

A flick of the wrist, a roll of the dice. Yet despite the satisfying clunk those dice made as they hit the surface, these dice were not physical, but virtual. The name of the game was Armello, its player was Rael, and his avatar, his character in this troubled world, was Scarlet, a typically cunning vixen relying not only on her wits, but her swordplay, toughing it out in an increasingly dangerous world. She went by the title of 'The Bandit King'... self proclaimed, sure, but she was a fox with aspirations, looking to claim a genuine title and sit upon a throne occupied by a monarch beset by plague and madness. Nightmarish terrors were terrorising the land, and Scarlet's duty compelled her to liberate its villages from the dark scourge, earning her the recognition and notoriety required to be seen as the one true heir to Armello's throne amongst other upstart challengers seeking to win the crown.

Rael watched as the dice settled, determining the result of the impending battle with the Bane that loomed large over the panicked village. His chosen hero and the foul monster clashed; despite its great power, having the right items equipped and a troupe of allies by Scarlet's side helped the fox turn the tables on the shadowy avian beast. It squawked its last breath and collapsed, allowing a wounded, yet still alive, Scarlet to enter the village. The screams of terror died down as the vixen claimed its allegiance, earning her vital prestige in the race for the crown. One step closer to glory.

Rael looked down on his desk, smiling at the small figurine of Scarlet that stood on the surface. It was a fortunate find; a trip to a gaming convention yielded this great reward. He never expected to meet some of the team who had helped craft the rich world of Armello, design its inhabitants, and shape their skills. A team eager to show their work, and show their newest creations, Armello's latest heroes, in action. Even better than seeing the new content in action was the merchandise they had on offer, and that was how it came to be that a figure of Rael's favourite character rested on his desk, looking up at its owner as he commandeered the very character represented by the model vixen. If Armello were physical, perhaps a figure like that would have been used. But by breaking free of the realms of reality, Armello gained a dynamism unlike any board game that existed physically. Animated card art, exploding dice, and an ever shifting landscape with new quests and opportunities arising at every turn.

Day turned to night, the king grew ever more corrupted, and the players took their turns. Rael cast his eyes over the landscape, plotting his next move. That was the beauty of Armello; there were many ways to win. Sure you could take the throne by means of prestige, inheriting it come the King's passing. But there were other paths to victory. At a holy site, a spirit stone had formed, a crystallisation of the world's hope and its latent magic, The Wyld. With enough of these, the king could be purified of the afflicting corruption known as The Rot. On the other hand, Rael could capitalise on the King's ever weakening constitution and slay him to take the throne, be it a mercy killing, or one brought about by Scarlet's own madness at the hands of the infectious Rot. Walking a dark path could yield powerful results, at a cost.

No, this time Rael would play it safe and do what Scarlet did best; earning prestige by liberating townships from evil and turning their residents to her cause, while denying her rivals an early victory on the way. Victory in combat was a good way to earn recognition too, after all. Looking ahead, tracing a path towards the next quest marker, Rael saw Barnaby of the Rabbit Clan. The lapine sapper definitely looked tough, clad in armour and wielding a mighty hammer, gripped within the clutch of a bulky gauntlet. But it was clear to see that what he showed in strength he lacked in finesse, and Scarlet had the upper hand when it came to agility. Should be a fun battle. If only the dice could come up right.

Rael moved Scarlet onto the tile that Barnaby was occupying, initiating the duel. Fox faced rabbit, her sword thrust forward, its tip pointing towards Barnaby, the prodigy gripping his hammer with both hands, demonstrating a great amount of strength for someone so young. The starting bonuses for equipment and allies were taken into account, and then the burndown timer began, giving Rael an opportunity to sacrifice his cards in exchange for a guaranteed result. Those all important symbols, ensuring he'd strike true and defend against oncoming blows. With her decision made, Rael tossed the dice, hoping they would land a winning combination, as Barnaby's own scattered around. The dice satisfyingly came to rest with a thudding noise, any Wyld symbols exploding into a new roll. And another! A chain reaction! Enough power to break through Barnaby's guard, and the rabbit hadn't rolled enough to reduce Scarlet's life to zero. Scarlet leapt forth, swinging her sword; Barnaby could shrug off her attacks only so long before her blows broke through, attack with wide swings and quick thrusts. Rael watched with a smile, eyes glued to the screen. What he didn't see, as Scarlet made the killing blow, was the carved eyes of the Scarlet statuette shining a white glow, staring at Rael, unseen.

