

It had been a bad idea to try to infiltrate the wizard's castle by himself; Brian had always been aware of this fact. It was an inconvenient, nagging truth that tickled the back of his mind through every moment of planning, through every moment of his infiltration, even as he stood at the very doorway to his intended destination. Still, the allure of possibly being able to retrieve some scrolls of power from the magician's considerable stock of artifacts to sell for a pretty price was too great. It was a great risk, but the reward of success would be even greater.

But, revived from the very far reaches of his mind was that original, nagging thought. <This was a bad idea,> he thought to himself as he was forced to his knees in front of the wizard in his deepest laboratory. Brian thought he might perhaps try to run, but a quick glance at the guards who had escorted him reminded him why he had given up resistance long ago. The hulking beasts looked like some monstrous combination of a bear and a wolf, and their eyes glinted with an intelligence that convinced him that outsmarting them would be unlikely.

The wizard seemed decidedly less threatening than lore would suggest and, in fact, seemed disinterested in the intruder that had been roughly brought before him. The graying man spared Brian a few sharp glances, but mostly he continued busying himself with the various odd contraptions and pieces of equipment which surrounded him and filled the room.

"You lot in the city disappoint me," he grumbled, more to himself than for Brian's benefit. "I leave you alone and purchase every bloody thing I use from your town, yet none of you ever trust me. It always has to be legends of this strange wizard who lives in a castle outside of town and who probably has a plot to take over the world. Assumptions, assumptions! It has gotten so far that I cannot even trust the law in your town. I turn you into the Guard, and the next thing I know you're creeping back through my halls again. Well, now you've all done it. You've forced me to take things into my own hands."

"You could just let me go?" Brian offered.

The old man snorted. "Yes, and I suppose I can trust you not to come back in here looking for your two seconds of fame. Not a chance, boy. You'll do your time, but I'll be the one delivering the punishment this time. Then, when I release you, you might actually have a reason to stay away!"

Brian chuckled nervously. "Look, I know it looks bad, but I'm just here to reclaim the library books you never turned back in."

“Oh, right, I keep forgetting... Don’t think you’ve convinced me! The librarian knows she can always come to me if she needs a book back. I am a card-holding member in good standing! Now, since you found it so easy to break into my property, it’s going to be your job to guard it from now on.”

Brian laughed outright. “Look, I’m a peddler, not a watch dog, old man. If you set me to guard our stuff, you might as well just kiss it goodbye.”

“Well, you have a few honest bones in your body at least. No matter. I was not planning on having you take your new task as you are now. No, I have a much better plan for you.”

Brian was about to try to plead his case again, but the wizard began to chant and wave his arms in dramatic fashion. Brian watched, entranced, for a few moments, until he finally realized that the wizard did not seem to actually be watching him. He quickly glanced around, and saw a knife sitting on the desk that the wizard had been studying on before. It was likely some sort of scalpel used in study, but all he needed was a sharp blade. Brian carefully made sure that the beasts that were guarding him were not keeping a close eye on him, and then he shifted forward and reached for the blade. He only needed a moment to kill the wizard, and then he could escape!

Unfortunately, even as he was about to take the knife in his hand, the wizard finished his spell and threw his hands towards Brian. Surprised, Brian fell to the ground, head swimming as waves of arcane energy swept over him and flowed through him. He felt as though he were going to burst from his skin and stretched, trying to relieve the pressure which was building throughout his body. He could hear creaking and popping, and realized before long that the seams on his clothing were suddenly being stretched beyond acceptable limits. He was growing!

“What... are you...?”

Brian stopped as he heard his own voice. His speech was slow, and for some reason he could not speak more quickly even as he tried to concentrate on doing just that. That was not the only noticeable change. His voice was now much deeper, rumbling in his chest as he spoke. It almost sounded like the growling of a beast.

“As I said, I aim to punish you by using you to deter further intruders. You were no good to me as you were, so I am making alterations accordingly. Do not fear; you will know how to use your new body as though it were your own.”

“New... body...”

Brian looked at himself and his mouth gaped at what he saw. The first thing that was obvious was that he now seemed to be nearly seven feet tall instead of barely reaching six feet. There was something even more curious, however. He was, as he had said to the wizard previously, a mere peddler, and very much looked the part. As he glanced at his arms expecting the familiar, thin limbs he had seen every day of his life for years, he instead saw a pair of thickly muscled arms, thickening still even as he looked at them, packing on more and more muscle. He groaned, a rumbling sound deep in his throat, as his unfamiliar limbs finished expanding. His fingers began to feel as though they were lit on fire, and he watched them in horror as they all began to thicken as well. His smallest finger merged with the adjacent digit, and all four of his remaining fingers thickened and grew longer, and then from the tips of each, a long, sharp claw emerged, gleaming black and visibly sharp.

