

All characters except my Jaggi Di Speckle © Warner Brothers, used definitely without permission.

The wind ripped through the tattered sails as the pirate ship sailed on across storm-tossed, shark-infested waters. The only survivors of the raid stood at the end of the gangplank, precariously balanced over a swarming circle of Great White man-eating sharks and Great Pastel toon-eating barracudas. The Pirate Captain, a short and volatile human with bristling red hair crammed under his black tricorne hat, stood on the deck with a cutlass and flintlock pistol stuck in his belt and a forty-pounder iron cannon pointed down the gangplank.

"Right, varmints - time to hop it," he leered, then swept off his hat and held it under his arm in a poetic pose. "Parting is such sweet sorrow."

The blue bunny looked down the muzzle of the cannon critically. "You know, Captain Sam, you're going to look silly when you fire that and miss."

"Miss? Captain Sam never misses! Ah could part your hare at a mile with this." He snatched up a burning taper. "Now say your prayers."

The pink bunny pulled out a tape measure and a plumb-bob and lined them up against the cannon. "Hate to say it, Captain, but you are going to miss. And in front of all your crew. The angles are all wrong" she tsked, shaking her head.

"Oh? And what do two helpings of hasenpfeffer know about it?" Captain Sam glared. "Ah'm Captain Sam the terror of the seven seas and ... any other seas ya gots!"

"Trust us, Captain. You've got to get more range. For the proper elevation. Back ... back .. back ... That's it." The blue bunny watched as Sam grabbed the cannon's hauling rope and pulled it across the deck, grumbling.

"Now hows about it?" Sam stood up, squinting along the barrel.

"That's good. That's more like the Terror of the Oceans!" The pink bunny enthused. "But a toony little bit further and ... oh my, it'd be just terrible." She shook her head sorrowfully. "We wouldn't stand a chance."

"All right, now you've riled me!" Sam yelled, giving the haul loop an extra hard tug. "No quarter offered nor given, varmints!" Unfortunately he was now standing on the gangplank on the other side of the ship - when the weight of the cannon bent it down and ran him over like a frog under a steamroller on its way down to the waves. A flat toon shape with red whiskers followed it, picked up in the sea breeze and fluttering down like an autumn leaf. There was a loud snapping sound as of dozens of hungry jaws.

The bunnies slapped their paws together, standing in perfect symmetry for the camera. As one they chorused - "He's all washed up. And that's a wrap."

From around the ship, the enthusiastic clapping of a score of onlookers broke out. The backdrop was rolled up to reveal a very soaked Pirate half-way down the maw of a Great Pastel barracuda, which he was hammering with the cannonball held as if it was a bowling ball. "Back to props department, ya washed-up critter!"

A tall, grey and white furred rabbit looked on with a clipboard, on which he had been taking copious notes. "Got to give them full marks. They ain't been playing hooky all this time. Together there ain't much that they can't do."

Yosemite Sam snorted through his dripping red whiskers, as he kicked the fish loose and towelled off. "Them varmints is getting' just too smart for their britches - them as wears any. Been trying all year to mark 'em down. Try as I might, rabbit, I can't."

Bugs grinned, munching an expensive rare-breed Cuban carrot. "Eeh, what did I tell ya, Doc? The more ya puts 'em to the grindstone the sharper they gets."

The desperado cast Babs and Buster a sour look as the bunnies skipped down the gangplank paw in paw to the now dry studio floor. "Waal, that bunch will be out of our hair fer good come this July. And then ... and then ..."

"And then you'll miss 'em too?" Bugs queried, his ears cocked.

Sam sniffed. "Miss 'em nuthin'. And then - ah'm a-going out to paint the town red. Fer a week!"

Babs and Buster Bunny (no relation) watched as the Pirate Galleon was wheeled away back to the props department. "So, Buster, that's Combined Gag Action 701 all finished with. That's the last of that class." Babs gave a manic grin. "First year Action Gag class 101 - remember that?"

"How could I forget?" Buster bowed elegantly. "Historical drama, knights and castles. It called for an elegant, refined leading lady ... and there you were."

Babs' ears twitched. "Getting knocked into the moat whenever you turned round with your lance, Sir *"Classic-spin-around-with-plank-gag"*. Twice."

"And the fair and gentle knight Sir Buster ... had the drawbridge let down thrice upon his noble head. Such a tender damsel and so very quick with that lever." Buster raised an eyebrow. "Damsel in distress? Distressing damsel ... yes!"

"Well ... Ok, Blue-bruise, honours even. But if we get to do that scene again after we graduate - this time you wear the hooped dress and silly wimple!"

"And my sweet and tender damsel shall wear the knight's chain mail pants of rusty iron links next to her sweet fur ... and sit astraddle a horse for six hours instead of me." Buster said. "Incidentally - have you ever ridden a bicycle with a carrot-grater for a saddle?"

"Ouch." Babs shivered. "No wonder folk spent half the time at war. There was a lot of friction in the hare."

They followed their class out to the break room, where everyone was looking with glee at the new empty slot in their timetables. Buster waved, spotting the green duck and white-feathered loon. "Hiya, Pluckster! Hiya Shirley! So, what are you going to do next week with your free time?"

Plucky Duck seemed to swell visibly. "I," he declared "shall spend it devotedly with the most handsome fowl in the forest."

Babs gave Buster a nudge in the ribs. "Grade D in Scriptwriting. It's, "beautiful" for girls, not "handsome.""

The green duck looked annoyed. "My egg was stamped Grade A, Babs. I shall spend the time in contemplation ... of the sixth level of Astro Blaster." He pulled a games console out of one of his white vest's pockets.

Shirley McLoon looked at him and sighed. "And this is my boyfriend, for want of a better word."

"Fowlmouth had some better words, but they keep bleeping them out on film," Buster suggested.

Plucky turned to the pale loon and bowed, though whether ironically or not was hard to tell. "Shirley," he announced melodramatically "I know I've not always lived up to your expectations. But this is - a token of my esteem, from me, to you." With a flourish he rummaged in another pocket and handed over a neatly wrapped present, a cube about six inches across.

Shirley raised an eyebrow. "Not like you, Plucky. Are you like, three months late or nine early with the New Year resolutions?"

"Oh, my heart bleeds. Cruelly wronged again," Plucky struck a dramatic pose. "In all the long hours of the night - when I'm not there with you - this can keep you company. Use it and think of me."

Shirley's aura crackled. "This had better not be something mondo disgusting."

"As if I would! Open it and see." The green duck looked on in anticipation.

Babs looked on in equal interest. Seeing Plucky giving gifts was slightly commoner than Montana Max doing so, but not much. "If it's a booby-trap and it takes you out shall I pound him for you?" She asked brightly.

"Why wait?" Shirley muttered. She tentatively pulled the tape off and unwrapped the package. There were a dozen DVDs in there. "If it's like, whale song or wind chimes then, nice, Plucky." Her expression fell as she looked at the first one - and darkened as she shuffled the deck of discs to the last one.

"Yes." The green drake beamed. "My finest series - all starring me as Hudson Duck, crime-fighter and private eye extraordinary! Twenty-six hours of classic drama including rare out-takes and blooper reels!" He entirely failed to notice the danger sign of Shirley's mood ring rapidly changing colour.

The sound made by a DVD case being crammed down Plucky's bill was not quite "bloop" but it was close. "Plucky!" Shirley stood up, her aura crackling like a thunderstorm around a mountaintop "Of all the ... conceited, ego-maniacal ducks you are the worst!" She stormed out, her white tail-feathers hiked up in disgust.

"What did I do? What did I do?" Plucky spat out the plastic case, looking disconsolate. "I'd have brought her chocolates - but don't you think she's putting weight on already? I told her so just last week."

"Try it next time," Buster suggested. "Without the advice. Shirley only eats Fair Trade organic chocolate made from free-range cocoa pods."

"Humanely picked by spiritually aware native farmers in touch with the plants' natural forces and feelings." Babs added.

Plucky frowned, scratching his head. "Maybe the Hudson Duck wasn't the right approach. Yeah! I've spliced real footage and CG into that wrestling match so it looks like I beat Triangle Man and Universe Man that time. That'd impress her more."

Buster looked on, thoughtfully. "Plucky's bill. A tube of crazy glue. Sweet, sweet silence. There's an idea somewhere in there, it's just coming together..."

"Or ... my starring role as Bat-duck. That's more like it! The shadow that quacks in the night!" Plucky enthused.

Babs sighed, turning to Buster. "To be or not to be? If I mallet him flat, will that be more putting him out of his misery, or ours?"

"Trouble is, Plucky ... well, put it this way. On Astro Blaster you can put in cheat codes and jump up three levels. With Shirley - you can't." Buster pulled out two carrots from his ready supply, handed one to Babs and munched the other nonchalantly. "The surgeon general has declared the attempt is harmful to the health."

"Easy for you to say, Mister Smooth blue," Plucky glared at him. "You get support from your girl - I get nothing but grief." His eyes fell to the dripping DVD case. "Eww. She just had to ruin the one where I get to fight Evil Congressman."

Babs sat down next to the steamed duck. "Take a hint, Plucky. As long as she's into her New Age thing, she's always going to prefer Tibetan chants and whale-song to watching you drop-kick people. Anyway, you miss. So, what are you going to do?"

Plucky considered for a few seconds. "Convince her that whole New Age thing is *"Like, SO last year or some junk"*? Maybe then she'd take up supporting pro wrestling or monster truck derby like any normal person."

There was the sound of a toon mallet in action as Babs used the permission Shirley had lent her. "Adjust vertical hold ..." Plucky gasped as he staggered and fell "Picture looking... squashed."

"Wasn't that a bit harsh?" Buster queried, an eyebrow raised.

Babs struck one of Plucky's favourite Dramatic poses. "How we ac-tors, we suffer for our art," she declaimed, before reverting to normal. "But why should we suffer for his?"

In the corner of the room, half a dozen toons looked on. Some were making notes. One of them, a dark-skinned toon human, pressed her throat microphone. "And this is K-ACME's reporter Mary Melody on her usual beat. Babs and Buster have, along with Plucky and Shirley, scooped the top marks in class for the fifteenth week in a row. Yes, even Plucky although he's not always happy with the scripts he gets. Into every life a little rain must fall - but in his case it's usually safes and anvils. And who'd have thought there were so many grand pianos in decaying orbits? Mary Melody, a mile deep in her rut as the one and only toon reporter, signing off. Not that she'll ever be the first to make any news. Memo to myself, edit that bit out."

"Earth life is unfair," a strange being nodded next to her. While Mary was attractively dark complexioned, this figure had a skin, or possibly event horizon, that light fell straight into, revealing no detail at all. A classical Roman-style helmet and a bronze skirt looking oddly like an armoured tutu made up most of her outfit. "I have appeared in one hundred percent of scripts requiring a Martian. And no others."

"You are a Martian, Marcia," Mary looked at her friend. "I know it's type-casting but you're the most ... qualified. Putting a TV aerial on top of Dizzy Devil didn't look right. He only ate it."

There came a sigh. "On occasions I can sympathise with my half-Uncle. He kept trying to destroy the Earth, you know."

"Ehhh. did he ever manage it?" A buzzard with an early Beatles mop haircut looked at the Martian sleepily.

"No, Concord, he never did." Marcia Martian did not elaborate.

"Oh. Never did. Nope nope nope..." The buzzard shrugged, and waddled off.

"You're right. It is unfair. He's listed as Concord Condor. Everyone knows he's only a common buzzard, but nobody's had the heart to tell him. And putting him in the Comic Genius Class was just cruel." Mary watched the retreating figure.

"Has he noticed?" Marcia asked, her eyes blinking. They were the only feature that showed up under Earth style lighting.

"No. I don't think he has. Which doesn't make it any better." Mary crossed her arms in irritation.

"Marcia - what sort of plots would you want to star in if you could?"

The small alien struck a pose which was instantly recognisable on classic Martian drama but utterly indescribable on Earth (and caused three animators and a storyboarder to quit their jobs in despair.) "I would be the lead in a classic Canal Epic! Every male-equivalent wooing me with drops and drops of the finest water!"

