

Parts of the Whole — Part 1: The Arrival

By Austen Tucker · 2026

Cel-shaded website hero art for Parts of the Whole, showing a luminous kitsune guardian protecting a young man in a revival tent.

Originally published in "Different Worlds: Different Skins Volume 2." Nominated for an Ursa Major. In my other writing life I wrote for a LGBTQ political blog and spent a lot of time studying the ex-gay movement. This is what came of it.

When Audrey woke up – really woke up, with the fox yipping and everything – you could see faint whiskers on her cheekbones. We were just playing around with a little hypnosis, a quick relaxation and a "Who are you?" command added on for good measure, and before I knew it my best friend was a kitsune. She writhed and wriggled and screamed a new name to the heavens before waking up, eyes full of fire, looking at me with that sly, foxy smile. She propped herself up on a pillow stolen from my bedroom and I knew it wasn't Audrey talking anymore. "Is this sinking in, Lance?" she asked, hands folded under her chin, head tilted to one side.

"No." I laughed and shook my head. "It was just supposed to be hypnosis. You know, like my therapist uses. God. I'm breaking out the whiskey. Want some?"

"Yeah. Always loved that stuff." She was always a looker, in that cute, mousey-nerd way. Even though she wasn't my type I understood why guys went crazy for her. (Girls, too, but that's because she would hang out in my neck of the woods more often than not.) But here she oozed raw sexuality, a kind of command that captivated anyone foolish enough to step into her midst.

"Look, Lance. It's pretty simple. I told you three times already: Audrey's soul is part of a kitsune. One tail. Consider yourself lucky to know her."

"And you're someone else, I take it?" I poured two large snifters halfway to the brim. Sure, it wasn't exactly proper whiskey technique, but we could worry about proper when we were good and drunk, and this whole song-and-dance was just a memory.

"Not exactly. She is me. I've just been off doing things for her outside of this world. Watching over her, making sure she had good fortune, all that guardian angel kind of stuff, to put it in terms even a Catholic could understand." She stared at my cross and gave a little chuckle. "Lighten up, buddy! Just because you're gay and Catholic doesn't mean you can't laugh a little!"

Yep. This was definitely not my favorite, do-no-harm best friend Audrey talking anymore. "You always wanted to know who you were. I mean, Audrey, that is. Hard to see you as anything different."

I put the whiskey in front of Audrey and she took dainty little sips. "We aren't. We're parts of a whole. Audrey and Hope."

"So that's your name." I took a deep swig. "Hope."

"That's just the name my contractor gave to me. My real name stays a secret." Another sip. "No offense to you, of course. Just one of those things that spirits don't usually part with."

"She always wanted to know who she was." Another deep swig. "I guess. Who knew, right? You know any angels?"

"None that'd tell you to put a rubber band around your wrist," she said, chuckling. She pointed to the rubber band sitting snug around my arm. There were a dozen and a half welt marks where I had snapped the thing, hard, onto my skin, just like my therapist suggested. "What did the doc tell you? 'Snap this band whenever you think of another male in a sexual fashion?' That seems to be popular lately."

"None of your business."

"You know, most of those doctors don't even have a Psy-D diploma? They're kooks. Snake oil salesmen."

"And my mother's paying for the whole kit and caboodle." I drained my snifter and went back into the kitchen for more. "What's it matter to you?"

"You're my friend—" she paused, "Audrey's friend, I mean. But I'm easy to get to know if you just let things happen. Tell me. Are you allergic to dogs?"

I poured another slug of whiskey and downed it. At least this way I could keep up conversation without wanting to pull out a Bible and some holy water. "Nope. Lived and breathed them for years."

When I came back to the living room she had a long, slinky, brown foxtail strewn across the sofa. As she petted it I could see it writhing, slowly, each movement attached to her hip. She smiled a coy little grin and patted the cushion beside her. "I just didn't want to ruin your day – that's all. Surprises are better when you don't start sneezing."

What the hell, I thought to myself. I sat down in the little pocket she made for me with her tail and then it was around my midsection. It was nice and soft – reminded me of an old, comfortable stuffed animal, come to think of it – and when she wrapped it around me I could feel myself relaxing. "Old kitsune magic," she said to me, matter-of-factly. "My favorite kind."

"Wonderful. Just wonderful." We shared a laugh. I melted into her arms. "That mean I'm going to hell now, or is that the next step in this process?"

"Don't be so mean!" she said. Then she gave me a playful slap across the arm. "Come on. I'm only trying to help. Some kitsune actually enjoy helping, you know."

"And being blasphemous at the same time."

