

## A Change for the Better

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There was a time, years ago, when Steven was actually satisfied with his job at the Dynacom Institute. His position in one of the main research labs paid well-enough, his coworkers were pleasant more often than not, and the benefits were exceptional. Still, his work had gradually become dull and repetitive, to the point where he felt he was simply going through the motions. On late nights like this, where he was practically alone in the expansive facility, those feelings were only amplified. He was eager for change—any change—but he doubted he'd stumble upon it anytime soon.

Letting out a long yawn, Steven picked up the small vial that'd arrived from Delta Labs a brief while earlier. Their lead scientist had been excessively vague about the sample's nature, only admitting it involved research into muscle regeneration and wildlife, and that Steven's lab was best equipped to handle certain tests. Steven doubted the last part was true. In all likelihood he was being tricked into doing Delta Labs work for them so they could meet a deadline, or maybe just leave early. He didn't care much either way; at least the sample was something different from the norm.

Steven yawned again as he headed to another workstation with the vial, exhaustion rapidly creeping up on him. Perhaps he should finally go home after this last test, before he started making mistakes with expensive equipment. Unfortunately he didn't make the decision early enough. As the researcher tried to place the sample into his machine his grip loosened for a split second, and the vial plummeted to the metal table and shattered instantly. Steven winced and shielded his face with a hand as droplets of the sample splashed him, a few managing to get in his eyes.

He cursed his clumsiness and swiftly went to the nearest eye-wash station, hoping there hadn't been anything toxic in the sample. Steven continued fuming quietly as he flushed his eyes with water, barely noticing the slight headache he was getting. Once he was content with the treatment he returned to the broken vial. As he wiped up the mess he'd made, though, he felt his hands growing a little stiff, and itchy. Upon taking a closer look, his heart nearly stopped; there were webs between his fingers.

Steven looked over his hands in shock, convinced exposure to the sample had caused hallucinations at first. The change was simply too *real* though. His breathing grew heavy and the itching spread throughout his body, the headache from before growing in intensity. His nails, he could swear they were sharper, and speckles of light brown were appearing all over his arms. As they spread he realized they were hairs, or maybe fur, a coat of it growing everywhere. He knew he should be calling for help, but the onslaught of sensations surging through his body was overwhelming, and it took every ounce of strength he had just to stand.

Through the reflective surfaces of the metal instruments and table he could barely witness the transformations occurring on his face as well. His nose had turned black and flattened out, while his face was distending slightly, like a snout. Steven stumbled, his shoes suddenly feeling tighter and tighter, until finally their seams ripped, revealing arcing paws. More tears appeared on his shirt and pants, his entire body feeling sturdier, bulkier. While the scientist had kept in relatively good shape before, his muscles were now becoming more defined, shredding his clothes bit by bit as they grew.

As his whole body changed completely, the most noticeable transformation was the slow growth of a tail. Steven had felt it starting to poke out of his pants early on, and now he could seemingly feel every inch of its growth. He swayed it back and forth, on accident at first, gradually becoming accustomed to the balance provided by the new appendage. After what seemed like an eternity the itching and thrumming pain in Steven's head stopped, and he braced himself on the side of a table, panting.

More than a little concerned, Steven nervously made his way to the closest mirror he could find, staring at it in stunned silence. He was an otter. Clad only in a poorly-fitting lab coat, Steven had a commanding view of his new body, confirming the transformation hadn't been limited. His mind raced with questions, unable to accept such a thing was possible let alone that it'd happened to him. There

was fear and unease, but also an undeniable amount of excitement and...joy? Steven flexed his arms, enthralled by the muscle that'd accompanied his change, and a slight grin appeared on his face. While before he'd been exhausted now he was energized, wide awake. The bored researcher had desperately wanted some changes in his life, and there was a chance his pleas had just been answered. Of course, now he'd have to figure out how to explain this to his boss. And his friends, and his family, and...