

# "In the Light of Day"

## Conversion, Part 3

by Christopher Shaffer

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Lawrence's fingers fumbled with the car visor as they turned the corner and the rising sun hit him right in the eyes. Pain shot through his face, his ears flicked back from the irritation. Even through the windshield and his fur, the fox morph could feel the heat on his face. He flailed a bit, found the visor, and found that the sun was still too low for it to do much good.

"You should be laying in the back, if you're in as much danger as you seem to think," Melody said next to him. She'd already lowered a flexible strip of tinted plastic over her eyes to rest on the bridge of her muzzle. Once it was in place, the plastic stiffened and stabilized, blocking the sunlight and holding onto the sides of her head.

"If I lay down in the back, I'm going to fall asleep. Given where we just came from, I'm not sleeping anyplace I'm not completely sure is safe."

The raccoon sighed, equal parts annoyance and sincere concern. The near-groan, a familiar sound from when Lawrence and Melody used to date, was almost soothing in of itself.

*Or maybe that's just how exhausted I am,* he thought.

Lawrence accepted a wordless compromise. He fumbled for the lever next to his seat and with a clicking sound lowered the back of it so he could stretch out and stare at the ceiling.

"There. Out of sight."

He couldn't see Melody's eyeroll, but he could imagine it just fine. As much as it certainly wasn't the time to rekindle things with his ex, being able to drift into familiar patterns was really helping him relax. He needed pretty much any comfort he could get at this point, though a little voice in the back of his head warned him about where that road might lead.

A burst of random, static-y noise caused him to sit up so quickly he actually almost smacked the side of his head against the window. He squirmed and sat back on his tail at just the wrong angle, sending a twinge of pain right up his spine.

"One second," Melody said to someone.

He looked over to see her staring at him, wide-eyed. Just outside her window, a drive-thru intercom awaited an order. Humanity had developed the technology to reshape the human body, install computers in their brains, replace limbs with cybernetics. But they couldn't make a fast food speaker system that didn't sound like a radio in a blender.

"Do you want anything?" she whispered to him. "I'm bringing some stuff back for Tom and his friends."

"Still good from the Chinese earlier, I think."

A sack of tacos and quesadillas later, Melody and Lawrence returned to Tom's repair shop. Lawrence paused as he got out of the car. The street was still relatively quiet, business owners arriving and grabbing the newspapers out front or just opening up for the day or whatever. The sun still crept into the daytime, warm and comfy through the fox's orange and brown fur.

His tail flicked back and forth behind him, working out the kink he put in it, feeling the cool spring morning air. His ears twitched. What was bothering him? He was pretty sure they hadn't been followed despite his period of sleep during the ride.

"If you're not gonna bring those inside, you better eat them out here before someone else gets them," Melody said as she closed her car door.

Lawrence realized he was still holding the plastic bag of food.

"Right." He closed his own door and followed her into the store.

Back in the living room, Tom sat with a pair of strangers on the floor, surrounded by some electronics gear he was poking at. They were dressed in simple khaki pants and plain short-sleeved shirts, the sort of thing you wear when you're going to a job interview but don't know the dress code. One was a human woman of average build with purple and blue-streaked hair and some sort of maze tattooed on her forearms. The other was a mouse with tan, almost golden fur. Like a lot of mice this one was slim and androgynous, but Lawrence's sharp nose recognized the aroma of a female morph.

He also picked up the distinct odor of the apartment he shared with his father.

The fox quickly handed the bag of food to Tom before he dropped it from shock. He sat down on the floor across from them, giving each of them a piercing, appraising stare.

"You've been to see my father," he gasped after a few moments of trying to find the right words.

"Pleased to meet you too," the tattooed woman snorted.

"I'm sorry, just... it's been a long 24 hours. I'm Lawrence Murphy, I've been Tom's friend about as far back as we can remember." He held out a dark-furred hand and shook each of theirs.

"Lawrence, this is Linda and Dana," Tom said, gesturing to the human and the mouse respectively.

