Xenofox -Another Side-

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Content warning: Near suicide, violence, dystopia

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A loose newspaper flapped and wiggled against Rift's left cybernetic arm. He ripped it off with his right and crumpled it between his fingers. After a second, it slipped between his fleshy fingers and joined with cardboard, other loose paper, and plastic bags. He stepped on top of shattered glass with his brown boots, crunching them further.

He glanced all around Wilmington, a once prosperous city in Delaware. The air smelled heavy of smoke from recent fires, which tickled his instincts. Cars lay abandoned on the streets, with broken windows and a couple still smoldering. A radio from a looted store played music, though it went on and off with a mix of static.

Rift rolled his left shoulder up and down despite the pain disappearing a couple of months ago. He glanced at his left hand, where a clock lay on it and displayed 8:47 AM. To think that, before the Great Change, it would be a miracle if told the right time twice a day. Though if it turned him into an anthropomorphic animal like the rest of—

He shook the thought out of his mind.

Another thought took its place.

Those were your clues. If you put them together— He scrunched his eyebrows and shook his head. Rift stuffed his left hand into his pocket, leaving the thumb out. With his right, he adjusted his dark navy blue polo shirt to remain tucked in his brown jeans. He briefly played with the topmost button before inhaling and sighing, leaving it unbuttoned.

Part of him wondered why he bothered with looking good, considering his goal for the morning.

Rift walked through the city, having one building in mind to go to. Along the way, he passed by a couple of anthros: an armadillo and a tiger. They eyed his cybernetic arm, which he ignored. He got used to the stares after having the arm for four years. Still, if he could remove it, he would since he doubted it would survive the fall.

After some time walking, he stopped before a building. Tan, grainy walls surrounded the tall, broken-in windows. The shards still lay on the sidewalk and inside. A pair of glass doors lay on the sides, with the glass shattered, and a revolving door stood in the middle. Green-blue framing hung around, holding what remained of the glass. A coffee smell came from his right, where a smash-opened coffee bar stood in the same building.

"A good place, if any," Rift said to himself. An orangeyellow light flickered to his left. He turned there, where a teenage human girl in tattered clothing sat. Dirt stained her brunette hair and fair skin. Above her hands, a fireball glowed. Rift paused, debating with himself, and he turned to the girl. "Hey."

The girl lifted her head and flinched. She extinguished her flames by clutching her hands. "Oh. Um, hi?"

"I see you can use this 'magic,' as some folks called it," Rift said. He waited until she nodded. "You should head out as fast as possible. Certain groups don't take kindly to it."

"I-I know." She glanced down. "My family—" She trailed out, though Rift guessed what she almost said. Mobs sometimes lose track of their targets, especially at night, and they focus on others. He rubbed his chest above his heart. The teenage girl suppressed a sob and said, "I don't care what they do to me now."

Rift knelt. "Listen, I understand. Really, I do." He hesitated, wondering if he had any right to lecture her. He swallowed that hypocritical feeling and continued, "But it's foolish and shameful to throw your life away when others give you a chance to live."

"l-l — "

"Listen, you hear." Rift lay his right hand on her shoulder. "You aren't a lot, are you? But it's not the end.

Run. Find a group of friends who will protect you." He paused for a second. "You'll always carry the scars, but it'll get better. I promise."

She hesitated long enough that Rift thought she might reject his words. It passed, and she nodded. He relaxed and lifted his hand off her.

"Good. Run along now." Rift stood and took a couple of steps back. The teenage girl got up and ran. Rift watched until she disappeared off the corner. He shook his head. "Maybe I should listen to myself, but I can't."

A memory of bricks shattering windows and torches surrounding his home popped up. Screams of his daughter followed—

He shook his head. "No. No need to convince me of my failures, brain."

Rift sighed and turned toward the doors. He stepped through the entrance door despite it being the farthest door and with the windows broken. The glass inside crunched underneath his boots. No secretary sat behind the desk, which satisfied him. There would not be any more people who would stop him.

He walked through the hall and stepped into the stairs. Any sane person would take an elevator since this building held twenty-three stories, but not him. Besides, he doubted that they worked, considering how the entrance looked. If they did not care about the doors, they would not care about anything else.

