

Placing her mug on the table, the Absol gave the terrace a final once-over before getting back on her feet and leaving. A sizeable tip left underneath the now-empty container, there should be no issues with payment; plus, given what was about to happen in... about fourteen minutes and thirty-six seconds, the establishment was about to have much bigger problems than someone not paying for their coffee.

It had taken her a few days to get there, but in accordance with her pilgrimage, she *had* to be there. It wasn't a choice; she could no more decide to be anywhere else than she could stop breathing, it being a sacred mandate she had no willpower to ignore. That, or it had become so utterly ingrained into her as to become an automatic reflex, one she *could* theoretically unlearn, if given enough time and patience.

But she didn't *want* to unlearn it, was the main problem there. Well, she said problem; fact of the matter was, *she* was never the one who came out of it bigger than ever before, nor was she the one who had to deal with sudden onset AHS. *She* was merely the harbinger of change, a face that never quite became familiar enough that others knew to recognise, but just well-known to the point where, if looked at from the right angle, a couple of passers-by might stop to look.

She was no slouch herself when it came to her curves, being a "sufferer" of the condition herself. Unlike others, however, she had no difficulty dealing with a body that would've left most people floored and unable to think, let alone move or have a normal life; while the pleasure spikes were doubtlessly a constant source of frustration, seeing as she had to fight *against* them rather than accept their bounty, they were... manageable. It was as much as she could ask for them to be, and as far as she got; just as long as she could still move from place to place, the Absol didn't quite care how she accomplished this.

For *someone* had to show up and let people know of the impending disaster (for a given value of the word). *Someone* had to knock on the door and politely remind everyone inside that they were about to undergo a change that would follow them for the rest of their lives, and that there was no turning back once it began. *Someone* had to do the unfortunate work of being the trumpet-caller for the oncoming storm, even if it left them in a position where the most positive of reactions to their presence was impolite scorn.

Still, the Absol didn't mind. Those who didn't suffer from the condition might shun her, might insult her even, but for the few whose lives were upturned as a result of the sudden genetic flip, for *them* she was their guardian angel. There were so many who underwent the change without anyone there to guide them through it; alone in the world, left with only themselves and a body they no longer recognised, it was easy to fall to despair, to the whispers of one's own mind.

That was why she was there. Not officially, in any capacity; there were therapists and government agencies built specifically to handle such events, but just like all official pipelines, it was easy for people to slip through the cracks. Maybe they weren't in a position where they could seek help; maybe the pressure to hide it was too great, or they simply didn't know such help existed at all.

For those cases, the Absols, and others like her, were there. They weren't an organisation, not even in the loosest of senses, but rather a group of likeminded individuals who, on occasion, would report back to one another on assorted goings-on. They were united only by two things: being Absols, and choosing to take that *one* specific aspect of their roaming lifestyle up as their dominant motivation.

Each pilgrimage was different, and while most of their kind chose to warn others of more conventional disasters, there were always a handful who chose more esoteric catastrophes to focus on. It might make them pariahs, but those who mattered didn't care; just as long as lives were saved and put back on track, then their task was complete, their job was done, and they could rest easy knowing they'd made the world a better place.

This was, mostly, why Dalia was content with stepping out of the terrace and waiting on the street below, one hand in her pocket, another holding up her phone. She had an alarm set for the specific time at which her innate senses had told her a new case would pop up, and with it being somewhere in the vicinity of that café, it was only a matter of time until *someone* yelped as their body was reshaped right under their noses.

Others on the street wasted no time in sneering at her, making sure she knew she was unwelcome. She was an Absol, they mumbled loudly enough for her to hear, a harbinger of chaos, a bringer of disaster, and she should *go away* before someone "did something"; not that anyone would, seeing as the police were more than used to ignoring those sorts of calls in that day and age, but it was still so needling as to get under Dalia's skin. She had to exercise a great deal of willpower not to look up and glare at whoever she heard talking about her; it would only make things worse.

Besides, once the transformation began, *she* would be able to slip back into the panicking crowd and go by entirely unnoticed. Just as everyone rushed in the opposite direction from the centre of growth, so would she move towards it, effortlessly sailing through the crowd as she had done a thousand thousand times before. But there was something different about that day, something that made it special compared to every other occasion; there was a good reason why the Absol was there that day and not anywhere else, why she'd picked *that* instinctive pull over any other: someone she knew lived in that city.