“My hands... what have you done to my hands?”

Even now as he panicked, Brian could not manage to raise his voice or speak quickly. It was as though something was keeping his body calm, even as his mind continued to panic. The wizard was not forthcoming with any sort of answer to the question, but that was just a well. Even as he finished asking, Brian began to feel the change infecting his chest. What next emerged from his throat was no ambiguous groan or grunt. No, it began as a snarl and quickly grew, until a full, wild animal's growl rumbled up from his chest. Even as it did, his chest barreled forward, no longer looking like it belonged on a human's body. His shirt had started to rip before when he had grown suddenly, and now the strained seams had simply been pushed too far. His chest virtually exploded from his clothing, leaving his upper body bare. He reached up and touched his chest with one of his massive, clawed hands. He could feel the tips of his claws on his chest, and he could also feel that his chest was now much more thickly muscled. He was already well on his way to becoming some sort of powerful beast.

He rolled wide shoulders to try to release the tension that came with the change, but it brought no relief. He growled again, this time voluntarily in his frustration. He could feel the tension moving down along his body as the changes swept towards his hips. His body seemed to stretch a bit more, now not uniformly across his entire body but specifically around his core. When the changes finally reached his hips, he could feel them grinding, their structure reshaping with harsh, quick adjustments. He growled again as they gave a few quick pops, and by the time it all was over he could tell that standing back up on two legs was definitely not going to be easy.

His legs began to change, altering in shape and structure even as they, like his arms before them, grew stronger. Curiously, they remained shorter than his arms, leaving him in a somewhat lopsided stance. He tried stretching his legs, individually at first, and then one at a time. This resulted in several new

tears along the seams of his trousers, but rather than stretch out further, his legs remained the same length. It was slightly uncomfortable, and lent him an unnatural, beastlike appearance.

With his legs fully changed, his feet underwent their own change. Where his trousers had remained largely intact, however, his feet had no mercy on his boots as they were changed. Sharp claws tore through the fronts of his boots first; then his feet grew longer from ankle to toe, and tore apart what was left of his boots. He kicked the scraps loose and stared at the strange, powerful paws that had replaced his feet. Much like his hands, each digit bore a long, sharp claw at its end.

“What do you think?” the wizard asked.

Brian looked up at him. From the neck down he was now some sort of monster. Before he could think to answer the man, a new wave of changes rushed over him rapidly, and he had just time enough to watch as his skin discolored into a greyish hue, and a moment later a layer of dusty brown fur began to sprout. From his hind paws all the way up towards his shoulders the wave swept, quickly spreading towards his head.

“I’m a monster.”

No indignation and barely any energy could be heard in those words. Brian still felt strange – slow – and his words reflected that. Before he had even finished speaking, the wave of fur reached his head, and he began to feel the changes rush up his neck. He growled angrily now. What did the wizard think he was doing?

He could feel his ears pulling out and growing longer and pointed at the sides of his head, and then even sliding towards the top of his head. His face pulled out in front of him, mouth and nose combining and forcing forward, and he found himself looking down his own snout until his eyes began to slide to the side to give him a better perspective around that constant blind spot. It looked like he had a wolf’s muzzle now, and appropriately he immediately began to feel his teeth growing longer and sharper in his mouth. In no time at all, they were possibly even too long for his new muzzle, making it more comfortable to leave his mouth open in a vicious feral smile. The fur followed the other changes along, and his muzzle was covered in dark brown fur immediately.

A moment of pain marked a change in his eyes, and suddenly the shadows were not so dark. Unseen to him, his eyes now had feline slits. His head was now completely changed in shape; mobile, oval ears sat at the top of his head, a wolf’s muzzle with vicious teeth protruded in front of him, ending in a damp, black nose, and bright, feline eyes stood at the sides of his head, giving him wide peripheral vision. As

he panted with his mouth open, another change became apparent, as he could see the forked tip of his long, thin tongue.

However, the changes to his head were not quite finished. He growled in annoyance as pain came from around the top of his head, and a pair of horns began to grow. They quickly gained their shape, spinning in the familiar spirals of ram's horns. They were out of place on the head of a predator, but somehow they combined with the other elements to create a truly intimidating visage. He barely noticed their new weight on his head, as his strong neck easily bore them.

