making contact with the gleaming, noble armor, the bestial muscle swelling through his arms and broadening his shoulders into a wider, masculine frame. The mass and thick fur surged down his torso, enveloping his upper body in that rich, comfortable pelt and a solid, comfortable *weight* as his chest and stomach swelled forth in strength, settling into a pair of soft pectorals and hefty, solid *gut* to guard his core. His clothes strained against the great size, but it didn't care- only emboldened by his difficulties, justified in his rejection of the muddled, muted instincts growing up 'human' had instilled in him. He knew he would still need them, of course, but as he grew he felt all too keenly aware of how... *fabricated* they were, how they could never hold a candle to how *real* the armor before him was, how real HE would be soon.

The weight stretched out his hips and tugged his spine just a little longer- growing taller where he stood, and then poking out a little just above his rear, before shrouding up in fluff to form a stubby, furry deer's tail. The weight stretched his hips wider, and he absently shifted his feet to balance with his new center of gravity. The changing man's legs surged with the strength to carry his new, *real* form, taking on a shape that far better fit the beastly attributes he'd come to attain and anticipate- legs bent forward to crouch more comfortably on his knees, and his furry feet stretched long and clawed into a pair of digitigrade, powerful paws resembling that of a rabbit.

Shaking off the remains of his ruined footwear, the beastly man locked eyes with the amber-gold eyes in his true reflection, pushing further. He was so *close*.

His neck thickened with mass and fur, joining with the hair that was already shifting to the same earthly brown seamlessly. His face pushed forward into a feline muzzle, with a wide nose and curled fangs poking up and out of his jaws that didn't fit with the ursine body type or cervine tail and pelt or leporid hind legs, but it didn't *matter*. It didn't MATTER that his muzzle seemed of a different species of animal than his legs, or to his torso, or to the fluffy, pointed ears rising to the top of his furry head like the horns of a great owl. He wasn't any of those animals, nor was he *becoming* any of those animals, either- he was simply himself.

Simply... no. He knew well enough that Baron wasn't his name. Somehow, in some way, it had been buried so deeply inside him, he'd forgotten what it was. He'd even forgotten he was ever a *spirit* in the first place.

A spirit... was that the kind of creature he was? Who he *is*? A pang of sorrow that he didn't understand weighed down his heart, even in this form that felt so *right*. No, he couldn't think about the answer to that now.

He hunched forward to look at his reflection in the noble, majestic armor closer, taking in the reflection that his physical form now matched. He gazed at himself, long and quiet, while it dawned on him that it was perhaps *too* comfortably he'd shifted back into the stance more efficient for one with more animalistic features to stand in. But wouldn't that be all the more proof that this was his *true* form to begin with...?

The man couldn't tear his eyes away from watching himself reflected in the armor, as he began to *remember*. His muddled, hollow past, his nonexistent self, so much uncertainty that frightened now surfaced to his mind, in such clarity that could only mean to a spirit like him that it was *real*. His memories returned, of the hardships he'd faced, the fear of being hunted and caught, having to learn all those rules and

customs of living among humans and how to gently, carefully set down roots that he could unearth and tear away when those who wished to hunt him down found him. He remembered so much *failure*, so much *shame*, having to hide and hardly show his face from how *afraid* he'd been, ever since he'd lost his home.

Such was the shame that he'd forgotten his own nature, his own *name*, for a length of time that frightened him to consider. How cruel, to a spirit desperate to survive by any means necessary, that though their body may still be living, losing their own name and therefore losing themselves in their mask meant that the spirit had not survived after all.

But there was hope, his face began to lift as he recalled more and more of himself. His childhood in the Spirit World, and that fateful summer he'd spent at Grandmother Wren's cottage. The two greatest friendships he had ever had the blessing of meeting that summer, Suvi and Ame, and the friendships he'd made after, albeit fleeting, few and far between. Discovering the small pleasures of mortality, seeing all sorts of places in his travels, in search of...

*In search of... **Honor.***

The not-quite spirit's gaze snapped up to the armor's golden helm, sitting at more his eye level, now that he stood much taller. This armor... he wondered if it really did belong to Sir Curran, the knight who he had met so many years ago when he was just a cub, the one who'd shown him what *knights* and *honor* and *quests* were, stoking a deep, unwavering desire to attain those things for himself. Perhaps the most foolish quest he'd ever set out on, given the good Sir Curran had died hundreds of years ago and knights no longer walked the mortal lands of Umora.