To the victor, the spoils. Barnaby's reputation in ruins, victory transferred his fame to Scarlet, and no more was the rabbit an obstacle towards her goal. The fox moved forth, exhausting her remaining action points and ending her turn in the cover of a forest. All Rael could do now was look upon Armello as his opposition took their turns, making their moves, but he'd have to be ready in case he got the chance to ambush an opponent passing through the forest Scarlet had secreted herself within. But as Rael watched, an itch flared up on his arm. He knew he should be keeping an eye on his rivals' every move, but it was just too distracting. Rael broke his watch to look at his arm, and froze.

Not the rash he was expecting, no; instead, a patch of brown fur, its extent spreading before his eyes. He was too afraid to scratch this itch, its cause sprouting from his skin, on one arm and now overtaking the hand on the other; he turned it over and flexed it, watching his skin toughen up and darken, puffing up in his palms and at his fingertips, forming into pads within the paw. The fur continued to spread, forming a gradation of brown tones, from a deep auburn at his forming paws to a lighter chocolate brown around his elbows.

As Rael continued to flex his paws, watching short claws emerge from his fingers, a sharp pain shot through his wrists. Too much curious flexing? He felt like he couldn't flex them any more, wrists gone entirely rigid, swelling a little as if they'd been stung. As they continued to bulge, the fur matted down, the strands meshing into solid surfaces that were gaining a sheen, dull brown brightening into polished gold. The surfaces expanded, no longer feeling like part of his wrists, cut off from nerves and sensation. Not feeling part of him, but part of him could still feel them, hanging loosely around his wrists as the expansion slowed. Nervously, Rael reached to his wrists, feeling the cold metal objects that surrounded them, a pair of gilt bracelets. No join between them and his body, no sign that such adornments had *formed out of him*. Part of him yet not.

Rael looked back to the computer screen. It was his turn once more, Scarlet ready to move. But... could he bring himself to do it? He was in the midst of an unexplainable transformation, and could feel the fur continuing to sprout, reaching far up his arms, attacking his shoulders, his neck. Maybe it was for the best if he passed this turn and attended to more pressing matters. Was there any way of stopping this transformation? Not on the top of Rael's head. Perhaps this was all a delusion. Perhaps he just needed a drink of water. His throat was feeling a little dry after all. Rael left the turn timer to time out, leaving for the bathroom.

The mirrored surface of the medicine cabinet greeted Rael; he could see the fur in all its glory pushing its way through his skin, bushy hairs overcoming all, orange on his shoulders, white running down the middle. His neck looked incredibly wide underneath all the thick fluffy fur. Wide and... long? Rael watched and waited; yes, it was indeed extending, stretching out, yet his line of sight wasn't rising. He looked down and gasped, his body looked shorter, as if it was being compressed under the extension of his neck. He could feel terrible tingles within; outside he could feel the fur growing, bristling against the insides of his clothes, but within he could feel contraction, compression. His clothes started to hang loose around his body as his torso and limbs slimmed and shortened, his t-shirt drooping off shoulders that were losing their broadness, pushed aside by the expanding mass of fluff surrounding his growing neck, looking to overtake his shoulders entirely.

The sight distracted Rael too much; he was here to have a drink, wasn't he? And he'd better, the dryness in his throat was getting painful. He turned the tap and tried to crane his neck underneath it, but his neck felt so stiff, too stiff... Grunts turned to gasps as Rael saw a telltale swelling around his neck, something emerging from the fluff; this was what had happened with his wrists, wasn't it? A piece of jewellery forming from his flesh, a necklace of black string from which gold medallions hung, carved ornately. Rael's thinning legs trembled as he fearfully felt the thing. Cold metal borne from warm flesh, resting at the bottom of a neck that had stretched greatly and exploded with orange and white fluff, atop which his head precariously balanced, tickly fur forming on his cheeks and chin. Rael looked up at the horrific sight, then fearfully looked down at his shrunken body. His t-shirt hung limp and loose on a frailty body, and quite how his jeans were still fitting around his waist was beyond him-

Rael looked back up in realisation. The fabric of his t-shirt looked more delicate, and the neckline had widened, a more accommodating fit for his extended, widened neck. As Rael clutched at some of the fine fabric, loosely drooping around his arms, that was when he noticed the black trim forming around the expanded neck of the morphing t-shirt, framing the spartan fabric. Lower down, a tougher, thicker, yet still rustic fabric was forming, adhering to the thinner layer beneath. Stitches ran along the periphery of this development as dye bled into it, a deep grey, almost a tinge of green to it, flooding the growth of fabric. Rael ran a finger down the deep, rough, seams, feeling the texture, as curiosity turned to recognition.

"Wait... is this... am I..."