It took him reaching the tenth floor to feel a little winded. Perhaps he had gotten rusty after these four years, but he knew he was strong enough to continue. At that thought, he rubbed his cybernetic arm for an itch that only his mind detected.

After some climbing, Rift reached the roof.

He walked to the edge and, for a moment, took in the view. The clouds covered much of the sky, enough that only a little sunlight shone through. He considered glancing at the northeast for a moment before shaking his head; it would not be visible anyway. He stepped on the edge with one foot, followed by another. He inhaled and slicked back his dark brown, which grayed at the side, back.

"Listen," Rift said to himself. "This is it. I'm finally joining—"

A cry came from below. He glanced down while cursing himself for getting distracted. He always knew that someone would spot him up here and be horrified. He rolled his tongue over his teeth and stared at the streets with dark red eyes.

He blinked, realizing that it did not come from someone spotting him.

It came from a mob of five people chasing someone.

For a second, Rift thought that they chased the teenage girl he chatted with. He stared closer and realized his mistake. They pursued a boy, no older than ten from his appearance. The dirty blond hair shone a bit golden from what little sunlight poked through the clouds.

"Get him! He holds an evil power!"

At that moment, Rift felt torn on whether to help or not. He knew he should focus on his desire; heck, they might get startled enough that the boy might escape. Then again, 'might' be too close of a call. He gritted his teeth, feeling so close to rejoining his family only for something else to happen. So close to the edge, to the end.

Still, if he did not help, he would not be himself.

Rift narrowed his dark red eyes at the mob and jumped.

He dug into the building's wall with his cybernetic arm, slowing his descent. His shoulder would scream from pain if he attempted it before the Great Change. Heck, the left side of his chest and neck would be crying. The surgeons who grafted the arm onto him also said they added body

enhancements to make it a better fit, which he doubted worked.

After the Great Change, he felt only mild discomfort.

Within seconds, Rift reached the ground. "Hey!"

The human child glanced at Rift with an emotionless expression, his sea blue eyes meeting dark reds. His white clothes held no stain or dirt on him. Without changing his expression, he rushed over to Rift's sides. Rift winced at the kid stepping onto the glass with bare feet, but he gave no reaction.

The mob of five, with one in the back, turned and faced Rift. A couple pulled out handguns and pointed them at him and the boy.

Rift clicked his tongue and huffed. "Leave him alone."

The mob member in the back chuckled and stepped forward. He stroked his rope up and down. "What's wrong, old friend? Defending freaks of evil like him?"

Rift blinked and stared at him. "Geoffroy? Is that you?"

"The one and only, Rift Octavio." Geoffroy chuckled again. The giggling made Rift's hair on the back stand up. A hint of madness leaked into the voice. "So, what are you doing here after, you know, fleeing into a small town? Practicing a dramatic entrance like you used to?"

Rift tilted his head. Four years passed since he last met Geoffroy, or as he called him, Geo. The golden-haired man liked to talk people's ears off about something philosophical he read. Heck, he spoke about the beauty of Stoicism and how it made rational sense.

To hear him chuckle like a madman, however, worried Rift.

"Geo, I know you," Rift said. "Listen, you're a lot more rational than this."

"Rational? You want to argue about rational when the world got flipped upside down!?" Geoffroy shook his head while chuckling. "Gehehehe. I thought things were bad enough when the LD Wars happened. They said that we left ourselves out of it, but that's not true at all, is it? People from all over, claiming to be refugees, flooded in while kicking out our own folks who held their homes for decades. I thought that things might get better. But then the Great Change happened. Seeing half of our people turned into freaks of nature with evil power, with plenty of human-looking ones like the boy back there, I realized the truth. Everything I thought I knew was trash!"

Rift shook his head. "Aren't you listening to yourself? Because—"

"Oh, I'm hearing myself perfectly." Geoffroy chuckled again. "That's why I'm doing this. To make this world *right*! Gehehehe. Do you have any idea how it feels? To have the world flipped on you before you know it?!"

Instead of answering, Rift glared at Geoffroy.