The humanmaid winced slightly. "You were right the first time." She looked around at her friends - Barky Marky, Lightning Rodriguez, Chewcudda the bull and Banjo the Opossum - some folk said Banjo had only been allowed in to make up a State quota of ethnic marsupials. None of them ever appeared in the Looniversity's main features except as bit players. Even Byron Basset had once had his own script, despite having no voice and a physique rivalled by many failed soufflés. "Life is unfair. But consider the alternative!"

"My Civilisation did not endure ten million years of decay just so I could be defeated twice a term by Plucky Duck with a stage prop disintegrator," Marcia's expression might have been downcast had she had one. She looked out of the window where Babs, Shirley and Fifi were heading out to party after school. "In class - the rewards of the few outweigh the needs of the many."

"It's not as if they take centre stage just for the sake of it - except Plucky," Mary conceded. "Just that Babs ... she's only got one gear, and that's full ahead."

An alien shape pondered alien thoughts. "Analogy. Professor Road Runner has never been observed at a steady jog."

Mary nodded. "Toony is as toony does," she quoted "some of us work hard to get there and some are just... naturally drawn that way." She smiled. "I'm glad I decided to stick with it and not transfer out. I'd have

missed some good friends here.” Her heart began to pound as she recalled what she had talked over with her parents for the past month and finally planned for the weekend. *And one friend in particular ...*

It was three days later and Saturday morning; Babs was demolishing her first weenie-burger of the day when on the bench next to her she felt Shirley’s feathers fluff out in alarm. She looked around expecting to see perhaps the Perfecto crowd obnoxiously “slumming it” or, heavens forbid - Elmyra. But there was only Mary Melody arriving, the humanmaid arm in arm with her boyfriend Jaggi Di Speckle. The toon zebra had arrived as a transfer student that year from the high-tech academy of Digitalis Academy, and the couple had hit it off from the start.

“What’s up, Shirley?” Babs’ own ears were up as she craned her neck to peer at whatever must be behind the pair. “Some “vast disturbance in the Force” outside?”

Shirley slumped back in her seat with eyes glazed; her organic tofu wrap coming unwrapped as it fell to the table unregarded. “I cannot be-lieve it. Like, remember Film Observation 101, Babs? You tell me.”

The pink bunny frowned for a moment; Professor Wile-E Coyote’s detailed film analysis class had been a pain in the tail for someone better suited to wild action than in-depth introspection. Acting like a Shojo Anime star and standing watching the rain with the cameras rolling for a minute was not her style at all; in that time she would have been itching to pull half a dozen gags. But she had still passed with a “B+” and put her memory of the class to good use.

Mary Melody was dressed in one of her usual inline skating outfits, white Lycra knee-lengths and a white cotton top; she was busy taking off her elbow and knee protectors as Babs watched her from under lowered eyelids. Her boyfriend Jaggi was dressed smartly in a khaki bush shirt and shorts; at Digitalis the toons there specialised in courses in Action Adventure and the zebra had kept the style. His bold stripes gleamed in high contrast, and his Rollerball-surplus skates were battered but ran like new.

There was nothing obvious to be seen. Buster and Plucky waved to the pair and went back to their conversation. But Babs noticed the look Mary flashed her friend, and how when they made eye contact her hips unconsciously moved closer to him.

The pink bunny felt her ears glowing. “No.” She whispered to the loon. “I can’t believe it. Mary? Of all of us? The sensible one?”

Shirley nodded. “Like, here’s a riddle. When is a humanmaid not a humanmaid - any more? If you could see how their auras are still hugging each other - Babs, you’d know.”

Babs shook her head, amazed. Where auras were concerned the loon had never been wrong yet. But there was a first time for everything. “Mary told me she was going home to study last night - her parents are in. And she doesn’t lie, not ever. She’ll be the first ever media star who can put that on her resume.” The humanmaid lived on the other side of Acme Acres in a spacious apartment; her parents were busy medical professionals and were rarely home.

Shirley snorted. “Study? Oh, you bet. Think like, first-year Toon basics - “squash and stretch,” Babs-o. She must have been practicing that, major style!”

Babs almost choked on her weenie-burger. She still couldn’t believe it.

It seemed a long half hour before Babs spotted Mary heading towards the powder-room. Babs’ eyes met Shirley’s, and the two rose and followed her. In a few more minutes the three were alone and grooming in front of the big, brightly lit mirror over the sinks.

“Is that a new ribbon, Mary?” Babs asked innocently, smoothing out the pair near her own ear-tips. “Something about you looks - different today. Don’t you think so, Shirley?”

“Yeah, for sure,” the loon agreed, smoothing her already impeccable blonde head-feathers (in their natural state they would have stood up like a peacock’s feathers or a punk Mohican; it was a constant labour keeping them curled in a neat front quiff). “I’m picking up some vibes. Some happy, happy vibes around here.”

A regular human of Mary’s complexion might blush and nobody would notice - but she was a toon, and the blush appeared externally as a bright pink glow. Babs and Shirley pulled out sunglasses and admired the view. “Umm, I don’t know where to begin...” she stammered, while the blush became dazzling. Her friends looked up at the ceiling, enjoying the show.

Babs snorted. “Cut to the chase, girl. How did it finish? Then you can do the rest in flashbacks.”

It was a definitely sober pair that walked up the hill towards Babs’ burrow, both unusually quiet. Babs had been almost grateful for once that Buster had extra practice with the football team. They needed time to think.

“They say, like, truth is stranger than fiction or some junk,” Shirley shook her head wonderingly. “Jaggi’s a Mondo nice guy - but who could have guessed Mary’s folks ... approve of him THAT much? She asked them before she asked him! Wierdsville.”

“Going all the way with their permission when they’re even in the house - that’s so honest it’s downright

sneaky," Babs agreed. "I'd say - where's the fun in that? But.... Wow. I know she said she didn't want Coal Black as a mentor - but I never thought she'd be taking advice off Red Hot Riding Hood."

"Like, wow." Shirley's eyes bulged in an aftershock as she recalled Mary's hesitant account. Half the shock was that the Melody family approved of a non-human toon for their one and only daughter - not that mixed dates were uncommon as such at Acme Loo. Professor Le Pew's long-standing and long-suffering feline girlfriend Penelope had over the years been won over by the romantic skunk to the extent of willingly having white back stripes bleached on her black fur, and a diet rich in limburger and garlic had skewed her sense of smell to the extent that she rarely noticed the stink any more. But at least Penelope now looked something like a skunk.

Shirley stopped, and pressed two wing-fingers to her forehead. "I'm getting a premonition..." she announced. Her Aura materialised with a projector and screen sculpted from the finest ectoplasm. On the screen was Mary at the beach that coming summer - generally she had no need of suntan lotion, especially the thick white Acme Brand Million Factor that was "*guaranteed resistant to a supernova - or double your money back!*" Mary using stripes of it as body paint to make herself a matching two-tone couple with Jaggi lying on the beach towel next to her though - that was another matter.

"Wow." Babs looked appreciatively at the image. "Would she think of that? Would she do it? Well, she might. She's full of surprises today." She did a quick double-take at her unplanned double entendre, and grinned. "I can't believe even I said that."

"Mondo surprises," Shirley agreed. "Kinda like hearing Dizzy went on a vegan detox diet, you know? It's hard to take it all in."

"As Mary said to Jaggi ... last night" Babs quipped.

"Babs! Like, easy on the mondo off-colour jokes. A toon can get struck monochrome."

"Sorreeee...."

As the news seeped out to even the least perceptive toon, Mary and Jaggi became a seven-day wonder. Then the novelty faded - for their friends if not for them. Babs, Fifi and Shirley each had long private talks after class with Mary, and returned with mixtures of expressions. Wondering and shocked were certainly in the mix, but pensive was the main ingredient - and calculating was not far behind.

Monday:

The sun shone brightly down as classes broke for lunch break. Babs had heard a rumour that due to a computing error the cafeteria was selling food with real ingredients in it. She sat down next to Buster, her ears drooping as the rumour evaporated. Something that went "splut." fell heavily onto her plate. "Looks like they had props left over from yet another re-make of *"The Blob"*", she sighed.

"Naww - *"Swamp Thing"* - I recognise the radioactive pollutant," Plucky looked at her dish. "What else have they got?"

"Scrambled eggs." Babs said flatly.

"Ewww..." Plucky and Shirley chorused. Shirley looked at the green duck's back unseen by him and smiled, blushing shyly.

Plucky waddled off to sit with Buster, leaving the girls together.

A pink bunny stirred a spoonful of extra-roast instant coffee into her extra-sweet dessert, slapping a stray saucer over the bowl before the toon food hopped out of its dish and escaped. She sighed. "You know, considering we can beat any toon on the running track except Little Beeper, Buster's awfully ... slow at some things."

Fifi's eyes twinkled. "'Zere is always ze Big Bad Wolf, in Acme forest. They say 'e is... not so slow with a girl. You could wear ze Red Riding Hood?"

"Wolves," Babs looked at Shirley, pulling one eyelid down derisively like the Anime transfer student who had joined them one year. She shook her head determinedly. "Not for Mrs. Bunny's Number One daughter! I've been waiting long enough for Blue-boy, I'm not quitting on him now. It took two years for him to even start going steady with me!"

Babs spin-changed into a tweed-clad grey-furred "academic" looking toon rabbit with a pipe in one paw and a microphone in the other; she spoke in a Dick van Dyke English accent that would have been funnier than she intended to anyone who knew the real thing. "Guinness Book of Records here. We have exhaustively researched three centuries of archives - Babs Bunny has, indeed, the cutest toes in history." She changed back again. "And I know Buster appreciates them. But ..."

"Well after all, you've been with Buster all along. You're bunnies - you could have had relations or some junk at any time. Most folk expected it." Shirley knew that invasively reading minds was automatic bad Karma, but the glow between Mary and Jaggi was probably causing forest fire and missile launch detection satellites to lock their cameras on Acme Acres. Plucky and the rest of the male toons were utterly unaware of such things, as per usual.

Babs felt annoyed. "Could have? *Could have*", "Would Have" and "Should Have" never won an Oscar or an Emmy between them and they never will," she snapped.

Shirley sniffed, her gaze following the pair out. "I can read it in her aura, Mary accepts that she won't either. She's happy enough in what she does, she doesn't, like, need the world at her feet. But, you only get those trophies for films - right now she's got an audience of one she cares about and she's not acting."

"They don't shoot those kinds of films around here," Babs' quip was out before could stop it. She clapped a pink paw over her mouth, horrified.

Shirley's plumage bristled. "You know, like, it's a good thing I know you don't mean that, Barbara Anne Bunny - and that Mary didn't hear you. If you'd have been Plucky coming out with a line like that ..."

"Crispy Duck. I know. I'm sorry." For a second her ears dipped. "I don't know what's come over me." Her eyes widened again. "Re-take! Cut! I just don't know what's got into me all of a sudden. Awwk! That's worse! Medic! Scriptwriter!"

Shirley clucked sympathetically as her friend began hitting herself over the head with a pink toon mallet. It was going to be one of those days.

Tuesday:

The Amazing Three did not spend their days reassuring each other they were the Pack Leaders, the most popular girls in the Looniversity. That would only have gained them points in Social Status Assertiveness (a.k.a. snobbery) Class at Perfecto Prep - and besides, they had never felt the need to. "*When you know you've got a diamond - you don't need to keep testing it*" was a saying that sprang to Babs' sugar-rich and caffeinated mind. Unfortunately she recalled it was actually one of Plucky's lines, from a few terms before - and a few milliseconds before an annoyed Shirley had fried the "Number One Action Hero" duck's tail-feathers with a psychic bolt.

Nevertheless, two sets of ears were down as they looked out over the sports ground, and Shirley's aura seemed subdued. Mary and Jaggi were both on inline skates, performing a high-speed "pas de deux" that traced an intricate love-knot of tracks in the dust.