"Right. Right. That's not why you woke me up, though. Tell me about Steve," she asked, tracking lazy, gossip-hungry circles into my thigh, and I couldn't keep myself from pouring every little sordid detail to that chuckling little fox-smile.

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I saw Mister Jenkins in my dreams. He preferred being called Therapist Jenkins, or Doctor Jenkins, but the guy was never licensed and he sure as hell wasn't a doctor. But for me, when I sat on his couch in that little strip-mall ministry-turned-therapy spot, it was Mister Jenkins, nothing more, nothing less. Mister Jenkins' "#1 Dad" coffee mug. Mister Jenkins' matchbox cars in shadowbox display cases. Mister Jenkins' Ten Commandments. Mister Jenkins' "God Loves You For Your Fight" poster.

"I want you to wear this rubber band," he said. He always said this one. The band was always different; sometimes it was on fire, sometimes it had thorns sticking out of inappropriate (and painful) places, sometimes it was a pink garter made of lace and elastic. But I was never given an option to say no – he'd say the words and the thing just appeared on my wrist.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything, mind you; that was never part of the dream. Not that Mister Jenkins would listen; he never listened. My mother paid him two hundred dollars a session for results, not compassion. So I stared at the band on my wrist and twirled it around, feeling the slight, pinching pressure coming down onto my wrist.

All the while, Steve was there. He was wrapped around my waist and kissing at my neck, just the way he did in every dream: curly black hair, pudgy little love handles, bubble butt hanging out of just-right jeans. God! Was he ever a looker! He held a mimosa in his free hand and giggled as his other hand made itself useful.

All his work got me panting pretty quickly; Mister Jenkins watched with that distant, off-in-space look he used every time we tried this little activity, making notes on the inside cover of his study Bible. "Right," he said. I interrupted him with a little squeal as Steve found my ticklish spot. "Now I want you to snap the rubber band as you're thinking about him. Lance, it's the only way. Snap that rubber band right down on your wrist."

It was a hot band of steel this time. When I snapped it down it left a charred mark across my wrist. I didn't scream. Steve didn't stop his ministrations. "Again, Lance. Snap the rubber band. Every time you think of that man, you have to hurt yourself. It's a reminder, Lance. Remind yourself of why you are here."

I'd snap it down again. Steve stopped working on me. He sat by Mister Jenkins, with a half-smile, sipping his mimosa and eyeing the ever-increasing number of char marks on my wrist. "We didn't make a safe word," he said to Mister Jenkins, "Can't have S&M without a safe word!"

Mister Jenkins shook his head. He always shook his head in these slow, pained swings, a stiff-handed way of saying "close, but no cigar." Then he would take out his pad of paper and tear off the top sheet. "My friend," he said, as if we went out every weekend for drinks and darts, "I think we need to move to the next level of treatment. You are terribly homosexual."

One armband became two. They linked at my belt loop, holding me to the chair. When I struggled the burning began again, charring long scars down my veins. I cried and the tears sizzled on the floor. Mister Jenkins shredded trust certificates in his hands and stapled the Exodus International order to the top of the sheets. Steve laughed. Mister Jenkins kept shaking his pooh-pooh head, as if scolding a child.

"The Security personnel at the door will take you to the camp. Please don't fight, Lance. It's for your own good. Your mother will be proud of you." That was how the dream always went: same imagery, same people, same goddamn ending. It got to the point that I simply stood up and walked toward the door, paying little attention to the ache in my heart, visions of shock therapy and snapping rubber-bands dancing in my head.

Except this time, Hope was at the door. She carried Audrey's face, but the ears, the tails, the paws, the stark white fur, the Hellfire-red glow in her eyes, it was all Hope. She raised herself off the ground, tail whirling up a small dervish on the carpet. The dervish became fire, fire became storm, and before I could blink the whole room was dancing in orange-yellow flame. Mister Jenkins kept shaking his head even as the fires licked away at the Exodus order, Mom's trust fund certificates, the tip of his beard. Steve disappeared into the wall. The cheap decorations, motivational posters, and anti-gay rhetoric all perished in the fire, consumed by the living, breathing flames.

And Audrey, smiling a smile that split her lip in a canine grin, broke my bonds with the fire. "Let it burn," she said to me, and the flames grew ever higher—

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The intercom buzzer almost scared me out of the bed. If it weren't for Audrey's new fox tail curling tightly around my waist I might have fallen straight to the floor. My clothes were soaked clean through with sweat and the covers lay on the floor in a heap. Audrey lay motionless on her side of the bed, a gentle smile crossing her face, fox ears licking this way and that in innocent slumber. Best to leave her be, I thought to myself, and I closed the bedroom door behind me.