"Still, I guess I'm still fond of you. That's why I'm willing to let you go." Geoffroy pointed at the child behind Rift. "Hand him over, and we'll let you live. Right, fellows?" The other mob members nodded, with one making a gruff sound. "Heck, you still owe me." He pointed at Rift's cybernetic arm. "Do you know how much I spent on that!?"

Rift glanced at it for a moment. "I know. The Saquu Elohi lab boys are still sending me bills for it. And I am grateful for you and the others who helped me. However," he bent his knee with his cybernetic arm before him, "this is wrong, and you know it. Instead, and I'm asking as a friend, please leave in peace."

"Ah, jeez." Geoffroy tapped his nose. "Then I guess we'll have to kill you as well. Right, fellows?" The other four shouted in agreement. "We'll make your death as quick and painless as possible, old friend."

Rift growled. "I'm sorry it has to come to this." The two with the pistols fired. Within a split second, Rift's cybernetic arm glowed neon green in a series of lines. A green energy shield formed before him, holding a hexagon pattern. The bullets crashed into the shield and disintegrated into nothing.

They stopped firing and blinked at the shield. White dots littered on it where the bullets impacted before it faded back into green. Rift lowered the shield, though he still held his left arm up, ready.

Geoffroy chewed on his lip. "So, you gained this evil power too?"

"'Fraid so," Rift said. He clenched his right hand tight. "Listen, stop this. You're better than this!"

"Sorry, 'old friend,' You're with them now." Geoffroy spat on the street. "Knock him out and carry him for a lynching!"

Rift grunted and turned to the child. "Run! Now! I got this!"

Two of them charged at Rift, each hungry for blood.

Rift grunted, not wanting to die this way, and charged.

One pulled out a knife and swung it above his head in a reverse grip. Another held her pistol close at Rift, inches away from his nose. They both grinned in the absolute certainty of their victory. Rift reacted, grabbing the pistol's muzzle with his left cybernetic arm and the knife attacker's arm with his right fleshy arm. He crushed the barrel tight enough that he ripped it off with a snap. At the same time, he flipped the knife attacker onto the back, ensuring that his knife slipped off his fingers. They both flinched in shock, with it all happening in a second.

Rift took advantage of the stunned gun wielder and slapped her hard. She fell onto the street, her nose bleeding as she lost consciousness. When the knife attacker reached for his knife, Rift threw the crushed gun barrel at his face. He slammed back onto the street, knocked out.

The other two mob attackers froze at the quick counterattack. "W-what is he?!"

Geoffroy rubbed his teeth against his lips. "You kept your fitness up despite retiring."

Rift nodded. "Listen, I don't want any of this. Really, I don't. Just leave now, and we can forget all of this."

Geoffroy chuckled and shook his head. "You really are a square. Always have been."

Geoffroy charged forward, swinging his rope around. The end lay loose for a moment, but within half a second, a noose formed at the end. Rift blinked and raised his left arm, ready for his shield. Geoffroy dashed a bit faster than usual to the right and reached behind Rift. He flung his noose around Rift's neck and tightened it.

Rift gasped and struggled against it. It tightened up hard enough that he fell to his knees. He almost reached with his left arm, but the other pistol wielder pointed it at him. He gritted his teeth and instead used it to generate a shield. The rope tightened, with his face turning red. He reached with his right and tugged against the noose.

"Farewell, 'old friend,'" Geoffroy said.

He pulled the rope tighter.

Rift's right hand glowed light blue.

The rope snapped off with a shattering sound.

Geoffroy stumbled onto the ground, blinking. He glanced at the frayed noose, which held chunks of icicles on them. Rift stood up and turned toward him, flexing his glowing fingers. Frost covered his neck but left no damage at all.

Geoffroy frowned and pulled out a knife. "Why, you—

Geoffroy sprinted fast at Rift, faster than before. Rift wondered about that, but he leaped to the side. The knife edge rubbed against his shirt but left no cut. He frowned and grabbed Geoffroy's shoulder with his right hand. He broke free from his grip in half a second, but it touched him long enough.

Geoffroy screamed and fell onto the pavement. Frost covered much of his left shoulder through his clothing. He dropped his knife and rubbed it with his right hand, trying to warm it up, but it grew colder instead. He cried out, his left arm turning white.