Three sets of eyes watched them from the shade of a blossoming apple tree. Babs voiced what was in all their minds. "It's not as if they're doing anything they weren't last week."

"Like, right now," Shirley nodded. "They've been a team all semester. Like you and Buster have for a lot longer as a comedy team. Since the start here when we were all three heads high."

The pink bunny winced slightly at that memory - at least she no longer looked quite like a squeaky-toy. Bank robbery and the years at Acme Loo were both liable to get a toon a long stretch and indeed she had stretched in all the right places. "And you and Plucky as a team. Well, he thinks so."

Shirley gave a delicate shiver. "You had to remind me!" She paused. "Sometimes I think there might be, you know, a half-decent duck somewhere in there. Buried under an ego twice the size of New Jersey and twice as toxic."

"New Jersey? Babs asked, an eyebrow raised. "I thought it was Cleveland."

"Negatory, Babs. Cleveland had a mondo eco-cleanup. Too many weird Swamp Monsters coming out of Lake Eerie," Shirley said.

"And you and Hamton, you've been sweet for the longest time," Babs prompted Fifi, who was lying with her cheek-ruffs in her paws with a dreamy expression. Hamton had been nearer two heads high in the beginning.

"Le sigh," Fifi agreed dreamily. "'Amton, 'e is such the gentleman pig. I 'ave to make all ze moves. Else I would be older than Madame Slappy, before 'e would have kissed me. Now, that is being one thing - and what happens when I see le skunk-hunk is anoathair, my heart goes boom!"

"Which is what we expected to do first." Babs' ears drooped. "Sure, Mary's our friend. I'm happy for her, really! But - leading-lady material?"

"She's someone's leading lady now, fer sure," Shirley said, her eyes fixed on the scene below where Jaggi was hoisting the humanmaid - no, a human lady now, she mentally corrected - in his arms while still managing a reverse spin manoeuvre on skates. It was too late in the course for anyone to change classes, but she had seen Mary in the Looniversity library with a book on "Dramatic Romance for Romantic Dramas."

"Certainment." Fifi's luxurious tail waved languidly. "Who would 'ave though it? Years ago, back in our very first Summer Vacation, though - that might 'ave been me and Johnny Pew."

"Like, a bigger heel you couldn't find in all the Acme Mall shoe stores," Shirley snapped. Her friend nodded sadly, acknowledging the fact.

"But still. That day I would 'ave given 'im anything - everything! Le sigh" A pair of ears drooped.

"Bad plan, Fifi. He'd have dropped you after like a used tissue." Shirley's feathers bristled. "That skunk's like, a million negatory points on the steady boyfriend scale."

A calculating look passed over the skunkette's features. "I was not expecting 'im to carry me in 'is limo to Hollywood and make a Leading Lady of me just for 'zat. Fifi la gold-digger? Nevair! 'Zere are attractive men a girl

wants to someday marry, oui - and attractive ones she does not. But still. Ooh la la!"

"You might find one good for both," Babs allowed herself a rare moment of introspection. She had been briefly shocked and jealous in turn, before telling herself Mary was hardly to blame for being first at the post. She had never thought of it as a contest but still Babs had expected to win, unless of course some unscrupulous "skunk-hunk" had dragged a willing Fifi back to his motel room which was something she would not have much envied her friend for. "Not that it'll make any real difference to us. I mean, will it? So who's in a hurry all of a sudden?"

Shirley looked up, meditating on the tree above them. A white petal of apple blossom spiralled down and landed on her yellow-gold bill. The loon's eyes crossed as she focussed on it. "As in, it's our last year here and everything? One more Spring break, then Game Over, girls! Game over! Final exams or some junk then Big Wide World time!"

"Hollywood. Stardom." Babs' eyes were dreamy.

"Le greasy Hollywood ten-percent agents with zair feelthy casting-couches and zair "we'll call you, babe"..." Fifi responded. "imagine zat as a first time for a girl. Quelle horreur!"

"Ewwwww..." came as a triple chorus. A pale feathered fowl turned a sick shade of green and two sets of ears went right down at the idea, as from the knoll the Amazing Three watched Mary and Jaggi finish their synchronised routine then skate off, hand in hoof.

Babs sighed. "I hope they don't regret it."

Shirley caught another falling blossom in her feathered hand, and meditated on fleeting things. "It's karma, Babs. Things begin and, like, end. No way around it, this Summer we're all leaving, and it's not for a Summer vacation. Not any more."

"Some 'zey are leaving togethair ..." Fifi nodded "and some zey will be left all alone."

For a second a cloud seemed to cross the sun. Apple blossom fell from the trees in a slow, steady rain. Shirley looked up at the white blossoms, contemplating. Nature ran in cycles, and by the time the fruit came around, she and her friends would be scattered to the four winds like the autumn leaves.

Babs set her shoulders determinedly. "I hope Mary's picked the right one. Well, too late now! I shouldn't be jealous of someone making a mistake."

"And 'oo would zat be?" Fifi asked brightly, still gazing towards where the new couple had vanished to.

For once in her life, Barbara Anne Bunny had nothing to say.

Wednesday:

Class had finished, and Babs and Buster were walking home through the green fields towards Babs' burrow. Buster stopped at one of the convenient tree stumps and hopped up to sit on it, patting the spare place next to him. Babs obligingly hopped up to join him.

"You've been kinda quiet this week, Babsie." Buster said, spotting the pink bunny's distant expression. "Homework getting you down?"

"Homework." Babs' gaze obligingly snapped back to present time and company. "Final projects coming up in the next few weeks - we won't see much more of classes next semester, only exams." She spin-changed into a stage Russian costume with ragged overcoat and fur hat, and broke into a chorus of "The Volga Boatmen's Song", while straining on a cable that could have hauled up the Titanic. She rapidly changed back - wondering if Buster noticed her skirt was now an inch shorter.

He did. "Umm, Babs ..." he pointed down, looking slightly embarrassed.

She flashed him a smile. "Why, I do declare! You just can't trust that laundry. They'll shrink eighteen-inch Acme battleship plate." She made no move to adjust it. "Do you like my hem-line up - or down?" She had often spin-changed into far more seductive outfits, but this was her chosen yellow top and lavender skirt. What changed here was her primal form - and she felt her tail twitching. On impulse she kissed Buster long and hard, feeling his heart hammering against her.

The blue-and-white buck gave a deep and happy sigh as she released him, and melted into a pool of liquid. Like a sand-castle sculptor, Babs kneaded him back into shape in a few seconds. She gave the dazed rabbit a quick peck on the nose, not enough to liquefy him again. "Thank you, Blue boy. That's for - never taking me for granted." Smiling, the pair hopped off the stump and Buster escorted her chastely home.

Ten minutes later, Babs was alone in her mostly pink bedroom chatting on the phone to her distant friend Harriet.

"... And he'd have scored points for that one even in Professor Daffy's class in Wild Takes, I mean it!" The self-styled Queen of Comedy concluded, a pleased expression on her face as she recounted her day's adventures. "Now, that was Funny." Suddenly her ears went rigid as she fully realised what had been urgently nagging in the back of her mind since the weekend. "Got to go, Harriet! I'll call back later." She put the phone down and threw herself back on her bed, hands folded on the pillow behind her head. She suddenly had a lot to

think about.

"Laugh, clown, laugh" was a phrase Babs knew they used in the Dramatic Irony classes. She also knew why; Clowns had to laugh while they had the chance as something was guaranteed to be coming their way. A tricky horizontal spin-change saw a brown furred and white lab-coated bunny sitting up in bed, official NASA clipboard in paw. "Ze anvil mit your name on hass completed ze second Jupiter slingshot und iss heading back to Earth impact." She pronounced solemnly, then melodiously sang. "If ze anvils go up, who cares where they come down? Dat's not my Department, says Werner Von Braun-Bunny", before resuming her normal form.

Comedy was food and drink to her. More, it was oxygen and air pressure and chocolate and all the second-by-second needs of survival. Unconsummated romance like hers was comic, at least to the audience, she had to admit. "Like Professor Coyote could only eat that Road-Runner once... then what? Two careers over." She loved to see Buster so overwhelmed by her coquetry that his toon form dissolved in confusion to primordial paint. It would be a sad day if he ever became immune to her that way.

"Now, that was funny," she repeated to herself. Mary Melody had never been in the running for Comedy Queen, and her Action-type zebra majored in the Acme classes in Dramatic Irony for Ironic Dramas. "Buster and me, like that... I've hoped that'll be a lot of things. Face it girl, "funny" isn't one of them." She paused, wriggling her clean white toes. "At least I think so." Another thought struck her playfully. "He might have to go back to wearing pants for awhile, after that. For a week. What am I saying. Just a week? With me, a month!" She laughed wildly at the thought.

As a glance outside Babs' bedroom at her many young siblings would have confirmed, young toons of both sexes started off with all their anatomy visible - generally by the time they were out of diapers most species could "conceal" and manage without pants as Buster, Plucky and many other non-human toons did. There were many toon jokes about honeymoon hotels having in-house tailors who could run off at short notice a pair of pants or a long skirt for room service to deliver urgently and discreetly though - for some guests they would be definitely needed for awhile until their bodies re-adjusted.

"Not me, though," Babs declared with supreme self-assurance. "Couldn't happen. No way. Not possibly." She picked up the phone and re-dialled Harriet. Her friend had sounded strange, as if she had been bursting to tell her something and trying to get a word in edgeways. Talking to Babs often had folk subconsciously wondering where her "pause" button was.

Five minutes later a stunned bunny was locked rigid with the phone pressed to her ear. "Harriet? You did WHAT?" Babs suddenly had even more to think about.

Thursday:

"Ah, mais c'est tres naturelle," Fifi enthused, the romantic skunkette looked up at the trees that were loud with courting birdsong. "Eet is Spring! All Nature is in love again."

"My friend Harriet. Pinch me if I'm sounding clichéd this week but - I can't believe she did that." Babs was looking bemused. "You've never met her, have you?"

"Mais non. Your friend, who went to a different college. A hound, ees she not?" Fifi's gaze wandered to a pair of circling butterflies.

"Harriet Harrier. If she was a poodle or a fox I could imagine it. They're like that. At least by stereotype." Babs took a deep breath. "I didn't even know she had a special boyfriend. Sure, she's mentioned his name, but ..."

Fifi looked at her best friend under half-lidded eyes. "Jealous? Or - worried zat ... when you phone her next time you might be ... interrupting something, n'est pas?"

Babs' hand clapped to her mouth in shock. She had genuinely never thought of that.

Friday:

"That Plucky. We should have an Acme Unreliability team, you know? Then he could be captain," Shirley fumed. "Might be top of the class for once. He was going to meet me here for lunch yesterday, we've an Action Drama project to work on for Professor Yosemite Sam."

Babs' ears went down, and her eyes widened as she remembered. "Shirley ... I know why he wasn't here. He was sharing a picnic outside with Maria. You know, from the Dramatic Romance class." Babs was generally the last to tell tales, but it was hardly as if Plucky and Maria had been trying to keep any secrets. They had been sitting out in clear view on the lawn beside the Looniversity; from a distance at least Maria seemed to be actually laughing at one of Plucky's jokes.

Shirley's beak dropped open in shock to hit the floor with a loud clang; a move that would have scored her well in the "wild takes" class. "Her? Like, gag me with a spoon!"

Suddenly Babs' paw obligingly held a large cafeteria serving ladle. She offered it to her friend, but Shirley shook her head angrily.

"I can totally not believe it!" The loon's feathers bristled. "Maria Mandarin? Her mother's family owns a



logging corporation and her father personally owns and runs a whole sweatshop military-industrial complex? Mondo bad Karma, Babs, a definitive spiritual smog bank around her. She makes Pittsburgh smell like a lotus blossom!"