The garment, the jewellery; Rael had to confirm his suspicions. He rushed back to his computer, trying to keep his neck from tilting too much. It still felt weird to be more neck and less body. But he had to be sure. Rael was glad to see that his next turn was about to begin, but he wasn't here to make his move; he sat down, rested his paw on his mouse, and pushed the scroll wheel forth, zooming the camera in on Scarlet as she stood, ready. Rael looked from the screen to himself and back, then back to himself; this was definitely Scarlet's dress forming, and continuing to form; his jeans had bonded with his shirt, waist to hem, and were being tugged upwards, absorbed into the widening skirt of the dress. Upon the charcoal grey fabric, brown leather was tugging outwards, from Rael's back, around his sides, its extension reaching towards his front where an ornate buckle was forming, liquid metal materialising, taking shape and solidifying rapidly, completing a thick belt which tightened around Rael's stomach, compressing his lithe figure further, while a modest growth bubbled out at his chest. He felt his hips crack, his legs shaking in response as his biology shifted, and deep beneath the layers of fur that coated his neck, his Adam's apple melted away...

"I'm... Scarlet?", Rael asked in a mature, female voice. She... definitely a she now... looked at the screen, at Scarlet's features, and felt them with her own hands; the bracelets, the necklace. Some elements hadn't yet materialised, but already she knew the truth. She didn't know how, but she knew what was happening. How to feel about it? How to feel, as she rested a paw on her fur-covered face, feeling a snout stretch out, feeling her nose turn wet and leathery, feeling her ears rising to the top of her head and gain a distinctive vulpine shape, two triangles of orange ripped with brown. She stepped back in awe, her shrinking feet leaving her shoes as fur reached down her legs to coat them, bending into a digitigrade stance that felt natural to the fox, while her dress continued to form, any semblance of jeans lost to the garment. She looked down upon her legs, enveloped in tones of brown that darkened as they descended to her footpaws, exposed by the absorption of her jeans into the skirt of her dress, where a space cut in the deep grey material framed finer white cloth, decorated with zig-zagging stitches, while the material at the rear parted to allow her growing tail to slide out; a thick orange mass of fur, tipped with white, exploding with softness as it extended from within.

Rael pressed a paw against the clothes, feeling the rough and rustic texture of the fabric, and her lithe feminine figure beneath. Finally it was dawning on her, and she was acceptant.

"Oh my god... I'm really Scarlet?" Rael tried to squeal in excitement, but the permanent maturity lodged in her voice halted such an utterance. A slight weight built upon her right shoulder as the last difference between her and the fox on the computer screen materialised; a leather strap that reached across her body to another forming around her waist, connected to a scabbard, a holster, a weight building within.

"Re-really?", Rael stammered, looking down, feeling more used to having such a neck, her head feeling more balanced upon it. She looked upon something protruding from within the holster, a handle with strips of greyish fabric tied to it. *"Is this what I think it is?"*, she thought, considering the things that had materialised around her. *"Just like her..."* She nervously reached down, wrapped her left paw around the handle, fitting comfortably around it as if it was made for her, and tugged; the blade of a cutlass smoothly emerged from the holster. It was just like her; this was Scarlet's trusty weapon, the blade with which she vanquished foes much tougher than her, yet less wily. She took a few aimless swings, careful not to be too vigorous with the weapon, and then sighed with satisfaction. This felt like a dream come true, to become the fox so beloved of her. To wear her clothes, to hold her weapon. Her tail wagged joyously; was there even any need to finish her game of Armello when she had become Scarlet for real? She took a few more swings of the sword; it cut through the air with a dull zip, light in her hands... too light. And why didn't it have the sheen she expected from a metal blade? Sensing something was off, the worried Rael lifted the sword up into her new line of sight, and tilted the blade. Cardboard! So that was why. Perhaps whoever had set her up with this transformation was looking out for her safety and didn't trust her with a sharp blade. Instead, the dull edges of cardboard, flat surfaces with corrugated layers between, greeted the fox. Even if it wasn't the real thing, even if there was a lack of that satisfying weight and heft a true blade has, that wasn't going to get in the way of Rael's enjoyment of the transformation. Another swing-

Rael's arm froze involuntarily mid-swing. Complete paralysis, her left arm stuck out, her blade's point extending down to the side. She tried to force it to move but to no avail. From out of nowhere it came, locking her arm in place, her paw permanently gripping the sword's handle. Then

so did pain come from nowhere, a building pressure in her hand, pushing in from either side of the hilt, seeming to compress it against the cardboard grip.