The remaining two shook in horror, with one lowering his gun.

"Listen, and you listen well. THAT is a warning." Rift lowered his left arm. His shield disappeared, though he intimidated them well enough. He picked Geoffroy up with his cybernetic arm and tossed him to them. They caught him, who still shivered from the frostbite. "Take him and your other 'fellows' to the hospital. Don't bother me, that boy, or anyone who has this so called 'evil' power anymore."

They nodded, with one carrying Geoffory and the other bringing the other two.

Rift sighed; his right hand stopped glowing. He glanced at the rope left behind, the noose already gone. "I never thought I had to deal with that."

Rift turned back around, expecting the boy to have already disappeared.

He stayed, staring back at Rift with an emotionless gaze.

Rift flinched and walked over to the boy. He lowered himself, not bothering to kneel since glass lay on the ground, and set his right hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You're safe, kid. Run along now." Rift said. He waited for a response but got none. "Listen, I got some business to take care of. So, uh, do you want me to take you home? Do you still have a mommy and daddy who can care for you?" No response. "Any siblings?" The child kept staring at him. "Uh, are you alright? Did they, or someone, do something really bad to you?"

"Why do you stand on the edge?" The boy asked. His voice, much like his expression, held no emotion.

Rift blinked. "Uh, OK? Listen, you need to leave. It's dangerous here."

The boy reached to Rift's left arm and touched it for a moment. "Why do you wish to fall?"

"What are you talking about?" Rift asked in turn. He patted the child's dirty blond hair. "I leaped down to rescue you. I'm perfectly fine."

The child pointed at his chest. "In here as well?"

"I—" Rift shook his head. "Listen. We don't have time for these games."

"Why do you feel so hollow inside?" The boy asked. "Is it living? Do you seek to die?"

Rift flinched from those questions. It took him everything it took not to squeeze the kid's shoulder. "How? Who are you?"

The kid stared at him with emotionless sea blue eyes. "Do you feel alone without them?"

Rift let go, stood up, and took a couple of steps back. "It-it can't be." He breathed in and out fast. "Who is 'them?'"

"Monica and Katy."

Rift shivered and twisted all around. "Impossible." He turned the other way with images flashing before him of last week. "How do you know?" He shook his head and spun back. "HOW DO YOU—"

The child disappeared from that spot without a trace; even the glass he stood on left no blood. Rift flinched and twisted around. He spotted the child by the end of the street to his right a second later. The child stared at him for a couple of seconds before walking away to the right.

Rift gritted his teeth and sprinted after him. "Wait! TELL ME!"

Rift ran past the corner, staring down the street.

The kid already stood by the other corner, staring at him. He walked down the road, reaching the other side.

Rift grunted, sprinting over to him. He wondered how the child did such tricks, partly because he pulled none when running from the mob. Many possibilities popped into his head, but none of them fit.

The child gave him one last look before walking past the corner, disappearing from view.

Rift reached it a second later and—
"O!!"

Rift blinked, crashing into another person. She fell back with a grunt, almost landing on her gray tail. She rubbed her chest, wincing from the pain.

Rift stopped his sprint and knelt before her. "Hey. Are you alright? I'm very sorry."

"Ugh, I think I'm OK?" She rubbed the back of her head. Her yellow eyes glanced at his dark red, which almost popped from her gray fur. "Is there anything wrong, sir?"

"I-I was chasing a kid." He glanced down the street, but the child disappeared. "Darn." He helped her onto her feet-paws. "Did you see a kid pass by? He's a short kid, human, with blond hair. He wore white clothes but no shoes."

"Uh, there was a kid that walked past me, but almost nothing like that." She brushed back her dark hair. "He was an anthro fox with bright red fur, even his hair-fur."

"Listen, he was a human, not an anthro. He should've walked past you."

"I saw no human. Only a fox anthro child." She adjusted her pale blue shirt. "The only thing that matched that description was his white color clothes."

Rift rubbed the back of his head. "Wh-where did he—" He paused for a second. He turned to the anthro gray wolf with realization. "Wait. Your accent."

She gulped and asked, "Oi? What about it?"