"Well, you've got a good friend," Linda said with a snort. She pulled out a slender device that looked like a pen, pressed a button on the side, and took a hit off of it as it released a cloud of vapor. "He says you've been through hell," she said, letting the smoke waft out of her mouth when she talked.

Lawrence resisted the urge to scrunch up his nose or lay back his ears at the strong mint scent of the vapor. Dana didn't seem to be too keen on it either, but she was clearly more used to it. Tom distributed food as they talked.

"How much did Tom explain?" Lawrence asked.

"He just said that you've pissed off someone dangerous, and that it's not the cops," Dana spoke up as Linda started tearing into food. "And that you needed someone to check on your dad."

"Dana works as a nurse," Tom explained. "I thought that might be helpful."

"And he's doing okay," Dana quickly added. "He's physically healthy, he'll be fine in the apartment until we can grab a few things for him. Tom told us he's got the Reversion so we were ready for that."

"The Reversion?" Lawrence didn't like the sound of that.

"I work in a street clinic, we've had a few people bring in their Converted parents or neighbors. I don't know who came up with it but that's the term floating around."

"Does anybody know what it is?" Lawrence asked before he could stop himself.

"There are theories. Most of 'em are tinfoil hat at best but there are rumors floating around. You know anything about it?"

"It's..." Lawrence paused. "It's connected to why I'm in trouble. Poking my nose where it doesn't belong, and now there are people after me."

"Well, he seems to have some decent meds for it, whatever they are." Dana gave him a searching look as she reached for something in the pile of food.

"And finding out where they came from is the reason why I've been shot at and chased all over town," Lawrence growled, staring her down. He didn't like what her tone implied.

"Hey, asshole, relax," Linda said, reaching out to give the fox's shoulder a light shove. "We're puttin' our necks out for you, and this is the thanks we get?"

Lawrence, either from fatigue or surprise, was nudged back far enough by the shove he had to reach back and catch himself. He held up a placating hand. "No, no, you're right. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I've just... I'm about ready to have a nervous breakdown, I think."

"You're not going to have a nervous breakdown," Melody said, rolling her eyes again. "But he has had a really rough time of it," she said, directing that to Linda and Dana. "I'm sure if we can keep him alive and sane long enough, he might be able to do something about making sure those meds get to other people who need them, right?"

Lawrence narrowed his eyes at her. *Just like her, volunteering me like this*, he thought, his tail flicking with annoyance. He held up a hand, took a deep breath, and counted to 10.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, after letting it out. "If I live through this, that should be do-able." *Assuming, of course, 'living through this' doesn't mean destroying the people who can make this stuff.*

He realized that they were still giving him suspicious looks.

"I promise you, if I knew something that would be useful, I'd tell you." It was technically the truth and he hoped his sincerity showed despite his fatigue. "I've got a couple of corner pieces of a big puzzle. And somebody's trying to *kill* me because of it. I'm not exactly getting off on having what I *do* know rattling around in my head and nothing useful to do with it."

Both Linda and Dana leaned back slightly when they heard the strain in his voice.

"Ladies," Tom began, reaching out to give Lawrence's shoulder a squeeze. "Would it help you feel better if I told you that we've already prepared a cache of the information my friend Lawrence has found, in case something happens?" Tom leaned in so they'd pay more attention to him than the fox's momentary look of surprise. "I assure you, if something happens before we get to the bottom of this, it's all going to be broadcast across the Hub anyways."

He gave them a wicked, predatory grin, teeth glinting. The effect seemed to sell his claim, judging from the way they visibly relaxed.

"When are you going to check in on my dad again?" Lawrence sighed.

"Probably around 6 or 7 this evening," Dana said.

"Think you could swing by here first? I might give you something to take to him, or I'll leave it with Tom if I can't be here."

They looked at each other. Linda still looked pretty put out, but Dana nodded in agreement. They shared a brief unspoken conversation, and Dana turned to Lawrence. "That shouldn't be a problem," she said.

"Thank you so much," Lawrence said, sighing with relief.