"She seems a nice enough girl for all that," Babs mused. The light green feathered duck had transferred to Acme Looniversity two semesters ago, but never overlapped with any of her friends' classes. "A quiet kinda girl, no wild moves. She could have gone to Perfecto if she'd wanted, she's rich enough. Can't help what her family does, can she?" Babs had once spent a morning with her mind swapped with her own mother courtesy of one of Calamity's malfunctioning inventions, and had come out of the experience severely shaken but more sympathetic. "We talked last week. She asked me all about Plucky. I gave her the full, true story. Didn't leave any of it out."

"Like, hideous. And she's not run away screaming to hide in some chemical swamp in Siberia?" Shirley raised an eyebrow incredulously.

Babs frowned. "Didn't seem to bother her. She did ask me not to tell him about her money. You know Plucky. That's all he'd see in her." She paused. "Well, not all. She has got quite a nice figure." Exactly why some avians turned that mammalian shape despite hatching from eggs was something she had asked Miss Granny, the school nurse and repository of much folk wisdom - like most such questions however complex, the answer was "*it's a Toon Thing*." It was something Shirley was definitely lacking, and although her black and white adult Loon plumage pattern had grown in the year before, her silhouette had stayed depressingly the same. It was a sore point with her.

The loon's aura seethed, crackling like a power transformer in a rainstorm. She could imagine it very well. Aside from Montana Max, Plucky held the record for detecting the sound of a dropped coin at over a hundred yards. The idea of a cute AND wealthy waterfowl girl remotely interested in him would have Plucky immediately laying siege to her - regardless of how much siege equipment was likely to be lying around the family home to use on him if she objected. Despite her usual irritation with the green drake, Shirley felt a chill running down her nine Charkas as she contemplated life without him. That might happen if Maria was brain-dead enough to fall for Plucky even after hearing the true facts about him. Unlikely things were happening that Spring, after all. "Plucky. He's going to need re-naming, "Plucked" for that."

"It's not like you ever do a lot to encourage him." Babs paused. "Anyway, Plucky's not the only avian guy around here. There's Fowlmouth and there's umm, Concord Condor?" Her ears drooped, considering the options. "Oh. I see what you mean. But it's a big continent out there."

Shirley was a strict vegetarian. Nevertheless, two plucked oven-roast birds slowly turned, dripping sizzling duck fat impaled on sharp steel spits in the rotisserie of her imagination. One had a scorched dark green feather or two still remaining; the other smaller carcass had a few surviving feathers of lighter Mandarin green.

"Maybe Maria just wants to play you fair for him?" Babs' violet eyes were studied lakes of innocence. She had practiced in the mirror. "You know, you with everything you've got - against just her, she's got no psychic power and her money's not mentioned. Just maybe ... once in awhile Plucky might prefer a girl who's not so quick with the "Massive Retaliation Strike" every time he opens his beak the wrong way." *Which is most of the time*, she admitted to herself.

The loon's pupils shrank to dots and her feathers bristled; the air shimmered around her with an electric blue glow. Her mood ring flashed through red to yellow, white, and arc-light blue-white, before the plastic furniture in the hallway began to fluoresce from hard ultra-violet light. In a few seconds toons in the hallway were treated to X-ray views of each other's bones and construction lines.

Babs did a rapid take and dived out of the corridor and under the nearest desk - they were the guaranteed thermonuclear assault-proof models the Looniversity had brought off the set after filming finished for the "Duck and Cover" film in the 1950's. Under the desk Babs read a faded sticker: "*Guaranteed proof against a 1 MegaToon airburst at 1 mile range. If this product fails to satisfy, your next reincarnation may phone this number for replacement or refund...*" The rest of the sticker had faded to illegibility.

The corridor suddenly stood out in brilliant light and black shadow as Shirley's aura short-circuited and reduced the loon to a puddle of violently glowing green glass on the floor. Emerging, Babs added a beaker of water that sizzled in a violet glow as Shirley reconstituted. She faced the camera knowingly as the dazed waterfowl staggered off.

"Sometimes I just can't help myself."

Saturday:

When Babs' telephone rang at six in the morning on a weekend her usual reaction involved a large mallet - fortunately Toon phone contracts had an automatic free replacement scheme for that very eventuality. But something stopped her this time. Premonitions were more in Shirley's line - and as if on cue, she recognised her friend's voice. Something was very wrong; the loon was almost sobbing.

"Shirley? Where are you? I'll be right over." Babs knew she was going to get a scolding from her mother

for burrowing straight out from inside the house, but this was an emergency.

The sun was rising over the wetlands to the South of Acme Acres as ten seconds later Babs emerged from the tunnel, shaking off stray soil - in her haste she had not even spin changed into the "Miner, forty-niner" outfit she generally used for digging. She spotted Shirley sitting by a tree at the edge of the swamp, the loon's beak propped in her feather-hands and her eyes fixed on the ground in misery.

Before she could speak, Shirley put a wing-finger to her bill and pointed over towards the water's edge. There was a freshly built bower in there - neatly woven from reeds, and despite its temporary nature obviously the work of more than one set of hands. One part was built in a much clumsier technique, for a start.

Babs opened her mouth to speak. But then her ears went right up, as from the direction of the nest came a raucous snoring - a very familiar one that usually started when she watched TV with Shirley and Plucky, half a minute after the girls outvoted him and switched channels to watch something they wanted to see.

"Plucky?" Babs was so shocked that her "take" reflexes blew a fuse and failed to work: she simply sat down heavily next to the loon. A tear was in Shirley's eye. "What did he DO to you? If he's hurt you I'll..."

Shirley laid a wing on her shoulder softly, and looked into Babs' trembling face. "Like, take the key out of the firing console, Babs. That isn't the problem." A small smile crept to her beak. "That wasn't a problem ... at all."

"Then what's wrong? Talk to me, Shirley." Babs' eyes were locked on the loon's.

"Babs." Shirley's look was hollow, desolate. "My Aura. It's not ... it's not there any more. It's gone."

Ingrained reflexes died hard, but Babs managed to suppress the quip of "*Shirley you can't be serious?*" that came instantly to mind. "Are you sure?"

Shirley nodded. "It's like part of me died, or went blind. The whole spirit world - I can't see it, can't feel it ... like someone cut it off at the switch. It's been there all around me since the day I hatched." She ran a feather-finger through her blonde head quiff, now somewhat ruffled. From many a sleep-over Babs knew Shirley usually had to sleep with her head-feathers in curlers; there were no facilities in a nesting bower in the swamp. The loon ran her reddish ribbon through her hands, looking down at it. "Well - that's like a real drag. I'm down to like, lowest common denominator-ville."

Babs grimaced. "I've seen Warrior Maiden films - some lose their magic powers when they stopped being, umm, maidens..." She blinked as the scale of Shirley's loss hit her. No more astral plane travel for Shirley - no more psychic firepower on tap, levitating or tuning into the Infinite. The Infinite had been her life - and her loss was infinite. The pink bunny shuddered, imagining becoming allergic to humour, never able to use it again. Her loon friend was grounded now, flightless, almost defenceless, and one way or another Babs knew who was to blame. Her eyes flashed red behind her contact lenses. "I'm still going to kill him!"

Shirley was in front on her in a single frame, feathers bristling. "Not MY boyfriend, you don't." Her expression softened. "He looks cute asleep, you know? Like, I've seen it often enough but never really noticed."

Babs nodded, deflating. "What are you going to do?" Shirley had lost her aura, her better half. She hoped Plucky was up to the task of now becoming her better half. He was more usually a vulgar fraction.

Shirley looked over towards the nest. She shrugged, an embarrassed look on her bill. "I'm going to wait till green and handsome wakes up. He wanted me ... now he'll see just what he's got."

Babs hugged her friend close. "Call me when you want to talk. Do you need anything?"

Shirley considered. "Can you find me a wheelbarrow?"

Babs blinked. "Umm, yes. I think. What do you want that for?"

Although no blue-white aura discharge flashed across the loon's features any more, her expression seemed not to need it. "I don't. But by the time I've finished his "wake-up call" - I'll need it for him."

A thoughtful Babs walked back to her burrow the slow way, arriving back in time for her usual breakfast of caffeine-soaked sugar-frosted chocolate. She lightly sprinkled grated carrot over the bowl, always careful of her diet, then called Buster as she ate. Ten minutes later he was knocking on her door, Mrs. Bunny letting him in. With a half-dozen large litters to manage, one more lepine was hardly going to crowd the place much more.

"Shirley's lost her Aura?" The shock literally rocked Buster back on his heels when he heard the news. "How?"

"Umm... she thinks she has. But I'm not so sure it's exactly lost forever. I think "Mis-laid" might be more like it." Babs cocked her head to one side as they sat by the ring of flowers outside the burrow a few minutes later. "You know Plucky, leave anything good lying around and see if you can find it again."

Blue ears went up. "You mean...?"

"Me? Mean? You wound me, Buster." Babs flashed a smile. "Shirley's not thinking too clearly right now, or she'd remember what she told me last year. Her Mother said ... some experiences change a Toon, all the way through. Her psychic powers took a nap on her honeymoon - something about realigning the energy flows? They came back different after awhile. Think ... chrysalis, butterfly."

Buster looked worried. "I hope so, Babs. I'd hate her to lose her powers just for Plucky's sake. I only hope he can make it up to her somehow."

Babs smiled. "Oh. That reminds me. Do you have a wheelbarrow we could borrow?"

Weekends at Acme Looniversity in term time were usually times to relax, when the students headed out to the park or into the town centre to work on their part-time jobs. Babs and Buster headed out to the malt shop.

"Extract of malt. Fifty different flavours." Buster looked at the list, impressed. "One of these days they may sell ice-cream or sodas or something to go with it."

"Why spoil a good thing?" Babs ordered a quart of smoked Bavarian malt, her tail twitching in anticipation as the treacle-like liquid slowly filled the glass. "Hi, Mary! How's the job going?"

Mary Melody had worked in half a dozen places in Acme Acres; there were usually plenty of vacancies as the other toons went for jobs with more comic potential such as firework stores or testing equipment for the ACME Corporation. "It's a living. Better than the cameos I used to get. It's the only Slow Food place in town." She waited while the two malt pourers oozed into their tall glasses.

"Mmm-hmm." Babs had the glass turned upside down, waiting for the malt to start flowing. Pouring was the only way to drink it; if she licked it it would become a "malt likker" and the place was not licensed for that.

"Are Plucky and Shirley coming in this morning? They're usually in here by now." Mary asked.

Babs would have choked on her malt if any of it had yet reached her. "Umm ... I've got some news about that. Shirley said ... it was OK to tell you." She whispered urgently in Mary's ear for a minute.

Mary Melody blinked, the dark complexioned human turning a sickly ashen grey. "He made her lose her powers like that?"

Babs gave a wry smile. "I don't think it was his idea. I mean, who knew?"

"Yeah. Forward planning from Plucky that actually worked? He's innocent - of that anyway," Buster said.

Mary sat down heavily. "Is it permanent?" She looked ill. "If it is ... he's hurt her worse than if he'd splashed her with dip. He's ruined her forever." Not only was the banned ultra-solvent the only way of utterly destroying toons, but even minor splashes caused injuries that would never heal no matter how they spin-changed or rested off camera. "Like Furball's ear. He was only lucky it was just his ear that got a permanent hole in it."

Babs' ears went down. "Shirley's home with her Mother, giving her the news. After all, who else knows about auras?"

"They sure don't print repair manuals," Buster looked at the pink and white doe, his face troubled.

"Babs."

"Yes, Buster?"

"I don't Ever want to hurt you like that. Or even risk it."

"Eehh ... if I ever grew an aura like that, it'd just get in the way. You and me - three's a crowd." Babs shrugged. "It'd be handy to have someone I could always send out for carrot pizza, though." She cast Buster a wry smile. "Want to walk me to Shirley's house? Girl talk. She may need it."

"Ahh, those strange mysteries. Of which no mere male can understand. We, who have not the emotional depth of a soup bowl at the cheapest Chinese restaurant in town ..." Buster declaimed, covering his eyes with one paw. "Babs, I'd take you anywhere."