"You're not from around here, are you?" Rift asked. He rolled his left shoulder up and down. "I say, you're from the UK?"

The anthro gray wolf sighed and nodded. "Yah. I came from there. Landed in just a couple of weeks ago. I, well, hoped that things were better here."

Rift sighed and shook his head. "You know, I thought that the United States ordered the borders be closed after the Great Change event a couple of months ago."

She paled. "Th-there wasn't anyone, not even a squaddie, who—"

Rift rubbed the bridge of his nose up and down with his left hand. "Listen, you can relax. I'm not some officer of the law nor in the mood to contact them. From my experience, they're useless and not around when most needed."

"Th-that sounds like it back—" The anthro gray wolf paused. "Your arm."

"Huh? Oh, this?" Rift flipped his left arm around. "Yeah. I lost my old one in a fire."

"Huh?" Her eyes widened. "Wh-what happened?" She blushed. "Sorry if—"

Rift sighed and shook his head. "Listen. I don't mind such questions. In fact, this arm is my badge of honor." She blinked and flattened her right ear to the side. "You see, I was a firefighter. Been one for five years or so. What happened was that four years ago, an activist group got violent when protesting at the mayor's house here. They set fire to the place. We were called in to put it out and rescue

as many people as possible. I had just pulled the mayor's son out when a maniac charged me. He got past the police, and just before they restrained him, he tossed a Molotov cocktail at us. I dropped the son and blocked it," he raised his left arm, "with my arm taking the brunt of the damage. So much so that they had to amputate it when we were taken to the hospital."

"H'm so sorry." The anthro gray wolf reached up and touched it. "It-it must've been so horrible."

"But the kid survived, and that's all that matters in my book." Rift flexed his fingers a bit. "And the mayor was so thankful that he managed to pull some strings at the local research facility. They were working on some blueprints, you see, and they just created this. So, they gave it to me, along with a long bill. Of course, they claimed that if I do practical tests for them with it, they could shorten it." He gave a dry chuckle. "It did not take as long to prove that it works like a lemon. It barely moves around, and not even dry leaves crumble between my fingers. Plus, even with a so-called body enhancement so that it would not offset the balance too much, my shoulder still hurt like no tomorrow."

"Oh." She tapped her nose a couple of times. "Say, I don't have much, but if you still need to—"

"No need. In fact, I'm planning on ending my troubles very soon."

The anthro gray wolf blinked and wiggled her ears in confusion. Rift grunted, wondering if he said too much. When she reached up and touched his chest, he concluded that he did.

"Don't worry about me," Rift said.

"You feel so cold, much like him," she said, though more to herself. "Much colder." Her yellow eyes flashed. "What happened?"

"Listen, don't you worry." Rift brushed aside her arm. "Just take care of yourself. Don't worry about an old man like—"

"You look like you need more help than me," the anthro gray wolf said. "You already opened yourself up about your arm."

"Listen. It's a thing of pride. I like sharing that story."

"Then tell me another."

Rift hesitated and sighed.

"When the Great Change happened, it affected my dear wife and daughter. It turned them into anthro raccoons." He lifted his cybernetic arm. "It didn't leave me untouched, but it isn't as obvious. If I realized it sooner, then maybe.

"When news came of lynching of anthros and 'magical' folks, I did my best to hide them. We lived in a nearby town, you see, so news travels fast. I hoped to stifle any news as to what happened with them, even trying to say that they fell sick. Only a few friends knew the truth. B-but they found out. Th-they surrounded my homes, tossing in bricks and fire.' Rift stammered a bit. "The house caught on fire. I-I carried them out, but—"

Rift broke out into a sob instead of continuing. He lowered his head, with shame and guilt written all over his face. He wondered if she would take this as a weakness to take advantage of.

The anthro gray wolf nodded in understanding instead. She reached for his cheek and rubbed it. Rift sighed and held it close.

"They let me live at first. That was when I realized the Great Change also left me with 'magic.' When I grabbed one of the mob member's arms and froze it off. They attacked me, realizing that I also held this 'evil' power. I managed to hold them out and escape." He flipped his cybernetic arm. "I should've guessed. After the Great Change, this arm worked much better than my old arm. The

pain in my shoulder stopped. Heck, even the built-in watch finally told the correct time. If I realized the truth, then maybe."