"As much as we like being helpful, we should probably get going," Linda said as she dug out the pen-shaped vaporizer and took a puff off of it. The mint scent wafted into the air again.

"C'mon, let's go, Smokey Dwarf," Dana said, getting up and gently tugging Linda to her feet by her shirt. Linda shot her a dirty look as she pocketed the vaporizer and Tom got up to show them to the door.

"You notice how you didn't get pissed off at Tom when he stepped in?" Melody snapped once they were alone.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Lawrence muttered. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm just... I'm just tense and pissed. Don't worry, though, I'm gonna give him a piece of my mind once he comes back."

"What'd I do, again?" Tom asked as he came back.

"Larry got mad when I stepped in and spoke for him, but seemed to take it just fine when you did it."

The fox gave her a glare. "Honestly, I was too busy being surprised at Tom to say something." He then turned to her brother. "You haven't been recording the stuff we've talked about, have you?"

"I'll be honest, I considered it," Tom admitted. "Mostly because you've been so tired and loopy I wanted to make sure it wouldn't sound rehearsed. But I decided against it *because* you're tired and loopy and who knows what you'd say and the less obvious editing I'd have to do the better it'll sound. That said, we should keep a backup copy of what you've found out so far just in case."

"I'm not sure that's a great idea," the fox sighed with a yawn. "I mean, a backup copy means that they're just definitely going to come after you, too, and I'm not convinced it would scare them off in any case."

"I'm not talking about preventative measures. I'm talking about making sure this gets out because people deserve to know." Tom leaned in, his eyes intense. "I'm talking about pure *spite and revenge* against the people responsible."

"Okay, maybe it's because I'm still running on fumes, but I'm actually kind of liking the sound of that."

"Well, good. Because I really think we should do it as soon as possible."

Lawrence stood up. The room shifted and spun as he got to his feet. Everything blurred for a second and he quickly flicked his tail to help steady his balance. He took an uneasy step back and gritted his teeth.

"Okay, I'm ready to get this started," Lawrence said.

Melody opened her mouth to say something, but Tom instead stepped in front of the fox and clapped his hands right in front of Lawrence's face.

"Oh Jesus!" the fox yelped, falling back. Melody and Tom quickly caught him and pulled him upright.

"Lawrence, if you don't get more than two hours of sleep, you are going to die. Of a heart attack. At your age. And you're not going to be useful to anyone when you're dead. Especially yourself," Tom said, staring Lawrence in the eye. "Melody, I'm going to go open up the store. Go help Lawrence up to my bed so he can get some sleep."

"Done and done," Melody said, slipping an arm around the fox's shoulders and leading him up the stairs to rest.

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"Lawrence. Wake up."

He woke with a start, aware of a warm body against his side with his arms wrapped around it. His nose registered a familiar scent and the breath of someone whose most recent meal was Mexican takeout. Then he realized he had eyes and decided to open them.

Then he was aware of Melody glaring at him from a few inches away.

"Why're you in the bed with me," he mumbled, having difficulty with any manner of proper tone or cadence of speech.

"Because you wouldn't let go when I was helping to tuck you in. So I said 'fuck it' and closed my eyes for a bit. But I have to get up and go to work."

"Oh. Sorry." He blinked slowly, unevenly, just utterly out of it.

"Lawrence."

"What."

"You're still holding onto me."

"Gah! So--" he started, pulling back and rolling off the bed mid-apology. He hit the floor with an unpleasant thud. "-rry. Fuck."

"Thank you," Melody said, getting up with a stretch. "By the way; it's about two o'clock, I'm gonna hit the shower, and you're not invited." Without another word she shuffled out of the room, tail flicking with clear agitation.

Lawrence pulled himself up to the side of the bed, resting his head on it.

"Hey, Mel?" he yelled out.

"What?" she called back from the other room.

"If you could find out if my motorcycle is still at the airport, I'll be your best friend forever."

"You already owe me a few forevers. But I'll check."

The shower started before he could come up with a retort so he just climbed back up and sprawled out over the bed.