Babs snickered. "Underline it in the script, Blue-boy. One day I'll get back to you about that."

Shirley's house was in the hills to the East of Acme Acres properly, bordering on the forest. Oddly enough it appeared to be at least a century older than any other structure in the region, a classic American Gothic wooden house with upper floor veranda and belfry-like attic tower that would have looked more at home in a forbidden valley in the New England backwoods. Shirley and her mother lived there in one continuous séance; Babs could smell the incense from fifty yards away.

"This is as close as I go," Buster announced. "There's loony and there's ... the McLoon family."

"Hmmmph." But Babs smiled. "Thanks for walking me over, Buster. I'll see you tomorrow."

Walking up to the front stoop, Babs noticed something. The house had always seemed to buzz with unseen energies; dream-catchers fluttered even when there was no wind and the geometric arrays of crystals glowed like the pilot's console of a Space Shuttle. Today all of that looked dead.

As ever, Mrs. McLoon was at the door long before Babs was within reach of the doorbell. "Barbara Anne," she cast her a worried smile. "Shirley's up in her room. I think she needs company."

Babs nodded, thanking her. Few people could call her by her full name without risking a bunny's wrath, but Mrs. McLoon had an obsession with True Names. There were large unpleasant-looking books on the shelves elaborately secured with rune-embossed silver chains that were full of them. Most of the True Names had a lot more letters in them than "Babs" and none of their owners had adorable toes.

"Shirley? It's me, Babs," The bunny knocked on the attic door. Shirley loved to look out at the stars from

all the four roof windows, calculating her horoscope. In her case it included not only the classical astrological planets but all the asteroids and minor objects out past Pluto including the great circling aura of ice-shrouded grand pianos in the far darkness, the Steinway Cloud.

"Babs? Like, come in." The voice seemed unnaturally quiet, and somehow out of balance. *Like a set of stereo speakers when one's broken*, Babs realised in alarm.

Inside was a familiar enough sight, Shirley sitting in the chalked circle in the centre of the drapery-hung attic room, surrounded by smouldering joss sticks. But today there were differences. All the crystals around her were lying inert, as if they were no more than shards of broken glass picked off the road - and rather than levitating, the loon was sitting solidly on the wooden floor.

She rose, rubbing her tail feathers ruefully. "This floor is mondo hard - and cold, you know?" She cast Babs a wry smile. "That's something else I've learned today." She gestured towards a bean-bag. "The Loon has landed, Babs. I've fallen and I can't get up."

Babs flopped down in some comfort, accepting the proffered glass of herbal tea. "Shirley ... nothing works? You can't channel a spirit guide or something to ask about it?"

Shirley's bill drooped. "Channel? Babs, you cut the cable at the power station with an axe and see how many channels your TV gets."

"Ow." Babs hesitated. She sipped at her tea, her ears dipping slightly as she noticed an utter lack of caffeine in it. "I was going to ask how you were apart from that but..."

"*Aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?*" Shirley quoted from her Dark Humour class. "I'm going to need some mondo extra pursuit and evasion classes from Professor Bugs and Professor Fudd, even if I have to take them in the holidays. Next time it's Duck Season ... without those and with no powers, against a hunter I'm just poultry on the shelf."

"Ow with an ironclad five-year Disney contract," Babs shivered. "We graduate in July - what are you going to do? Your whole show was based on ..."

"What I've not got any more?" Shirley gave an embarrassed grin. She picked up a stage top hat and props. "I've got a first-year stage magic book out of the Looniversity library, I've been practicing." She spread a fan of cards, offering them to the bunny. "Pick a card - any card. Or - rubber balloon animals for the kiddies?"

Despite what she had said earlier, Babs picked up the phone to call Buster as soon as she reached home and fought her way through a multiple scrum of siblings. Fortunately the pressure was off her these days now her next youngest batch of brothers and sisters were old enough to start taking charge of the rest. Mortimer was heading in to start classes at Acme that September. *At least*, she thought wryly, *whatever happens - there will still be a Bunny in comedy class, even if it's not me any more...*

"Buster - come on over. Better - meet me at the Clampett Memorial above the lake." The toon obelisk was a favourite picnic spot of theirs on a Summer day, and it was a clear Spring evening with hours of light left. "Shirley's in a mess. But her Mother didn't seem too worried."

Ten minutes later, she was back with her buck looking out over the wetlands. An hour with the loon had upset Babs more than it seemed to have Shirley, who was gritting her beak and resolutely looking forward - not that there seemed much left for her to look forward to.

"... The only good thing is - can you believe it, Plucky seems to be taking it seriously," she finished. "Shirley said he's been sending her flowers, paying all the right sort of attention for a change."

"Flowers? From Plucky? Spot the guilty conscience. I bet he picked them in Acme park" Buster's eyebrow rose in disbelief. "Funeral lilies for her aura, maybe?" Had Plucky abandoned Shirley, he would probably have needed a wreath himself. Toons were notoriously hard to "rub out" without Dip but there was a first time for everything; Buster would not be the only one of Shirley's friends who would have spent hours of justifiable fun trying.

"Hush, you." Babs pressed next to him. "We thought he could be romantic if he tried. That's why Shirley put up with him all this time. We were right. He was coming over to see her again when I left."

"So, Shirley's got something out of it. But what a cost!" Buster struck a martial pose. "*One more victory like that and we're finished!*" He quoted from Ironic Drama class. "Well, I know she said she was going to make the best of things. No point in paying for your cake and not eating it."

"Duck cake?" Babs queried. "Must have been that sequel to "Duck Soup" the Marx Brothers never made."

"It's not much of a trade, her powers for Plucky," Buster admitted. "But better than no Plucky and no powers. I suppose."

"If nothing else, she ties a mean balloon giraffe," Babs agreed sadly.

Just then the horizon to the West lit up, a brilliant dome of rainbow light rising to the skies while the Toons around Acme Acres scrambled for a desk to hide under as the shock wave rattled windows and blew

blossom off the trees. The light faded to reveal Babs and Buster sitting companionably together, wearing 3-D glasses and sharing a tub of cinema popcorn as they watched the light show. A billowing cloud of steam rose from the direction of the swamp.

"Well, what do you know?" Buster took off his shades. "Isn't that good timing? Talking of powers..."

"They're baaacckkk..." Babs quoted from the film "Poltergeese", a delicious smile on her face.

Buster nodded appreciatively, consulting his wristwatch as Babs leaned her cheek against his shoulder.

"You know what else? About Plucky making it up to her? I'm thinking that would be starting ... right about now."

It was lunch break mid-week when a dishevelled green duck slid out of the shadows of the male Toons' locker room as Buster arrived from baseball practice.

"Buster old pal, old buddy ... you've got to help me!" Plucky's feathers were sticking out at odd angles, and his voice was on the edge of panic. "I don't know what to do! This is the only place on Earth I'm safe."

Buster held his nose at the unwashed scent. "Plucky - were you born in a swamp?" He paused. "Skip that question. Let's guess, you're between bouts for the re-match wrestling Triangle Man? Sorry - can't help you there."

"No. Worse. Shirley." The duck's eyes crossed.

Buster looked him over critically. "Can't help you there either, Plucky. What have you got to complain about? The girl of all your dreams, she's all yours."

"Dreams? Nightmares! It's like ... suddenly she's turned into a monster! She just won't let me go!" The mallard's eyes looked around wildly. "I can't even hide... her Aura can spot me clear across the continent now. Believe me, I've tried, she can get me anywhere. Bottom levels of abandoned gold mines. Submarines under the Arctic ice cap. Disney stores! Even Sylvester only wanted to eat Tweetie the once when he caught him."

"Pluck-eeeeee..." Buster leaned against the wall, nonchalantly munching a carrot in the pose he had often seen on his mentor Bugs. "If there's a Monster around here, Doctor Pluckenstein, blame its creator. There's a mirror you can see him in, right by the showers. And they're serving lunch out there so eat hearty, keep your strength up. You need all of those, and badly - get my drift?"

"A fine friend you turned out to be," Plucky grumbled. He poked Buster in the chest. "You know the difference between you and the mall cop at Acme Giga Mall?"

"About three hundred pounds of fat and a bad haircut?" Buster hazarded a guess.

"The mall cop gets paid to say *"You break that thing, you bought it."* With you, it's just for pure laughs." But he took Buster's advice.

A few minutes later Buster joined Babs and most of the others in the cafeteria. For a change they were serving a fairly decent fresh salad; he heaped his tray high and sat next to the Amazing Three as usual. The loon was chatting happily. There was no sign of any great change in her, either in her outfit or expression; far from becoming a monster Buster thought she looked if anything more serene. Her powder-blue Aura was definitely brighter, and shared the same contented glow.

"Shirley! I think Plucky should be here soon. He just couldn't stop talking about you." Buster exchanged glances with Babs. "Well, it's true."

"Like, good news, Buster!" The loon's eyes were bright. "I've been having a long chat with him. He nearly convinced me that express air ticket to Greenland I detected in his pocket was really for my birthday present."

"Greenland?" Buster blinked. "Why would it be Greenland? Do you have relations there?"

Shirley relaxed, and somehow her aura flexed as if stretching a new part of her abilities. "I haven't yet. But the way I'm tapping power - by next solstice I could be having "relations" with Plucky on the moon!"

Babs and Fifi snickered, the skunkette segueing it into a romantic sigh.

"Ah, so beautiful. Young love." Fifi's tail swished. "And 'ere 'e is, the lucky loovair!"

Plucky had indeed showered and groomed his plumage considerably; he bowed to the assembled toons with a fair show of dignity. Piling his plate high with energy-rich seeds and vitamin-fresh vegetables, he sat down opposite Shirley. "What have I missed?" He bowed and kissed Shirley's wingtip; her mood ring began to glow a pleased salmon pink.

"Plucky being polite," Buster mused. "Invest in ice skate factories, Hell has frozen over."

Just then, Shirley's aura detached and looked down the corridor with a highly annoyed expression.

Another class had obviously just finished, as along with a dozen other toons a pretty light-green duck entered. Maria was a slender waterfowl with a great mass of smooth blonde head-feathers that extended halfway down her back. Her eyes lit up at the sight of Plucky.

"It's a nice day to eat outside on the lawn, Plucky," Shirley suggested. "Would you want to, join me or some junk?"

Plucky hesitated, as he too spotted Maria Mandarin. He took a deep breath, calculating rather more than his potential profits and survival chances for once. Something seemed to change in his eyes as they met the loon's.

"Sure, Shirley." Picking up their plates, the pair walked out holding each other's wing-tips.

"Well, there's a sight for sore eyes," Babs said. "Buster, is it just me or has this place got Spring Fever all of a sudden? Shirley, of all people." *The Girl Least Likely To*. Or was that Mary?" She looked down meditatively. "While I, who have the Cutest toes..."

"Sometimes you need to imagine losing something to know what you've got," suggested Buster. "And sometimes you know it's "use it or lose it" time." He blushed. "Meaning Plucky."

From Maria Mandarin's expression she was thinking the same thing. The pale green fowl was carrying a stack of freshly rented DVDs, the top one garishly proclaiming "100 biggest and best Monster Truck crashes!" She had needed little more than a timid enquiry and a smile to discover from the Acme Mall video rentals what their best customer most liked to see. That and "Cheerleader Wardrobe Malfunctions", of course.

"*Always the bridesmaid, never the bride...*" Babs sang sweetly, her eyes locked in Buster's direction. "They said these here were lucky rabbit's feet. If I don't get lucky can I get a refund?"

Buster gave an embarrassed cough, looking out of the window to where Shirley was kissing Plucky with an enthusiasm he would have bet serious money against the week before. "Seems Shirley's making up for lost time - three hot meals a day and fresh Duck's on the menu. Maybe her aura likes dining on ego." His imagination flashed on her wall an image of a tar-pit like lake which the loon's floating powder-blue astral form was draining through a pipeline to a distant refinery. The aura was looking at the falling oil level with interest as if to see what would be revealed.