It wasn't every day that those like her had the opportunity to put down roots for long enough to develop lasting relationships. Their pilgrimage was one where spending more than a couple of weeks in any one location was exceedingly rare, and the necessities of it meant that friendships were more often than not a detriment; as an Absol, especially once devoted to those sorts of tragedies, it was important to be able to detach oneself from material reality, to see others as one saw themselves: transient.

Alas, it was easier said than done. It was altogether unexpected that some among them would fail to live up to this spiritual standard, and would seek attachments to those who they saw as kindred spirits; those who, through one stray, errant action or another, came to understand the pilgrimage and what it meant for those undertaking it, the significance of it and how critical it was for the Absols' view of themselves. And in these rare moments, a bond was forged of such strong links that breaking it would require a force greater than the heavens could muster.

For Dalia in particular, it was a Ponyta called Sandra. Sandra was the picture of normality: average height, average school results, average salary, average home, average everything really; if anything, she stood out from the crowd for being so utterly unnoticeable, as if her very being exuded a statistical anomalous field that peaked the interest of anyone who understood the slightest thing about outliers.

Perhaps because of this, Sandra was one of the few people with whom Dalia felt a genuine sense a kinship; not just because their being in the middle of the curve gave the Ponyta an enviable view of the world around her, but because it had led them down much the same path of inner awakening that Absols like herself often had to work for *years* to even find the beginning of. By being so unremarkable, Sandra's focus shifted outwards, to the world around her, leaving the "her" within practically untouched, and gifting her with an almost eerie ability to comprehend others on a level too deep for it to be natural.

Perhaps they were simply naturally empathetic. Perhaps it was all in Dalia's mind, as she tried to rationalise away her own deviation from the path, but whatever the case may be, the two of them had met a couple of years prior and became fast friends. It was an interesting scene to watch: a twelve-foot Absol with curves so absurd as to be almost comical and a perfectly average Ponyta, sitting next to one another discussing matters of grave philosophical import. They could do so for hours on end, failing to notice how the sun rose and fell above their heads, until the sky turned dark and their bellies grumbled.

Having to leave the first time around was one of the hardest things Dalia ever had to do. Having to leave the second, third, fourth and fifth times didn't get any easier; detachment from material reality was a nice enough goal, when it didn't mean giving up the one thing that reminded the Absol of what it was like to just... be normal.

A goal that so many of her kind strived towards. Perhaps it was the source of their philosophy: that all of it was just one, long, convoluted way of not being themselves, through self-denial and the sloughing off of what made them *them*. All that Dalia knew was that being around Sandra was enough to bring some semblance of normalcy into her life, almost as if the Ponyta was a reality anchor around which her own existence suddenly made sense.

How unfortunate, then, that she was the one picked for the transformation.

Picked was a strong word. Fate did not “pick” anyone so much as things simply happened; some among her kind did genuinely believe that a great, overarching force acted through inscrutable means to bless and curse those who deserved it, but Dalia didn’t subscribe to that particular belief. To her, the world was it was: it was, and no one was really in control so much as attempting to be. Sometimes, genetics aligned to turn one into a hyper; sometimes, they didn’t. It was a flip of a coin, really, and not one that *anyone* had any say on.

For the Ponyta, however, the Absol could tell the change would come with its own set of challenges. It was one thing for the extra size to be granted to someone who’d been starved of it for long periods of time; living in a world such as theirs made it relatively easy for the smaller of the bunch to become predisposed to fantasies of growing larger, and even those that did not suffered such a break in continuity that it was almost like living a second life entirely.

But for Sandra? She was in the worst position possible: smack dab in the middle of the scale, she had no outward or inward defences for the incoming change. It was something Dalia struggled with herself at times; once or twice, when the two of them had time, the Absol would ask her friend if they’d ever thought about what they would do if they developed the condition, only to receive a blank stare in response. The mere notion was so far outside the realm of possibility that Sandra just didn’t know how to react... and she wasn’t going to be given the small version either.

It was an art form, being able to tell degrees of disaster. Those untrained in the senses were only able to know *when* something would take place; further training allowed one to pinpoint where, then to whom, and finally what specific kind of transformation would be taking place. Not that it was at all difficult to make an educated guess: the Pony was going to become bigger, that much was certain; it was only a matter of *how much*, and just which part of her would receive the blessing.