The intercom was by the refrigerator and was ringing so much that I feared it'd fall off its screws. Only one person in my world would do such a thing. "Hi, Mom," I said, my finger leaning against the talk button like a crutch.

"You're sleeping away your Sunday again?" her voice screeched and crackled over the intercom line. "Church was two hours ago."

"Long night," I replied. "Place is a bit of a mess."

"Let me in," she responded. I looked to the ceiling, released the talk button, and let out a moan. The ceiling had nothing to say in reply. "Really," Mom insisted. "it's chilly out here."

I buzzed her in and threw on a tee-shirt just in time to greet her at the door. "What brings you to Indy?" I asked.

"Oh, bridal shopping. Same old routine." She didn't hug me; instead, she looked me from head to toe and sneered. "Rainbow tee-shirt and highlighted hair? You're expecting to find a woman looking like that?"

I snapped the rubber band on my wrist hard enough to leave a welt.

"Oh, my. Dear, I'm sorry. You just don't look... well... accessible. You know what I mean."

"I look gay," I finished for her.

"Yes!" She laughed. She had the most horrible laugh: high-pitched and cackling, like a hyena. She pulled her permed-to-frizz hair and stepped further into the kitchen. "I'm paying good money to save you from homosexuality, and you still dress gay. You're still making it to group therapy, right?"

"Every Monday," I replied. "Right on schedule. Want a drink?" God, did I ever want a drink!

"Heavens no! It's the Sabbath!"

"Church serves wine on the Sabbath – can't be that bad." I poured myself a small slug of whiskey and drank slowly. I poured water for my mother.

She pointed to my wrist. "And I see you're doing your therapist's rubber band thing. Is it helping?"

"Helping to develop calluses, and that's about it." She pulled out a compact and checked her makeup. Leave it to Mom to ignore the issue. "But I am trying."

Mom grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. "I know, honey. You have to understand that I'm just trying to do what's best for you. You're an adult, yes, but you're still young. You don't know what you want. And let me tell you, you most certainly don't want to choose homosexuality. Did you know that most gay people have AIDS?"

I had tried all the angles with her, from "it's not a choice" to "I'm happy this way" to "your facts suck balls and I can prove it". But anymore, the best offense was to just ignore the issue altogether. I looked to the table "I've heard the figures before, Mom. I'm trying."

"Gay people that give into their sin become sex-crazed, wishy-washy maniacs. Commitment means nothing to them. I don't want that for my son."

"Right."

"And besides, you still need a date for my wedding." She laughed. "Third time's a charm, right?"

"Right." I finished the drink.

"Why can't you be more like Ted Haggard?" she asked suddenly. "The guy's had homosexual desires for years and he still managed to raise a family! Now that's a true hero! God bless him."

"Mom, I'm a bit busy today. I can't sit and chat all day about this."

"I wanted to take you out shopping with me – Find you some nice polo shirts, flannels, that sort of thing. Make you into a real looker!" She pulled snippets from a GQ magazine from her purse. "I know the mag's a bit gay, but these looks are right up your alley."

They were something, all right. Jocks, prep-boys, working men. Nothing like me, but my mother could dream. "Maybe some other time," I told her.

"Yes. And then we can drop by the Exodus camp, just to take a tour."

"Mom!"

She held up her hands in surrender. "I'm sorry, honey. I just don't think you can do this alone. It takes a village to save an idiot, after all. I hear it's a nice place – they have chapel every night, and you have all your amenities paid for. And I'll pay for everything – you just say the word and it's done."

"An idiot? Let's talk about idiot—" I paused, breathed, and collected myself by pouring another shot of whiskey. "Look. I'm only a month into treatment. Give me some time. This doesn't happen overnight."

"But you can find a date for the wedding?" she asked. "I hate to nag, but people are... well... asking questions about you. I figured it'd be a good start to recovery."

"I'll do my best," I said.

Her voice was soft, low, pleading. "I just want to see you happy." Then open your eyes, I thought to myself. But before I could get the nerve to say anything Audrey came ambling out of the bedroom, yawning.

When I heard the door open my heart seized with shock; Mom would flip her lid if she saw a girl with fox ears and a tail! But when Audrey came to lean on the kitchen counter the ears and the tail were all gone, as if it were all a mirage cooked up within my own head.

Mom just laughed. "I see that you're quite busy." She picked up her purse and headed toward the door. "I'll just leave you two be, all right?"

"All right," I said.

"Nice to see you again," Audrey said.

"And you too!" she hugged me tight – tighter than she had done in months. "Thanks for trying," she said. "I love you."

Just like that, she left smiling.