Babs' ears were up in surprise. "Fresh duck - he generally gets pretty fresh, all right. And she used to be such a vegan. My friend Shirley the Loon, Olympic class vamp and energy vampire. Poor, poor Plucky. Oh my. How sad." She struck a tragic pose.

"Poor, poor, Pluckster. My heart bleeds too. All these years and he got exactly what he asked for." Buster was trying hard to keep a straight face.

"Just like his character in that "Raiders of the Lost Icebox" cameo from Action Adventure class." Babs' nose twitched mischievously. "It was covered in warning symbols and wrapped with silver chains and religious charms. Anybody else would have had the sense to stay wayyyy clear. But he just HAD to open that box."

"Babs! You'll get monochrome!"

"Sorree..."

The final weeks of the semester went by rapidly as the toons worked hard in their classes. After Spring Break everyone knew how hard they would be worked for exams. All the usual sports and trips would be off - with a sigh Buster packed his baseball bat and glove away in his locker at the end of the day. "That's the last match on our timetable done - the bat and ball stay here till we're clearing out in July ready to go."

Babs sniffed melodramatically. "The old baseball diamond will be out there alone in the wind and rain. Asking when its prince shall return. Quoth the bunny, "*nevermore*"."

"Aah, we'll get a game or two between revising. I hear Perfecto Prep don't work this hard at final exams," Plucky watched as Buster solemnly closed the locker door as if entombing a part of his old life. "All work and no play, makes Plucky a dull drake."

"So that's what did it ...?" Buster asked nonchalantly. "Hard work? Never would have guessed."

"We'll get a game if we have to cut some study time. There's ways to get around it," Plucky gave a conspiratorial wink.

"We're not at Perfecto, Plucky. There, they say "*if you're cheating and get away with it - it's not cheating*"",” Buster reminded the duck. "Most of them will be hard wired for data when they take their tests. Or bribing the staff. Or having mind-readers prompting them from a mile away. We don't have that sort of special-effects budget."

Plucky snorted. "Some of us have it built in." He felt his feathers beginning to bristle as if with static, and turned round with his eyes wide. "Uh-oh. Hi, Shirley." Suddenly his eyes lit up. "We were thinking - when it's exam time - you could channel the spirit of some super-genius into my head!"

"As if there was room in there," Babs winked. She caught the loon's expression, and stepped well clear. "Oooh, I think Shirley wants to ... talk to you." She smiled. The new Shirley had definitely seized the initiative, and was holding on to the (admittedly minor) prize of Plucky Duck with effectively both the carrot and the stick. *Not that she needs to use a stick on him, with her psychic blasts*, Babs thought gleefully *and for herself - she's got something maybe two percent better than a carrot now...*

Shirley was not in Babs' league in Spin Change technique; she generally managed a similar effect with her aura doubling as a light show and slide projector. It manifested visibly in the form of a cute devil-duck somehow overlaying her features. "Like, I hope you've not been skipping your organic vitamins and minerals, Plucky," she intoned in an almost purring voice. "My horoscope says the stars are right at last to open my ninth Charka. And that's going to need orgone energy - a LOT of orgone energy. When that's done - I'll be in tune with the next astral

level." She ran a finger along the underside of Plucky's bill. "There's some of Mother's advanced oriental books I've been looking through. Some of the rituals ... they take two. I was a High Priestess of Ishtar in one of my past lives, you know?"

In the green mallard's whirling brain a diagram appeared of an Acme 1-Megatoon "*Handy-dandy Landscape Re-arranger*" as the catalogue coyly termed it, with nine Plutonium segments poised around the core ready to slam together. In his mind the ninth segment slammed into place completing the critical mass. Somehow the expendable tamping device seemed to be made of green duck.

Shirley moved smoothly to his side, playfully enfolding the green drake in her wing like the trademark cloak swirling around a vampire's victim. "Duck season," she whispered seductively. Her Aura stepped in from the other side, cutting off his escape route.

"Mama." The duck's voice came as a squeak; pinball-type "Tilt" signs appeared in his eyes and he keeled over in a dead faint, his whole body locked rigid.

Shirley took advantage of a passing chain hoist and winched him off. She sat cross-legged, concentrated on her mantra "*Ohm what a loon I ammmm*" and smoothly levitated off the floor. "So long, Babs!" She paused. "It's double dating these days. Me and him, his aura and mine."

"Plucky has an aura? Who knew?" Long pink ears went up in surprise.

Shirley sniffed. "Everything alive has an aura, Babs. Pondweed has an aura. If his was half the size of his ego you could see it from the moon." She looked down with a surprisingly affectionate gaze at the drake. "He's kinda buried upside down in his own ego - the higher Charkas are buried deep. The only one in reach so far is his basal Charka - earthly desires." She shrugged. "Hey! The rest are down there somewhere. If I keep digging I'll find them for us." She paused. "Hopefully it'll be in, like, this incarnation."

"Those attaining cosmic Oneness, may proceed to Two-ness." Babs spin-changed into a mystic outfit complete with bed of (rubber) nails.

"That kinda thing. Got to go, my star chart says Venus and Jupiter have a hot conjunction tonight and we can't be late!" With a rattle of chain hoists, Plucky and Shirley departed towards the wetlands of Acme Acres, Shirley floating rather higher than she had the week before. If the previous nights had been anything to go by, some more of that swamp was about to evaporate in a psychic aura-lashed column of steam. She paused by the door. "Don't worry, Babs - if it's Duck Season today - one day it'll be rabbit season." Her aura waved, conjuring up a swirling Mandala pattern.

"Well, what do you know?" Babs spin-changed back and winked at Buster. "It takes two to Tantric."

The food court at Acme Mall was a cut above weenie-burger, in that on occasion its food contained real ingredients. The Amazing Three often met up there to discuss private matters. Buster was discreet enough but anything Plucky overheard might as well be relayed over the mall's speakers. And K-ACME radio.

Mary Melody joined the bunny, skunkette and loon with her meal - it was embarrassing for someone who hated type-casting, that she actually loved corn bread, ham hock and grits. She had left her skates off and was wearing a white blouse and cargo pants - unlike toons who saw more of the spotlights she had no trademarked "look" and hardly had two outfits the same in her wardrobe. "And now it's the last week of semester," She sat and scanned her timetable. "Last time we'll be having a real holiday. We'd better make the most of it." She kissed Jaggi shyly. "I plan to. I've got a new beach outfit and some ideas." Of all the toons, the human had changed most since their early days at the Looniversity - her figure had filled out considerably though she was well toned and very athletic.

"Le sigh," Fifi cast a wistful expression at the couple. "I also 'ave ze plans, with 'Amton. 'E will 'ave a certain question to ask me, I think." She wriggled joyously, her eyes changing into heart symbols.

Babs grinned. "Go for it, Feef! A romantic Spring Break is the perfect time to propose. And Buster and I ..." she sighed, her white cotton tuft of tail twitching "I am expecting a certain proposition too. Or even two." Her eyes crossed. "I don't know when or where it'll happen - it'll be something improvised and glorious with perfect timing! After that - carrots will forever be just something to eat. "

"True Babs Bunny style. Some of us have to plan ahead." Mary squeezed Jaggi's hand. A sensible girl with determined ideas and a sensible family, she had talked everything through with her parents beforehand. Her first nights with Jaggi had been spent in her own bedroom; her mother had wanted to be sure all went well for her only daughter and for the first weeks had insisted they only met intimately at home.

Shirley nodded. "Good luck, Babsie. I'm sure Buster's just waiting for the right moment. Like, how could he not?"

"Oh yes." Babs's tail wriggled. "Sure, I've loved him playing hard-to get. He's so cute when he's flustered. But that was the big gag all through Reel One, girls. It's now Reel two - when we get real." Her ears dipped slightly. Getting serious and staying funny at the same time was rather like juggling while playing the piano - deep down she knew neither performance was likely to be improved by the other. But the impossible was fairly routine

for a final-year Acme Looniversity student, let alone for the Queen of Comedy herself.

Fifi's eyes were distant. "Bonne chance. 'Amton, 'e ees the type to wait for ze wedding, aftair we graduate. Eh, and eet will be so." Her tail flicked seductively. "I weel be saving up ... all ze energy. All for mon petit kosher cochon!" She pulled from the depths of her tail-fur a small silver ring, and showed it for the girls' eyes only. "Eet was my mothair's. On some romantic cliff-top or beach sunset - this I will offer to 'Amton."

"And all the rest, I'll bet," Babs snickered.

Fifi smiled, swishing her luxuriant tail. "I 'ave been laying in ze tomato juice. Feh! I cannot stand zat. For 'Amton I will be scenting like ze rose garden."

"He's sure to say yes. You can start planning the wedding, Fifi. The week after we graduate would be good." Mary clapped her hands in glee. "A July wedding! Everybody'll be there! Even if we will all be heading out job hunting soon after." Only Elmyra and Little Sneezer of their class were staying on till next year. Ironically, Elmyra had already received several job offers from the crueller and more ruthless groups of international bounty-hunters. The toon human girl had a pet cemetery in her back yard that rivalled many military ones in size, and her gleeful death-cuddle had only got more powerful with years of practice.

Fifi gave an animal purr. "Ah, oui! 'Zat long, I can wait. But no longair. I am consumed with ze passion!" She jumped into a Type 9 "Freleng Frizzle" Wild Take, flames erupting and consuming her before she reconstituted, smiling wistfully.

"Seems like there's going to be a lot of energy heading for the coast this holiday," Mary nodded. "I wouldn't be amazed if a few things got broken on the way."

"Mary! You're getting nearly as bad, I mean as good as me!" Babs' ears were right up. "Heh."

Mary blinked, mentally repeating her line to herself. She suddenly blushed, the effect manifesting inches outside her body. "I was thinking," she said severely "of things like hotels and beaches."

"Sorree...."

A Friday came that all of Babs' and Busters' class had known would one day arrive - though it had always seemed comfortably far over the horizon. It was five to three and the class had handed in their Props 701 assignment - the last regular one of the last regular term. The Looniversity's somewhat battered collection of Acme gag products had been used in many cruel and unusual ways, and were back in the store room.

"Eeeh, listen up, class," Professor Bugs cast a glance at the cuckoo clock on the wall. "Next term you've only the exams and getting ready for 'em - no new classes. So if ya spent ya last years playin' hooky then that's too bad, it's too late now. We ain't going to teach you no more, see - after the break you gets to show us what you've learned." He pulled out an imported Paraguayan gourmet carrot and munched it idly. "For some of youse, that shouldn't take up much of our time."

A visible cloud of gloom enveloped some of the class, notably Plucky and Fowlmouth.

"Birdbrains," Sweetie Pie snickered, though her ventriloquism made it appear to come from the light-bulb.

Professor Bugs ignored it, adding to the two fowls' foul moods. "So you'se gots the week of break before that. It's the last break you gets with Acme Loo to come home to after - so make the most of it - class dismissed!" He grinned.

Gogo Dodo manifested as a cuckoo clock on the wall above him. "Cuckoo! Cuckoo! If you don't have fun this trip you must be Cuckoo!"

Visible smouldering lines filled the air as Fifi cast a scorching look at Hamton, and Babs at Buster. Plucky nervously reached in his desk for a bottle of extra-strength Vitamin pills as Shirley's aura floated towards him with a hungry look. The powder-blue aura stroked him, then reached into his body and grabbed something within - the corner emerged of something like a green translucent duck shadow.

"Like cool it, girl," Shirley scolded her aura gently. "Not in class. You'll get plenty of that later." With a disappointed air, the glowing figure released Plucky's own aura that snapped back into his feathered body like a released elastic band. Plucky twitched painfully as if he had grabbed a live wire.

"It's the break, all right," the green drake whispered to Hamton, as he tried to hide in his desk a NASA application form to be the first Toon duck to head out solo to Alpha Centauri suspended in freeze-frame. "Only thing is - what gets broken first?"