"Tom?" Lawrence yelled, not sure if he'd hear him.

"Yeah?" came a muffled response, possibly from downstairs.

"Is there food?"

"If you can come down here and get it. Copia's loaded in the kitchen."

Lawrence let out a sigh, climbed out of bed, and grudgingly pulled his pants on. His fur was matted and laid at weird angles from the way he'd slept but he didn't much care. He reluctantly shuffled down the stairs and through the living room into the kitchen, running his fingers through his chestfur to at least try to get it going in the same direction.

He made his way over to a large boxy device on the counter next to the fridge. Its black plastic casing had clearly been removed and put back a few times, revealing the unit was likely half-rebuilt from spare parts. It had a small door with a handle and a video screen up above that. The screen came on automatically when the fox approached and displayed a detailed list of various foodstuffs. A scanner read his eye movements and scrolled and expanded the list as necessary.

"Scrambled eggs, cheese, peppers." He opened up the door to place a bowl and a mug in the device. "And coffee, lots of cream, lots of sugar." He closed it.

The copia whirred and hummed. Somewhere up above, he heard Melody wrapping up her shower and turning on the fur dryer. He focused on the noises of the device literally making his food to distract himself from mentally picturing what she was doing. Having Melody so close brought back some potentially dangerous memories of times gone by.

He wished the door was translucent, like the old microwaves, so he could have something distracting to look at. But the marketing surveys revealed that once the novelty quickly wore off the process was more off-putting than appetizing. But, as the machine beeped and he opened the door to retrieve his meal, he couldn't argue with the results.

"How's business?" he asked as he brought his food out into the store area, finding Tom alone and reading news sites on his tablet.

"I've had worse," the raccoon said without glancing up. "By the way, this absolutely is not my fault and I mean that for once, but the news is starting to cover rumors that NUBio knows more about the Reversion than they're letting on."

"Probably someone else in the drug trial breaking NDA to get a few bucks out of the press," Lawrence said, poking at the scrambled eggs. "Someone who got the placebo, knows someone who didn't, and is pissed about it."

"I give it a week before the protests start. Then a few days before the 'protests' are labeled 'riots' and we all have to do the usual bullshit legal dance that follows."

Lawrence knew what he meant without asking. Pretty much every morph old enough to haul a sign had at some point been part of a protest or movement making sure morphs' rights were protected, that they could get the special medical or legal assistance they sometimes needed. Which meant that when things went off the rails, most of them wound up on lists the government wouldn't admit existed.

"We might want to prepare our little blackmail packet when we have a chance," Lawrence said. "Just in case we need the leverage."

The door opened and Dana walked in. The mouse moved with uneasy steps and she reached out to steady herself against one of Tom's display cases.

"Hey, Tom...?" she asked, her voice shaky, the quiver of her whiskers betraying that she was near tears.

The raccoon picked up on it immediately and came out from behind the counter. Lawrence set down his food, ears flicked forward.

"What is it?" Tom asked.

"I, um... remember that time Linda went on that bender and you tracked her down? Could you do that again?"

"What happened?" Lawrence asked.

Dana made a visible effort not to look at the fox when he asked that. Then she became aware that she wasn't looking at him, and thus turned to face him a moment later. Words were still beyond her. Tom opened a drawer and pulled out his access device, a scratched-up plastic box about the size of a deck of playing cards. He got Lawrence's attention and pointed to the door. Without having to ask, the fox moved to the door, closed the blinds, and hit the button to change the sign from 'Open' to 'Back in an hour.'

Tom had a seat next to the counter and pulled a cord out of the side of the device. He parted the fur on the side of his neck, revealing an access port, and plugged it in. He closed his eyes and his eyelids glowed faintly.

"Okay, what's she carrying that'll connect?"

"She should have the car -- she was supposed to pick me up for lunch and didn't show." Dana fidgeted, wanting to go more into that but not wanting to get distracted. Her tail curled around her leg out of nervousness and she forced herself to breathe steadily. "Then there's her phone, her puffer, and her ID."