The paralysis travelled further up through Rael's arm and into her body, the compression following behind it. Pressure's path upwards left a wake of numbness; neither movement nor feeling. Even the gilt bracelet around Rael's wrist had been affected, the forces at work squashing it tightly against the furry limb it encircled. Just what was going on? Rael craned her long neck around over the arm and gasped. Her arm was being flattened, compressed into 2 dimensions. The bracelet had been pushed into her arm, fused to it, a similar fate befalling her paw, merged into the flattened handle of her sword. She was sickened by the sight yet still curious; while she still had control over her other paw, Rael rubbed it against the flattened surface. It had a distinct texture to it, flat with slight, gentle grooves periodically. She wrapped her 3D paw around the 2D one, pressing in against it, feeling it crinkle a little...

"Oh no", Rael choked, her throat feeling even more dry, as she observed the corrugated layers prominent within her flattening arm. Cardboard... just as cardboard as her blade. She cast her eyes up her arm, watching her flesh flatten; no outwards spread, just pure compression, matter reduced paradoxically, not becoming denser but lighter. She pressed in a little again; no pain or feeling within the cardboard, devoid of veins or nerves or life, it just compressed a little then bounced back.

Now the affliction was reaching her clothes, the sleeve of her dress merging with her arm as it slowly squashed flat. The material which loosely dangled from her arm wasn't safe either; the flowing fabric bunched together and thickened up, folded layers forming within as it stiffened into cardboard, part of the same object her arm had become. She could barely hear sickening noises coming from within the changing limb; creaking, crinkling, crumpling. Rael had barely enough time to consider those sounds before her neck was wrenched upwards, invisibly commandeered and puppeteered to a state of straightness. Rael could still turn her head a little, but the neck below was frozen stiff. That stiffness was the harbinger of cardboard compression, and now it was passing through to her other arm; unseen forces were gripping it, bending it to its whim, forcing it into a confident pose, the back of her hand resting upon the hip. If she had a choice, not a pose she'd want to sustain for a long time, but...

All was being reduced to cardboard now, and Rael had no way of looking down upon her fate. No way to see all she wore merge with all she was, flatten irreversibly. Flesh, fur and fabric becoming one and the same. The holster around her body, the necklace around her neck, all compressed, all becoming just printed ink upon the surface of the cardboard. Light and shadow were just an illusion upon it now, as the folds of the fabric became little more than a flat approximation, while the back of what had been flattened was gradually bleached of all colour, fading into plain white. Rael wanted to feel her body as it was reduced to cardboard, but her arm was locked in place. Her legs were refusing to move, and even her tail was slowing to a crawl, the flowing appendage becoming frozen in position. She had barely enough time to understand her fate, that she was becoming a mere cardboard cutout, before her face froze, locked in a cocky expression. The compression was rushing up Rael's permanently kinked neck, her mass being compacted into cardboard. Was this how it felt for a tube of toothpaste to be squeezed? But nothing was spilling out, no, this was pure compression, organic tissue flattened into an inert state. The permanently-affixed wry smile on Rael's muzzle belied her fearful emotions as it too was sucked into her flattening face; a force was pushing in at one size, squeezing it against the rest of her face, gradually simplifying it nothing more than a representation of depth. Upward and downward it spread; as her

tail was pressed flat behind her legs, merging together smoothly as they flattened into each other, a headache built up as the compression reached further through her head, slowly inching towards the tips of her ears. It was hard to think through the pain; it felt like her brain was being squeezed through a mangle, wrung dry of the power to think logically. She had to cling on to a thought, she had to-

*"Foulness! Dammit!"*

That... that was one of Scarlet's stock lines, wasn't it? A canned response- too late, that thought was fleeting, no capacity to consider it.

*"Eek! Ouch!"*

Just a prewritten response as the pain faded from Rael's head, along with the capacity to experience it. As her eyes became mere markings printed upon the surface of the cardboard cutout she had become, her surroundings flattened too, losing all depth as the 3D image of her surroundings became 2D. Yet Rael had no power to parse the change to her vision. As her legs became naught but cardboard, thick flaps sprouting from the unpainted rear kept her standing, a guard against her flimsy figure from falling over.

*"You can't stand against revolution. Just try!"*

The simulacrum of Scarlet stood steadfast as reality changed around the inanimate object. Time rewound as room became expanse, growing into a packed convention hall, a change seen yet unconsidered by the mindless thing Rael had become. It proudly flanked the booth, standing aside the creators of the fox it depicted, drawing in visitors with its good looks.

*"Armello stands with me. I need no-one else!"*

Poor Rael, cursed to repeat the same pre-prescribed thoughts with no control over them, her mindset and personality as flat as the thing she had become. Constant cockiness. Permanent pluck. And yet the world outside her meant nothing to her, unnoticed. All she was now was a pretty thing to draw in the crowds. An object, and yet she had no idea she was. Thoughts went unheard to all her but herself, as the loudness of the convention fell upon Rael's deaf ears.

*"Kneel before the true King of Armello."*