

# **ELLE CAMPBELL WINS THEIR WEEKEND**

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# ONE

There were so many useful ways that Elle Campbell could have started their day. They could have gotten an early start on brushing their teeth and getting dressed for school. Heavens knew it took them long enough to pick out the perfect androgynous outfit. They could have done jumping jacks and begun their morning with a little healthy exercise. Heck, even staying in bed and squeezing their eyes tightly shut until the alarm blared would have been a more productive use of Elle's time.

Instead, they groggily pulled themselves out of bed and made a beeline for their computer to read the latest comments about Elle's favorite show—*Phantom Thief*.

The show was about supernatural thieves who pulled daring

heists all across time and space, and was just about Elle's favorite thing in the whole wide world.

Elle usually loved talking to other fans, but today their mood only soured as they read a long chain of comments attacking their favorite episode, "Wolf Heart."

"*Wolf Heart*" is the best, most important *Phantom Thief* episode in years, and anyone who doesn't see that is a FOOL! Elle typed fiercely in response.

The "Wolf Heart" episode had introduced the current protagonist, the witty nonbinary hacker who had changed Elle's life completely. The character had given them the knowledge and the courage to come out as nonbinary.

Why didn't these internet twerps understand that? Why couldn't they realize how *important* it was to them?

Elle spun around in their desk chair and surveyed the room appreciatively. Nearly every inch of it was covered in memorabilia from the show. There were the *Phantom Thief* posters on the wall, the *Phantom Thief* figurines that stood atop a bookshelf filled with *Phantom Thief* paperbacks and graphic novels. Next to their computer with the *Phantom Thief* desktop wallpaper was a picture

frame of Elle cosplaying as a character from *Phantom Thief* at a local convention.

“Elle! Time to get ready, hon!” shouted Elle’s mother. There was no corner of the house in which one could hide from the bellowing of Susan Campbell. Yodelers and banshees traveled the world over to learn her secrets of vocal projection.

“I’m getting ready, Mom!” Elle called out even as they remained in their office chair, legs folded like a contortionist. Elle had read online about the stereotype that queer people couldn’t sit in chairs properly and had decided to embrace it.

“No, you’re not! You’re arguing with strangers on the internet, aren’t you? Stoppit!”

“It’s not *arguing*, Mom. It’s civilized discussions on the pressing cultural issues of our day.”

Suddenly, the door to Elle’s room burst open and Susan Campbell flung herself through, doing her best impression of a character from some ‘90s sitcom that she’d tried—and failed—to get Elle to watch.

“Honey, I love you, but you need to stop arguing with strangers about which characters should kiss which other characters and get ready for school.”

Elle pouted. They hadn't been arguing about fictional couples. Well, not *this* time at least. Most of the time, yes. But not this time!

"Please don't give me that face, Elle." Sue's expression softened. "I love you, and I'm so proud of you and want you to always be your truest self, but ever since you came out it takes you three times as long to get ready in the morning. So get going before you miss the bus."

Elle finally unfolded their legs to slither out of their office chair.

"That's just 'cause fashion *makes sense* now. There's so much more to choose from and decide on! I want to look right and look cute, but it's so much work and it takes *forever*, ya know?"

Sue smiled, brushing aside a lock of her long red hair. "You don't have to tell me, I've been at this a lot longer than you have. Welcome to the world of beauty, kiddo! Now get dressed and put on whichever makeup you like today," she called as she left Elle's room, closing the door behind her. "You do it fast, then I got toast and eggs ready for you. You go slow, then I'm shoving you out the door with just one of those oat and grain bars that turn into a literal mountain of crumbs."

Elle opened their closet. In just a few months, what had once been a wardrobe full of ripped jeans and logo T-shirts had given way to skirts, blouses, and button-downs in loud colors and

patterns. Elle's eyes hovered over a jade-green dress. It had been Elle's first dress and was still their favorite. And to them, it looked even better now that their fiery red hair hung nearly to their shoulders. But now that it was time to actually put it on, they were second-guessing themselves.

Wearing a dress always meant getting more stares from people at school. Even the excitement of wearing a pretty dress tended to fade after enough mocking looks and judgmental sneers. Some days Elle felt strong enough to fight the whole world . . . and some days they didn't.

Elle passed the dress and rifled through the hangers until they got to their button-downs. The shirts were loud and colorful, most covered in floral patterns. But still, they were a touch more masculine than the dress, and would garner less attention.

Elle felt a little pang of guilt for not choosing the dress, like they weren't being true to themselves. But they couldn't help but smile when they buttoned up their shirt and looked in the mirror. The dark blue fabric was covered with bright purple and green leaves, flowers, and cacti. The combination of the colorful shirt with their long hair made Elle confident that no stranger on the street would

even be able to tell what gender they were. And that's exactly how Elle liked it. If they had to be confused about their gender, they were gonna make everyone else just as confused about it too.

Elle moved over to a shelf crowded with baubles and accessories and put on a pair of pink flower clip-on earrings. Elle knew they shouldn't be vain, but they couldn't help but feel joyous as they stood in front of the mirror. Elle couldn't have imagined being this person even a few months ago. Sometimes it still didn't feel real.

Elle's moment of celebration was interrupted by Susan's powerful voice making its way into their room. "The kitchen for eggs is closing in ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ."

"I'm coming down right now!" Elle shouted back, having more than inherited their mother's powerful set of vocal cords. They took one final moment to adjust their collar *just so* before racing out of their room.

"How you want your eggs? Scrambled or hard-boiled?" Sue asked as Elle strode into the kitchen.

"Uhh . . . I dunno. Scrambled?" Sue handed Elle a plate with toast and two eggs that were neither scrambled nor hard-boiled.