"Does she have the earpiece for her phone?"

"One of her earrings, yes," Dana said.

"Last place you saw her?" Tom asked.

"She dropped me off for work at the clinic. Right after I talked to you guys this morning."

"Alright, and... Working on it," Tom said. Beneath the glowing eyelids his eyes twitched like he was in REM sleep.

"He's had to do this before?" Lawrence quietly asked Dana.

"He's familiar with her gear." Dana said as if that explained everything. She took a deep breath to steady herself before continuing. "We've all had our moments where we did something stupid or had a bad day and had to take off for a bit. But with everything going on..."

Lawrence bit his lip. "Yeah. Yeah, I understand."

*Fuck*, he thought to himself. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*. He wanted to throw something. It hadn't even been a full day yet and people he barely knew were being caught up in his need to play 'industrial spy.'

Melody came in, dressed in her uniform for work. She blinked and looked around at Dana, Tom, and Lawrence. Then her gaze went back to Dana and then Tom, and her eyes widened when she processed that something was very wrong. The mask of dark fur around her eyes made the expression almost cartoon-like. Lawrence quickly slipped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her off to the side. Dana tried to ignore them and watched the news on Tom's tablet.

"Linda's missing and out of touch. Tom's trying to find her."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Melody said, kind of forced, clearly trying not to dwell on the elephant in the room.

"How soon do you have to be at work?" the fox asked.

"Soon enough," she said flatly. "Why?"

"Just thinking we might need a lift someplace, if Tom can get a quick fix on her."

"We?"

"Yeah. If Dana has to go somewhere to track down Linda, I'm coming along. This is my fault, and I'm taking responsibility."

Melody rubbed her face. "I'm already missing the world where I can make a 'who are you and what have you done with Lawrence' joke. But okay. That said, my missing work would raise some red flags. So I'm not agreeing to spending an entire day chauffeuring your adventure unless I absolutely have to. Besides, the less my car is seen around this whole mess, the safer we'll be."

Lawrence nodded, the angle of his ears and the twitch of his whiskers making it clear that even though he wasn't entirely happy with that compromise, he'd accept it for the moment. He took a few deep breaths as he closed his eyes and leaned against the nearby wall. His ears swiveled and he could hear Tom's steady breathing as he ventured through a variety of network backdoors and exploited status-transmitting systems. Dana tapped at Tom's tablet, having clearly moved on from the news to poking at something else. The simple background noise of daily life.

"You gonna be okay?" Melody asked, quiet. He became very aware of her watching him.

"Are any of us going to be okay?" the fox asked. "How many lives have I probably fucked up, cheating to make sure my father got some help? Dana and Linda, you and Tom probably. Maybe even Steve and his girlfriend."

His eyes opened, looking deep into Melody's. He knew exactly where she'd be standing, how she'd be looking at him, and his gaze locked with hers the moment his eyes opened.

"And you saw the news. NUBio is going to be under the hot lights for this anyhow. It's possible this might have resolved itself sooner rather than later. I might not have had to do what I did, to get my father into the right part of that drug trial. And we're all going to burn for it," he said grimly, eyes welling up.

Melody sighed and reached out to tug him close and rest his head on her shoulder. She rubbed his shoulders and glanced over to keep an eye on Tom and Dana while she and the fox had their private chat.

"Okay, I've got something, I think," Tom said.

Everyone immediately straightened up and paid attention. Ears perked, tails stilled with their focus.

"I found Linda's car. It's parked. Her phone's off, but I've managed to turn it on. But she's not picking up when I try calling. I'm turning on the microphone and camera to try and get an idea of what's going on, but..." He frowned. "Quiet and dark."

Dana bit her lip and slowly set down Tom's tablet.

"Where is she?" Lawrence asked.

"Parking garage on Stanton Avenue, not too far from the clinic where Dana works. It's possible she just pulled in to take a nap after dropping Dana off."

"That's not impossible," the mouse conceded, visibly relaxing as she took the tiniest bit of comfort in the notion.