Dalia, unfortunately, knew the answers. All of them, down to the most minute detail, enough that whenever she stopped to consider them, her face would grow so red that it could be seen through her fur. She’d seen a glimpse of Sandra as she would become, or rather, of the *potential*

she would again, and in those few moments of honesty, when she didn't lie to herself to ease the blow, she had to admit: it was hard to resist.

She shouldn't think about it in those terms, but knowing what was to come (or, more precisely, what *might* come should Sandra deliver herself fully unto her new form), the Absol just couldn't avoid it. Yes, it was against the tenets of her pilgrimage, and yes, she should've long-since transcended any of those unwelcome urges, but it was difficult for her to picture the Ponyta as she might become at not at least *blush* a little.

They were there as well, was the biggest problem. Dalia had called them over so the two of them could have a quick chat before it all began, but an unfortunate traffic jam had led to Sandra being delayed for just long enough that, by the time they walked out onto the terrace to look for the Absol, only three or so minutes were left before it all happened. And while Dalia would've loved to intervene, to beg of fate itself to give them just a few minutes more, she knew it was hopeless.

Trying to have a serious conversation *now* would only lead to more confusion, as anything she could possibly say would inevitably end up half-spoken as the change took place midway through the conversation. Thus, it was better for everyone involved if the Absol simply leaned back against the wall holding the terrace up, just out of sight of her friend, and waited for everything to fall into place. Not like she'd have to look up and check; transformations like those were rarely without their effusive screaming and moaning, so it was only a matter of time.

She checked her phone again. Thirty seconds at most. Up above, she heard the Ponyta's voice, presumably addressing one of the service staff as they asked if anyone had seen an Absol by Dalia's description. Dalia herself could only sigh, rubbing her eyes as she mentally counted down the remaining time, hoping beyond hope that, at the very least, it would be over soon. No macro incidents that day, thankfully; Sandra would "merely" become so large as to not fit in cars anymore, so at least there was that.

Ten seconds. Ten seconds and then everything would change. The Absol recalled her friend as they had been up until then, as they always *had* been since puberty came and went without adding much. She recalled the little one that had spent days without end humouring her and her own musings; she recalled Sandra as the one friend she'd ever had ever since starting the pilgrimage, the one person who truly *understood* her on a deep and meaningful level. And, for a brief and fleeting moment, the Absol smirked when she realised that Sandra was about to "understand" her in a much more direct manner.

There was a yelp from upstairs, followed by the sound of glass shattering as it hit the floor, then shouting and a great deal of expletives being thrown around with abandon. Usually the case

for sudden changes like that one; couldn't expect people to remain civil when tits were invading their personal space without a moment's notice. Sighing, the Absol pushed herself from the wall and turned to face the stairs leading back up to the terrace, hoping to see a throne of bystanders clogging it up in their mad rush to get away from the disaster area.

She'd find it, as usual: a large blockage of bodies all vying to be the first to leave, all working to create one semi-solid mass that the Absol could tug on and dismantle with but a single hand, making way for herself to head over to where she was needed. Plenty of grumbling, plenty of extra cursing, but Dalia was an *Absol*; she got that on a regular basis anyway, so why bother with the pleasantries?

Especially when she had her friend to take care of. There, in the middle of the terrace, having already ripped through their clothes, burgeoning in every direction as soft flesh piled on soft flesh, as curves accentuated and proportions were exaggerated, was Sandra. There, as she stood watching, Dalia was struck with the realisation that what she was seeing was something truly beautiful: the fulfillment of a prophecy, fate made manifest, just as she'd seen it in her mind's eye.

Alas, there were practical considerations to think about; much as she would've loved to stand there and watch as everything unfolded, the Absol knew better: she had to start ferrying people around, giving instructions and letting people know the expert had arrived, so please and thank you move along so she could handle things going forward. Yes, leave the workplace behind, local authorities will compensate everyone, just as they always did; leave the terrace for the Absol who saw it coming and warned no one, along with the person responsible for the disruption.

It took a while, but it was always worth it. Not that Dalia technically needed to shoo anyone away; she could just as easily do her work with a million people watching, once she focused enough. But there, along with Sandra, with her friend who just then recognised her, she had a certain measure of peace and quiet she could enjoy. One that *they* could enjoy.

Together.