## Chapter Two - "The Break is on, the Brakes are off"

"Ahh - Spring Break! At last!" Buster ticked off the days on his calendar as he rose and greeted the dawn. The blue-and-white buck's ears brushed the burrow roof now; since starting at Looniversity five years ago he had grown considerably, and like the rest he had put on a growth surge in the past year that had made him grateful he had no need for trousers. He would have out-grown quite a few pairs before wearing them out. It also made packing for travel a simple matter. Half a dozen sets of his usual red top, a pair of sunglasses and a pair of red swimming trunks were all he really needed - after all, he could hardly swim in his bare fur on a public beach. His mentor Bugs famously wore trunks when swimming, as salt water would spoil his white gloves.

"Anybunny Hooommmeee?" His ears bent against the ceiling as they spotted Babs' voice outside. Grabbing his bag, he hopped up to greet her, one foot casually tripping the burrow's door locking mechanism and starting the big screwjack motors. The hundred-tonne ex-Government surplus silo door he had bought via ACME slid securely shut with a slam of steel. As the catalogue described it - "*Designed to be proof against the Cold War - and Cold Callers!*" He had kept the original explosive opening mechanism for emergencies, but slamming the hundred tonne door open with ACME explosives tended to annoy the neighbours and panic watching satellites.

"Hiya, Babs. Ready to go?" Buster's gaze swept over the entrancingly posed rabbit - Babs was silhouetted against the Spring sunshine, the wind blowing through her fur. Her long ears were poking through a straw sun-hat, and the cutest toes in Acme Acres were neatly brushed. An old urge to drench her with a water pistol briefly resurfaced, but he damped down the notion rather than the bunny.

"Ready and willing, Blue Boy." Babs looked at him under lowered eyelids. "One week of fun, and yes, sun. The ocean and the sky there at Surf City - they say it's all SO realistic." Her eyes flashed. "And Plucky is not organising this one. Remember the first Spring Break trip, he took us to Fort Lauderdale, Florida? Acme Acres is in California, not that he'd noticed! Three days travelling day and night cramped in that old bus - we only had six hours on the beach before we had to head back."

"Ah, Toon Geography. He never did take that class. Barely scraped a C in Toon Physics, either." Buster reminisced. "Or he might be better at dodging anvils. Plenty of scrapes from those."

Babs smiled. The Amazing Three had put their heads together and looked at the maps for days before organising this final trip. Just down the Californian coast from Surf there was a Point Conception marked on the charts - Fifi had giggled at that and Shirley firmly vetoed going anywhere near it. Background gags had pervasive effects on toons that might be unfortunate sometimes. She relaxed, sitting on the designer tree-stump beside the road, and pulled out her travelling stereo. "Music to share, Buster? I got this album just for you," She handed him the DVD case to inspect.

Buster nodded appreciatively. "*Once again the band that dares to be different dives into the devil's bucket and comes up gasping,*" he read "*You'll enjoy it whether semi-conscious, naked on roller skates - or both!*" He accepted one headphone while Babs plugged into the other. For ten minutes they just sat, cheek ruffs pressing close to each other as they shared the moments together.

*Babs was right, this is my style,* Buster admitted - *played full power on a ghetto-blaster - it wouldn't leave a wall standing of the whole Acme Acres ghetto!*

"So, who's turning up then?" Buster asked, as the disc finished. "Apart from our class. Little Sneezer's not graduating till next year, but I know he's coming. How about Binky Bunny?"

Babs gave a hacking sound as if coughing up a hairball. "Please! Don't mention her. No, she's doing the usual."

"Wandering through the forest till she gets grabbed by Gene Wolverine and dragged off to his lair? Again?" Buster's ears went up. "We must have rescued her six times before we gave up."

"It's what she's into." Babs shrugged. "She's always back in class on Monday. Even when she doesn't get rescued." Gene Wolverine was one of the more formidable predators in the forest, and what Binky saw in him was something Babs had often wondered. The loud sounds of wolverine bellowing and excited rabbit squeals that echoed through the woods might have been a clue. "Maybe she practices puppet shows with him. She's the glove puppet."

"Eww. To think, I auditioned her for your job." In their second year Babs had vanished for two weeks to work on a vapid soap opera, leaving Buster without a comic partner. "I think she still watches 'Thirteensomething.' Is that the show's target audience IQ?"

Babs grinned. "It's on my resume, Blue-boy. A paid slot on a national show, while you were still doing newspaper rounds."

"Ahh... just like Plucky's resume. He accidentally blew up the Acme factory that one time but like he says - "*Everyone will remember I was big in the national news - they'll have forgotten why.*" Buster relaxed, sitting back to back with Babs. Their ears intertwined comfortably.

Five minutes later Babs spotted the Looniversity bus approaching, driven by Pete Puma the trusty janitor.

"Here's our bus - this time six hours not days travel. Woe is me - they won't let me drive. Not since the accident. It's not my fault, really. The state of Colorado should have swerved. Anyone else would."

Their bags stowed in the cargo rack, the bunnies (no relation) waved to their friends and headed towards the back seat where Shirley, Fifi and Plucky were sitting. The back seating area had a big fold-down table sometimes used for on-the-move catering; right now it had maps and documents open ready for use.

Buster looked round, counting heads. "Where's Hamton? Didn't we go past his house already?"

Shirley glared up at him in a stony silence. Fifi, who had been looking subdued, suddenly burst into floods of tears.

"Le boo-hoo! Le boo-hoo! Mon piggy is not coming. And ... Buster ... mon piggy, 'e is not coming back to moi. Evair. He 'as told me it is all ovair." She slumped in the seat, while Shirley embraced her with a protective wing.

"Like, Buster, you know Hamton's parents are major neat-freaks or some junk? Hamton's Mr. Death-to-dirt fer sure but they're like Howard Hughes' reincarnations gone wild. Fifi can't help shedding like a snowstorm in Spring, can she? The Pigs don't shed - so they've a white pile carpet all over the house positively knee-deep. Even when she's not shedding purple blizzards ... like well you know, skunks."

Living in a junkyard had always been a black mark against Fifi with Hamton's fanatically tidy family, though being of a different species, nationality and religion had not helped either. She had even accepted wearing a sealed polythene over-suit to visit Hamton despite being twice hospitalised from heatstroke by it, but that had not been enough. "For 'im I will 'ave all my fur cut off and my scent glands cut out of my body with ze cruel sharp knives," she sobbed.

"Don't do it!" Babs and Shirley said in the same breath.

Fifi sniffed. "'Amton's mothaire, last night after I said ze bonne nuit, she used fifteen cans of ze Air freshener in ze room. 'Zen outside his father, 'e lit ze barbecue. La Boom! Ze soft furnishings zey are ze frazzled furnishings. And now 'ze family 'ave told me nevair to come back. 'Amton 'e loves 'is family. 'E will nevair disobey zem, nevair." She paused, looking up with a tear-streaked face. "And nevair would I ask 'im to. Elope - we cannot."

"It's not like they're not used to his Uncle Stinky," Plucky muttered. "That road trip with him to Wacky World in our first Looniversity Summer vacation. Ewww. There was nothing like it till Acme Gigaplex screened Herd of the Zombie Buffaloes in "Scento-Vision". Had to flood the theatre to the roof with lye to clean the stink."

"Oh yes ... you were trying to sneak in to catch a free show when they sealed the room," Buster recalled. "Duck and lye pickles. Flying lutefisk, anyone?"

"Le boo-hoo! Le boo-hoo encore! My 'eart, eet is broken forever," Fifi sobbed, hiding her eyes with her tail tip. "I weel never be Mrs Fifi Piegenthaler."

"That's his real family name? Not Pig? How about that." Plucky wondered. "I never knew."

Babs gestured urgently to Buster with her ears - and Shirley's aura silently mimed what was wanted. Buster sat down next to Fifi, putting a brotherly arm around her and holding her close. Fifi leaned against him, pressing her damp cheek against his shoulder as she heaved with emotion. And so they passed the way to the seaside.

At the resort, the incredibly realistic sunshine and scenery seemed to have dried Fifi's tears for the time being. While Shirley led the skunkette up to the rooms, Babs pulled Buster into a secluded garden shaded with tall palm trees. They were alone for the minute.

"Babs?" Buster sat down next to her. "What are we going to do for Fifi?"

Babs looked up at him, her violet eyes locked in steely determination. "Buster. WE are going to see that she has whatever she wants. You know Fifi - she bounces back. And when she does ..." she drew a deep breath, and looked deep into Buster's eyes. "I'm writing you a blank check, Blue-boy. If Fifi asks, Fifi gets. Is the script clear?"

"Greater love hath no bunny than she who layeth down her buck for her friend." Buster quoted from "*A tale of two burrows*". He kissed her nose. "But ... I hope she doesn't ask me. I don't like to think of you handing out blank checks to anyone."

Babs smiled sweetly. "After this I've only got one more left in the book to give, Buster. Whichever way this turns out - that's for you, too."

An hour was enough for even the girl toons to find their rooms, unpack and change into their beach outfits; it was barely mid-afternoon when the party met by the hotel pool.

"Everyone's here - well, everyone who's everyone." Buster scanned the poolside. Montana Max and Elmyra had definitely not been invited, and nobody was mentioning Hamton. At first Fifi had kept looking around hopefully as if expecting to see the pig arriving somehow, but subsided with a glum look. Buster tried hard to smile. "Party time!"

The pool was generously sized, following the usual resort building codes that insisted a drunken rock-

star's limousine could be driven at high speed into it and still leave room for the bathers to get out of the way. As ever, toons dressed in bathing outfits regardless of how little they usually wore and where - Plucky, Buster and Calamity wore the only pants they owned to swim in. Fifi who normally wore only a small bow in her head-fur was resplendent in an actual yellow polka-dot bikini that had obviously been bought with Hamton in mind - for special occasions she covered up as much as any human toon. Mary Melody's white bathing costume was if anything skimpier.

A small Martian looked on, shaking her head in bafflement. The dressing habits of Earth toons were a never-failing source of wonder to her. "It appeared strange enough when you had that "Prom" event," she complained. "You put on more clothes than you usually wear, to sunbathe? And everyone sunbathes whether or not they can tan? Earthlings are just out of this world."

"I can get darker." Mary looked over at the loon, who was enjoying having the two-tone adult plumage of her back massaged by Plucky. That Winter Shirley's new pattern had grown in, and she now sported a natty black and white "checkerboard" pattern that Plucky was currently exploring. "Shirley? I wanted to ask. I never thought you and Plucky had - plans that way."

Shirley gave a satisfied smile. "As in, I didn't for the longest time. But not everything's like, graven in stone. It'd make the scripts way too heavy to carry."

Mary nodded, her finger tracing one of Jaggi's stripes. "Same thing with a news reporter. You never can tell which way a story's going to break." Jaggi stroked her hair in return. The year before Mary had decided on a major style change and experimentally braided everything, but she had cut back to just a single shoulder-length beaded braid on each side.

There was a companionable silence, broken only by the crackle of one of Calamity Coyote's inventions short-circuiting as he tested it for waterproofing in the pool. The inventor sighed, holding up a board sign with an arrow curving out then returning to a drawing board.

Babs relaxed, reclining on a deck chair. "Ah, fresh air and sunshine on my fur," she declared "Only one thing could be finer - sunshine and fresh hare."

Fifi looked at her friend, her ears down and her tail drooping "You 'ave ze good luck. You 'ave the fresh hare on tap. As fresh as you want 'im, exactement."

Babs pulled down her extra-pink heart shaped sunglasses and looked at Fifi over the top of them. "It's your party too. This trip, the air and the hare are free to share."

Fifi gasped, pressing a purple-furred paw to her white chest. "Always ze Joker, Babs." She said weakly as she watched Buster and Plucky plunge into the pool. Buster looked very handsome in the outfit, she had to admit; the buck had filled out in all the right places. Her eyes locked on the race; Buster was well in the lead despite Plucky's natural waterfowl advantages.

"He looks good these days, don't you think?" Babs relaxed. "Well, this will be the trip when we'll really become a couple. I'll let you know when, Feef. But before that happens - if there's anything he can help you with? That's what friends are for."