Lawrence and Melody glanced at each other. They both silently agreed not to hold their breath.

"I'll give Dana a lift out to the parking garage on my way to work," Melody said, holding up her car keys. "Taking Lawrence with me, I'll try not to keep him out too late."

Without another word, she headed for the car. Lawrence and Dana quickly moved to follow.

"I'll check in with Steve while I have this thing on!" Tom yelled after them on their way out the door.

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"Okay, we're a couple of blocks from there," Melody said. "I can't stay long, though. I really can't. I want to, I really do, but..."

"It's okay, we understand," Dana said.

"I literally can't afford to be late, is all." Melody's grip tightened on the wheel, her expression and voice broadcasting her guilt.

Lawrence kept quiet as she found a parking space within sight of the garage. A part of him wanted to talk her into skipping work, into coming along to make sure Linda was okay, but he also knew that even if she didn't want to actually *say* it she wanted her distance from the insanity that Lawrence had brought into her life. Once upon a time, back when they were together, an 'adventure' like this would have been a way for them to kill a couple of hours. But that was also because they were young and figured they had all the time in the world to get new jobs, finish school, and so forth.

"I'll have the phone link open while we're in there," Lawrence said. "If we lose the connection and we're not back in five or ten minutes, call Tom and get your ass to work before someone figures out who dropped us off."

She gave him a look that experience taught him was gratitude for not giving her shit about her choice.

He and Dana got out of the car. Lawrence had a cheap disposable phone in his pocket, with a wired earpiece tucked into an ear. The phone's case was rigid cardboard rather than plastic, something to be literally thrown away when the time came. How one of those wound up at Tom's was beyond him, given that it was literally worthless when the pre-loaded credit was expended. Were people that desperate?

It was weird enough he made a note to ask later.

Lawrence and Dana crossed the street at a quick jog. The fox took a moment to pull out his phone to check it. Tom was pretty sure that Linda was either on the third or fourth floor of the garage.

"Elevator or hike up?" he quietly asked Dana. Once they were out of sight of the street, he unslung his backpack and unzipped it enough to reach in as they walked.

"Elevator."

"If she's in trouble, they'll be expecting it."

The mouse stopped and stared at him. "Look, you asked. I'm not going to do the circular logic dance about this. Get in the fucking elevator."

"Sure." Lawrence's ability to argue vanished when she gave him that look. Lawrence knew from experience that on the rare occasion a mouse was legitimately intimidating, you don't push it.

They went up to the fifth floor. Better to overshoot and make their way down, the fox suggested. The pair walked down the middle of the aisle, footsteps echoing across the concrete. Horns and revving engines came in from outside as if they echoed from across a distant hill. Lawrence wanted to check his phone but didn't want to change his grip on his backpack. Dana would recognize the car anyways.

They were halfway down the fourth floor when he felt Dana's thin tail smack him on the leg. She nodded to a dirty sedan along one of the inside walls. His ears swiveled to focus and he sniffed the air. Residual exhaust overpowered the scents of the vehicles' various owners. He was pretty sure he could hear breathing, though.

"Linda!" Dana yelled, unable to hold back as she ran towards the car. Lawrence then saw the figure slumped over in the passenger seat.

He cursed under his breath and followed her, still clutching the backpack and the gun inside. She ran to the passenger door and he came around the other side. He got to the car first and checked the backseat and the driver's seat.

Empty.

Dana opened up the door and immediately checked Linda's pulse. She let out a sigh of relief.

The trunk slammed shut and startled Lawrence. A gunshot rang out, muffled by the backpack, as the bullet punched a hole through the material and shattered a rear window. He shrieked a curse of surprise as he pulled the smoking gun out of the backpack. The backseat was now home to a cloud of vaporized cushion floating in front of a hole in the seat itself.

Behind the car, a black panther morph 6-foot-3 if he was an inch stood by the trunk of Linda and Dana's car. He raised a shotgun and took aim, center mass, at Lawrence.

"One chance to do this awake," he said with a growl so steady that it might have been his natural voice.