"Well, too bad, because I already did 'em sunny-side up!"



Elle rolled their eyes and took a satisfying bite out of the toast and eggs. Already sitting at the table was Sue's newest boyfriend, Jerome. Elle was used to their mother dating, but at two years running, Jerome was by far the longest-lasting relationship that Elle could remember—so maybe not so new after all. But admitting that Jerome wasn't new meant that Elle was getting used to him, and that he was going to stick around and be a part of their life. And that just wouldn't do, so "newest boyfriend" he remained.

Tall, dark, and handsome, Jerome had a talent for making Susan laugh. He seemed like a good guy, but Elle had seen the good guys come and go. As far as they were concerned, their mother's boyfriend was nothing but an awkward acquaintance eating cereal in a house that wasn't his. In contrast to Elle's hearty and healthy breakfast, Jerome was busy shoveling rainbow-colored sugar loops into his mouth. His diet was the worst Elle had ever seen, and they knew a lot of teenage boys. They'd never seen Jerome eat anything green unless it started with the words *sour apple*.

"Heya, Elle! Welcome to the waking world!" Jerome said with a smile.

"Mehmm" was all Elle bothered to muster in response. Jerome

looked back to Sue for support, who subtly gestured with her head toward Elle and mouthed the word *Go!* to her boyfriend.

“So, Elle, I, uhh—I was wondering if you had any plans this Saturday?”

Elle stopped mid-bite. Their eyes narrowed in suspicion. Was this some sort of trap? “If this is you trying to make me go to another football game, not happening. I did that *once* and it was just as bad as I—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, no need for the interrogation. I got no tricks or traps, promise.” Jerome cut off Elle’s tirade before it could start. “Just, you like *Phantom Thief*, right?”

The question caught Elle by surprise. “Umm, yeah. It’s my favorite show. You know *Phantom Thief*?”

Jerome chuckled, showing off that effortlessly charming smile again. “Course I know *Phantom Thief*. That show’s been running since before *I* was born. When I was a kid, they were on the Fifth Thief. He was this real suave British dude, like a James Bond with more funny catchphrases, and he’d use the phantom powers to walk through walls and he’d leave this card with a unicorn whenever he pulled a heist.”

Elle jumped to their feet with a burst of fan-powered energy.

“Yes! He actually came back last year! It was called ‘Unicorn in Captivity’ and the Ninth Thief had to go through time to break the Fifth Thief out of space prison—it was the *best* part of the season!”

Jerome looked as excited as Elle. “No way! We gotta watch it later. I definitely need to see this.”

Sue folded her arms and sighed affectionately.

“Oh God, you’re *both* nerds. Watch out or I’m gonna shove you in lockers and give you wedgies.”

Elle rolled their eyes. “Mom, *everyone’s* a nerd now. It’s weird when people *don’t* like Star Wars or Lord of the Rings. And I just really like *Phantom Thief*, okay?” Saying they “really liked” the show was a wild understatement. *Phantom Thief* had changed Elle’s life. Until a plucky, androgynous hacker became the Ninth Thief, Elle Campbell had never heard the word *nonbinary* before. They’d never known anyone who used they/them pronouns. They hadn’t even known that was an option. They hadn’t had the words to explain why everything in their life just felt *wrong*.

“The actor playing the new Thief, Nuri Something, they’re non-binary, right?” Jerome asked.

“Yeah . . . um—how did you know that?”

Jerome picked up a folded-up newspaper. “There’s an article about them in the local paper. Bet ya didn’t think the newspapers still had interesting stuff, huh?” He cleared his throat and read, “Star of hit show *Phantom Thief* comes to town to promote their new graphic novel.”

A lightning bolt of adrenaline ran down Elle’s spine.

“What?! Where?! Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. Nuri Grena is coming *here*? *This weekend*? How did I not hear about this?!”

Elle’s thoughts were racing faster than their brain could process. Their personal hero was coming *here*. To their hometown!

Elle leaned over to read the newspaper article while simultaneously looking up info on their phone.

*What’s their book about?* Elle thought. *How many copies should I get? Should I have it in advance or buy it there? Will they sign Phantom Thief merchandise? How many things should I bring for Nuri to sign? Should I confess that Nuri inspired me to come out? Or would that weird them out? What should I wear?*

To that last question at least, Elle instantly knew the answer: the jade dress they had been too scared to wear this morning.

“It’s exciting, yeah?” Jerome said. “They’re doing a bunch of signings all across town Saturday. So I was thinking that you and me could—” But Jerome was talking to air. Elle had already zoomed out of the kitchen, head buried in their phone.

“Taylor, what’s up? It’s Elle. I—yeah, I know I’m calling. Yeah, I know people don’t call . . . Well, *you’re* weird! Well, maybe I don’t want to text, ever think of that? Look, did you know *Nuri Grena* is doing a signing this weekend? *Yes* way, dude! They’re coming to the bookstore on Powell Street. For real! I’m not messing with you, look it up! You think your dad could give us a ride tomorrow? Uh-huh . . . yeah? Awesome!”

Elle raced out the door, too excited to stay inside a moment longer. For the last six months, it had seemed to Elle like their life had been on pause. They’d somewhat retreated from the world to focus on figuring out the gender presentation that made them most comfortable. They’d quit all their sports teams, dropped out of the school play, and withdrawn from most everything except for being with their friends and watching *Phantom Thief*.

They liked to think of these last few months as their “cocoon time.” But now they felt confident enough to go out into the world

like a glorious genderqueer butterfly. And in a mere twenty-eight hours, Elle would meet Nuri Grena, the person responsible for changing everything. They bounced with delight, determined to start this new chapter in life by showing their hero the new, real Elle Campbell.