But he shook his head- this was not the armor itself, merely a replication of it forged for the purposes of displaying at the museum, he could tell. It was very, very real, yes, but now that he had aligned with more of his Spirit self he understood it was real in the sense of what it *represented*, rather than what it physically *was*. The humans of the mortal world were so particular about such things, he'd noticed after so much time living among them.

But then again... the spirit man's eyes drifted to one of the mighty, wide pauldrons fastened to the broad, proud frame of the memorialized knight's shoulder, his eyes flaring wide. That one was *real*, somehow having made its way to this suit of matching replica by a stroke of luck he couldn't believe- perhaps it was the pauldron itself that lent the armor the presence it needed to reawaken him up. He reached up to unfasten it from the display- it was *his*, not any old museum's. It was Eursulon's.

Eursulon.

His expression softened, picking up and cradling the name like a child, before donning it for himself. He would have to be more careful about it in the future.

He gazed down at his face reflected in the polished gold pauldron, the only physically 'real' part of the armor that had stood on display. Even his sword, too, was naught but a replica, so he wouldn't have miraculously received his sword back- he knew exactly why and when he'd given up his sword, without much other choice. He'd lost it in a time of great need, and it was up to him to find it again, and restore his *honor*.

His face set into a hard, determined expression, Eursulon focused on his face in the shiny pauldron's reflection, calling upon his mortal world disguise once more. In a flash, his beastly spirit face had disappeared- leaving a handsome, muscular, dark skinned face in its place, with beautiful ginger hair braided down his back and darker stubble on his face. His eyes, that of which had flashed an ethereal, otherworldly gold in the sunlight, glinted a much more 'natural' hazel color instead.

The disguised spirit nodded to himself, satisfied with his form- this was a chosen form, rather than one he'd been lost in or sealed within, always keenly aware that it was only a form he *wore* rather than the form he *was*. There were aspects of this form that were a part of him, indeed, enough to represent the person he was- brother of Suvi, brother of Sir Curran- enough to be *real* in the ways that were important. Such a glamor would not betray his nature as a spirit, and would even aid in keeping him safe from those who wished him ill, or wished that of his be theirs, in the all-too familiar greed of those who could never be satisfied.

His clothes returned to him, too, Eursulon absently noted as he took stock of himself- the visceral shifting of Spirit magic must have repaired his clothes, as well, the damage from his sudden increase in size undone. Eursulon rolled his shoulders in much more familiar, comfortable clothes... a tunic, long undershirt, and pants more fitting of his size, and a worn green cloak dappling behind him that reminded him of days long past, of jubilant games and play in the forest under the eternal treading of his father, the Great Bear.

Eursulon subconsciously pulled his cloak a bit tighter around himself, tucking his pauldron underneath his arm. He... didn't think he could bear to don the pauldron, not so soon after such shame and failure to protect *himself*. But he would wear it, he knew, someday. Perhaps when he'd earned it.

For now, though, he would be sure to keep it safe. It deserved that much, at least.

Eursulon lifted his head up to the noble golden visor, murmuring his deepest thanks that Sir Curran had once again found some way to return him back to his path of seeking out his honor, and turned away, his cloak flurrying behind him. He hurried out, his form fading from visible view so as to escape the sharp eye of any nightguards patrolling the museum at this hour.

The sun had set on Eursulon, in more ways than one- he knew survival took priority over any rainbow-pot-of-gold dreams of honor he may have, and he knew that he could not survive in this town, forced into an identity that was not his. He'd be off on his travels again soon, once he picked up his meager belongings- maybe, once he found something stable to live in, Eursulon could resume his search for honor elsewhere.

As dearly as he missed his friends from so long ago, he deeply hoped he would not meet them any time soon. The shame of his failure, his being forced to focus entirely on preserving his own survival rather than any higher ideal, higher purpose- he simply could not face them after this.

Maybe once he'd redeemed himself, once he'd found his honor, he could face them again, be proud of who he'd become while he was away, but not now.

Eursulon clutched his gleaming, golden pauldron underneath his cloak, and stole away into the night, set on returning to his life. As *real* as could be.

Perhaps it was selfish to wish for such, but he dearly hoped Curran would guide him as he stumbled through his foolishly chosen path further.