"Very good." The wizard stepped around him, observing how all of the changes had finished. Brian glanced himself over. He was now a large beast, some strange hybrid of many shapes that somehow blended well together. Almost comically, the scraps of his trousers still held together over his hindquarters. As if responding to this realization, a new change produced a sudden pressure at the base of his spine. Brian snarled, stretching his body out to its full length, and in response the new pressure was released, tearing his trousers apart and leaving him nude but for his fur. Brian glanced back along the length of his back, and saw that now, extending behind him, was a long, tapering tail that ended in a spade. Much like the other parts of his body, it seemed mismatched, looking closer to the tail of a great drake than any sort of furred creature. It was covered in fur, but it still struck him as odd. A moment of consideration did see one use for its unfamiliar length, however. Though his hips were not suited for bipedal motion, he could likely still balance in a bipedal stance now, using his tail for counterbalance.

Brian tried to turn to the wizard and ask what he had become and why, but all that emerged from his mouth was a loud rumbling growl. He could no longer speak.

"Now, my friend, you are very nearly done," the wizard explained. He brushed a hand down Brian's furred side. The former peddler wanted to strike at the man, but he found that he could not force himself to take action against the man. Instead he stood there, obedient to let the wizard pet him. "I needed some sort of scarecrow to keep others from entering these walls, and you should do perfectly."

Brian gave a loud roar as a sudden pain, greater than all of the others, shocked him from his back. In moments, a pair of new appendages began to spread behind him, barely able to fit within the walls of the relatively small room. Brian looked back to try to see what it was, but he could feel it before he could see what they were. He was growing wings! They were designed much like a bat's, a thin membrane of skin spread between a series of thin limbs. As they reached their full span, Brian found that he was able to tuck them at his sides comfortably.

"Good; that is that, then."

Brian gave a grunt, trying to communicate his confusion. The wizard smiled to him.

“You are a gargoyle, my friend, or soon to be one. Your role will be to provide a defense on my outer walls. With you on guard there I feel that it should be easy to keep others from making their way into my archives.”

Brian began to growl at the wizard. How dare he treat him in this way? He poured his will into attacking the man, rearing up before him with full intent to destroy him. Before he could even threaten the wizard, however, the man gave a dismissive wave of the hand and Brian fell back to all fours, blinking as he tried to remember what he had intended to do.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot abide insubordination. You will find yourself compelled to obey my orders for as long as you remain here serving your punishment. Trust me; things will go far more smoothly this way.”

Brian, compelled by an insistent voice in the back of his mind, sat in front of the wizard on his haunches. It was not involuntary, per se, but he simply would not have considered doing so if his was the only will that moved him to action. His tail calmly encircled his paws, leaving him sitting before his new master in silent patience. Antagonistic thoughts fled, replaced by the knowledge of how to execute his new responsibilities. As he thought of these things, his mind slowly found peace with them. As a human, waiting for hours as a sentinel would have been odious. His new gargoyle body was more than suited for the task, however. He knew that his body would become stone to wait out the long, lonely hours, and stone had more than enough patience to bide its time.

The wizard took a few moments to inspect his new creation, before finally giving Brian a pat on the side. “Very good,” he muttered. “Now, off to your post. You never know when another misled adventurer will see fit to invade my home.”

Without even a growl in response, Brian departed, padding down the hallway with long strides on massive paws. Powerful claws bit into the stone, pulling him along swiftly and leaving a trail in his wake. Finally, reaching an open portcullis leading into a small courtyard, Brian spread his wings and gave a mighty leap, catching the air with his new appendages and climbing into the sky with powerful strokes. He circled a few moments above the castle before guiding his flight to the western wall, a single beat of his wings arresting his momentum just above the crenellations.

His claws found purchase on a large granite sphere that decorated one of the parapets. He rumbled in contentment for a moment, as he curiously found that this perch felt familiar somehow. With all four of his paws gripping its surface, he allowed his tail to wrap down around it, trailing behind him almost to the walkway below. Keen eyes began to search for invaders, even as one final change took place throughout his body.

Muscle, bone, and sinew were being replaced by speckled grey stone, granite like his new perch. He knew that his flesh would return whenever he should need it, but for now he would be a deterrent as much as a guardian. He bared his fangs in a terrifying snarl as stone fixed his face as it was. As the last of his body was paralyzed, Brian found that he felt somehow excited. He almost hoped that an adventurer would happen by soon and attempt to invade under the assumption that this gargoyle was a mere statue. Perhaps then he would gain a companion in this task.