"So, you wanted to join them," she asked. Rift nodded without hesitation. She helped wipe away the tears on his face. "I-I wish I knew my family well."

"Your family?" Rift rubbed his left arm up and down for that itch. "Sounds like you came here alone."

She nodded. "Yeah. I don't remember my parents much. The most I remember is living with my granddad, who clammed up whenever I asked about them. He never told me what happened to them before he died a year ago. The old man didn't even leave snapshots behind of them."

Rift raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It's the truth. And, honestly, I thought he hated them. In fact, on a rare occasion, he let it slip that he felt disappointed in his daughter leaving with that man. When I asked what he meant, he looked away with unfocused eyes. I felt disappointed in him until he died. Since then, I felt nothing but pity for him. I lived alone with no other family member. There is one bloke who I am interested in."

"But you came here alone." Rift crossed his arms.

She sighed. "Much like you, he suffered and broke within. I, well, tried to convince him to come with me, to start over. But he fell into such despair that, well, I wouldn't be surprised if one mob or another burned him alive already. I only hope that didn't happen, that he'll recover in his own way and come for me."

Rift raised an eyebrow, wondering if he should believe her. Another part of him wondered why he should care since he planned for things to end today. He lost his entire world already. In his mind, he recalled his wife and daughter screaming for help while those freaks in black tied nooses around their necks.

Rift turned away, but the anthro gray wolf grabbed his left wrist.

"Listen," she said. "I understand how it feels. Really, I do. Just, trying to avoid this pain like this will only make you suffer. Trying to avoid creating new bonds or love to avoid being hurt again will never make you happy, even in your final moments. Instead, it'll make it hurt even more."

Rift paused. The child with the sea blue eyes' words rang in his head at that point. Though he tried to ignore it, he realized just how hollow he felt. Even though his pulse still pumped blood, he might as well be a corpse walking

without purpose. No father should outlive his children, yet it happened because he failed to realize the power within.

He turned back to the anthro gray wolf and, for a moment, saw a transparent image of his daughter. It faded quickly, but the feeling of someone needing protection remained. Observing someone he just met like that felt silly, and not just any person: a foreigner. No person, he thought, could ever replace his daughter.

But she does not have to.

In his mind, Rift imagined himself standing on that building again, ready to jump to his doom. He heard whispers begging him to jump. They gave hints that, if he did, he would meet his dear wife and daughter again. He lifted his boot and turned away, ready to start anew.

Rift returned with a small smile. "Thank you."

The anthro gray wolf blinked and smiled in return. "You're welcome, um."

"Ah. Right." Rift turned and placed his right hand against his chest. "I'm Rift Octavio."

"Nice name. I'm Avil. Avil Kassian."

Rift nodded. "Listen, I admit that, for the past week, I've been living in my car. Is it alright if—"

"Oh. Of course. As long as you need." Avil nodded. She grabbed his cybernetic hand and pulled him down the sidewalk.

Rift smiled a bit while trying not to shed tears. At this moment, he knew he must be strong for Avil. He still felt the pain of his wife's and daughter's deaths, enough that he doubted it would leave. In time, though he would always carry the scars, but it would get better. In fact, it would be a reminder of his love for his wife Monica and daughter Katy.

For that reason, for them, he must live on for Avil's sake.

"Listen, Avil," Rift said. "Could you tell me more about yourself? Specifically, that guy you mentioned before?"

"Him? Of course," Avil answered.

The midday sunlight glistened in the ocean's waves like starlight. Some waves splattered onto a large yacht, but most bobbed it up and down. Many smuggled passengers remained inside, resting after a storm the previous night.

One stood at the front.

Daniel the anthro cross fox leaned against the yacht's railing with a smile. Some of the ocean sprayed on his orange and black fur. His orange hair-fur waved in the

salty, cool breeze along with his unbuttoned light blue shirt. He kept his long knife in its sheath attached to his belt, not wanting it to get seawater damaged.

Though the sunlight burned against his black fur, he smiled with his bright green eyes shining.

"Avil. I'm coming. Wait for me."

About Author

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