Fifi gave a timid chuckle, her eyes still wide in disbelief. Babs might usually play the joker, but she was an excellent card player and it was a shock to imagine her giving away her ace - let alone her king. "Bustair ... you can tell 'im I would be - pleased to talk with 'im. Anytime."

"That rabbit cheats." Plucky hauled himself out of the pool an hour later, having lost best out of three - which had then been best out of five, seven, eleven and (in a desperate attempt at "lucky for some") thirteen races. "Prehensile ears as propellers! It's not in the Olympic rules."

"One way - or another," Buster relaxed, towelling his fur dry. "So you can't cry "fowl" on me."

Plucky appealed to the crowd. "Is this fair? A duck gets beaten by a bunny - in the water?"

Fifi borrowed Babs' pink heart-shaped sunglasses and looked at him over the tops. "Why not? 'E beats you in ze classroom. Why stop zhere?"

Sweetie Bird skilfully pulled out a baseball bat four times her own size from behind her back and offered it to Buster. "I'm on Plucky's side. I bet a cent Buster can't beat him with this!" Sometimes the pink canary played to lose.

Plucky cast imploring eyes to the skies. "Everyone's against me. The world's against me."

Sweetie snickered evilly. "Because it knows you, see?"

Babs spin-changed into Groucho Marx. "The world, sonny, is bigger and older than you are. And I wouldn't place any bets on you wrist-wrestling against it either."

"Humph. I'll see you philistines later. I'm going in to shower." With his bill held high, the drake waddled off.

"Who's Phillis Stein? He called me Phillis?" Fowlmouth complained. Though the rooster had definitely grown, he was a bantam by species and the only one of the class who was still half the height of his mentor Foghorn

Leghorn. Buster and Plucky were nearly the height of theirs.

"Well. Water-fowl temper," Babs winked. "Oh yes! While he's not here - Shirley - we've got something we've been saving for you."

Shirley blinked, as Babs pinned on her pink bikini top a medal Calamity Coyote had just handed her. "Like, what's with the decorations?" She asked, puzzled.

The young coyote's "signboard" flicked through a series of images. Plucky, the planet, a huge bloated shape then a symbol of arrows all pointing inward and finally a small dot.

"Calamity, he says ... with you and Plucky, if Plucky ever thought it was him in charge ... his ego would swell till it collapsed into a black hole and took everything with it," Babs translated.

The grey-furred scientist nodded vigorously, and his sign-board changed to read "*Saviour of the World!*" Shirley giggled, but looked down doubtfully at the medal. "Happy thoughts, Calamity. But mondo military-type medals are really just not me."

Babs grinned. "Not even organic chocolate ones?"

The loon examined what she discovered was a gold foil wrapped chocolate medallion. She gave Calamity a quick kiss of thanks on the nose. "Now that, Calamity - is me for sure." Her eyes flashed in amusement. "Like, Plucky these days, he's not that bad. He actually asked me what I was thinking yesterday, you know?"

"First time for everything," Babs marvelled.

Shirley snickered. "Peeking into other people's minds is just too Dark Side of the Force ... but I can give him the ten-dollar tour of mine, all right." She paused. "I had my Aura grab his and throw him in like a club bouncer in reverse. He was like a kid trapped in a carnival haunted house with all the lights out - running from one room to another."

"Screaming?" Babs asked.

The loon considered the matter. "Fer sure. But he might have been kidding. Like why should he complain? He DID ask what was on my mind."

Mary cast the loon an appraising glance. "It seems like I started something."

Shirley blinked. "It was in the stars, Mary. That's karma - one way or another it'll, like, happen." She glanced up at the hotel, checking Plucky was not at a window pointing an Acme "Long ears" parabolic microphone at her. "I don't much look at my own future but I did last month - I checked out sixteen futures with my crystal - in fourteen of them Plucky's with Maria Mandarin right now, for sure, for keeps. I had about one day left before things diverged so far I could never steer it back."

"Oh? Do tell," Babs grinned, her own long ears perked up and a mischievous grin on her face. "So you saw the curve coming up right ahead of you, and had to turn the wheel pretty quick?"

A loon shivered. Her aura stood off to one side, arms on her hips and looking irritated. "Truer than you know, Babs. Sure, you can work it out. But I saw exactly how it'd be fer real." Her crystal had shown one particular scene happening that significant Saturday - Plucky and Maria sitting on the Acme Park grassland enjoying a picnic. Collateral damage from a nearby water-fight had soaked Maria, and her blouse had fallen down - oddly enough Plucky had not gone into a "Wild Take" nor had Maria malleted him in a reflex action as Shirley knew she would have herself. Plucky had politely offered her his own jacket to cover up. The sight of Maria shaking her head and shyly pressing his green feather-hand to her breast had steamed up the crystal ball, reminding Shirley there were things not to be spied on if she was to stay on the light side of the Force.

After the evening meal, the party scattered in various directions. Babs went up to decide what to wear the next day (yellow top, lilac skirt and ear ribbons seemed a likely contender) and Fifi hauled her heavy heart up to her room. An hour later she was sitting in the evening sunshine when there came a knock. Not at the room door - but at the partition outside that divided up the rooms' balconies.

"Buster?" Fifi stood up on the balcony where she had been reading. More accurately, she had been trying to read the usual collection of romance novels she brought on trips - only to find they left the equivalent to the taste of dust and ashes in her mouth. She had stared at the first page of her Bill Sandmoon paperback for half an hour and could not recall a word of it. Anything involving genteel, ball-gowned heiresses dragged off by dashing pirates or desert sheikhs generally had her musk flowing outrageously in minutes. If one of the leading males so excitingly described was a "skunk-hunk" she could blow her car's doors wide open.

"Fifi. Babs said you asked me to call round. May I?" As the skunkette nodded dumbly, Buster hopped over the tail-high wall that separated the two balconies.

Fifi smiled shyly. She had reverted to her usual outfit, though the hair ribbon was looking bedraggled and stiff with dried salt from the hotel's seawater pool. "I 'ave, nothing to give you. Such a hostess you weel think me! You must be starving, all zat swimming. And ze meal 'ere - only Dizzy Devil was 'appy with eet." Dizzy was unprejudiced, and had eaten the hotel's luxurious paper plates as well.

"It's a hotel room," Buster reminded her. "They do room service." He reached back to his side of the

balcony and pulled up a picnic basket. "Carrot cheesecake?"

Although Fifi was less than keen on raw carrots, any kind of cheesecake had her trying not to drool. "But yes! Certainment!" One ear dipped slightly. "But what if Babs ..."

Just at that moment she saw, over Buster's shoulder, Babs stepping onto the balcony one room past Buster's. The pink bunny saw her buck and her best friend together - she winked at Fifi, blew her a kiss and waved before stepping back indoors.

For a second Fifi's tail went rigid. Then her eyes slowly widened, as she understood. "Sacre bleu..." she whispered to herself. Her heart began to pound. "And ... sacre pink, as well." She smiled for the first time in a long while. "Buster - with you and Babs - I 'ave the best friends a girl could wish for."

"You deserve the best," Buster assured her. "One slice or two?"

They took their plates indoors out of the sun, and Fifi looked around almost in despair. The economy-class room was spacious only compared to the abandoned car she normally lived in at the junkyard - there was one small plastic chair on the balcony, a shower cubicle by the door and just enough space to squeeze past the narrow single bed to reach the balcony. "Buster - there eez nowhere even for us to sit."

"They're all the same, our rooms," Buster raised an eyebrow. "May I?" He motioned towards the bed.

"Mais certainment," Fifi assented, feeling her heart pounding as they both sat on it balancing their plates on their laps. She had often been alone with Buster, but never like this. Her mouth felt dry, and as she ate she was suddenly glad it was moist cheesecake and not cream crackers.

Buster's nose twitched as the scent level in the room rose. When Fifi started to feel romantic chemical alarms began triggering half a mile down wind. Contemplating how far up the dial it might go was an alarming prospect - remembering what Babs' stereo was like when the dial was pushed to ten and the seismographs started rattling all across the state. Fifi might have a setting for eleven yet to be triggered. If that happened, Shirley had at least assured him that to lay down his life in this cause would guarantee his next reincarnation would be a good one - though anything without Babs in it would not qualify as good to him. He steeled himself. "Fifi. We can just talk if you want to."

The skunkette gave a delicious shiver, a lock of head-fur falling over one eye. She smiled. "Thank you, Bustair. And we shall. But first ... I would like it if you ... untied ze ribbon." She patted her head-fur.

Buster swallowed hard. "Are you sure?" At Fifi's nod he gently undid the bow, taking care not to pull her purple fur. The ribbon fell to the floor like a fallen blossom, and the skunkette smiled at the sight. She stretched luxuriously, and her scent began to take visible density. For a toon who normally wore only her bare fur, one ribbon was as significant as a full outfit.

"What are you thinking, Bustair Bunny?" Fifi tossed her unbound head-fur back, reclining. Her elegant tail coiled and uncoiled slowly. Royal purple fur gleamed in the low evening light, as she proudly showed her full pelt to a male for the first time. She looked at Buster from under half lowered eyelids. He was certainly a lot more handsome than Hamton. Her hand touched his, feeling the blue fur against her luxurious purple.

Buster sighed, trying to ignore his eyes watering at Fifi's growing aroma. "If I tell you, you'll probably throw me out. I'm thinking that ... all that time my friend Hamton was a very lucky pig. And now he isn't." He braced himself to receive the blast of Fifi's temper - or floods of tears that would have if not Fifi then Babs getting the mallet out. Probably both.

But Fifi smiled, if a little sadly. "Babs, she 'as sent me an honest buck. I was 'oping, yes, zat 'Amton would be the first to see me like zis, 'Amton mon petit kosher jambon." She ran a purple-furred finger along blue rabbit ears. "Bustair. Do 'zis for 'Amton - and for moi." She took his hand and pressed it to her unbound head-fur.

Buster kissed her, stroking. "What Fifi wants, Fifi gets."

While Fifi generally had books to read in slack time (abandoned cars in junkyards rarely having mains power available) Plucky had brought along his old games console. To Shirley's slight annoyance he was playing it in her room, sitting on the floor while Babs and Shirley sat on the bed with maps and guidebooks of the area spread for reading. There was no television provided in the economy rooms, since a convention of trainee wild rock-stars had held a TV-tossing contest out of the windows the year before.

"At least we've plenty of beach time this Spring Break," Babs commented. "When Plucky organised it, by this time on the trip we wouldn't even have got to that tricky turn at Albuquerque."

"Like, we have an atlas, see" Shirley agreed. She cast a fond gaze down to the mallard, who was sweating on the fourth screen of "Retro Rocket Rumble."

Plucky was intent on the screen, where ballistic re-entry tracks were criss-crossing a world map "Atlas C? First-generation firecrackers! I've just bought the Iowa Complex. Twenty rows of Titan 2's in deep silos! Look! They're proof against.... awww, noo!" The screen flashed violently as Plucky lost again. He threw the console down in disgust. "These games are rigged."

Suddenly Shirley's eyes went wide. A slow smile spread over her bill. "Babs? Picking up some happy,

happy vibes hereabouts."

"You don't say." Babs stretched and went out on the balcony. A few seconds later there was a happy squeal audible two rooms away - and a visible blast of skunk vapour jetting out of Fifi's open window like a rocket exhaust plume caused palm trees to wilt and passing joggers to collapse in the street as if scythed down. Distant alarm bells rang and groups of gas masked and rubber-suited troops appeared waving sensors. Fortunately for the resort's tourist reputation, in California everyone assumed it was just another specialist costume convention letting out.

"That's going to burn the plaster off the walls," Babs commented idly. "They say in Vegas there's Roman type fountains filled with wine." She paused, thinking. "I wonder if room service can get Buster a bathtub of tomato juice?"

The sun rose on the first day of the Spring Break proper. Fifi awoke in the narrow bed with a cobalt-blue buck wrapped in her arms and tail - and her heart swelling with love and friendship for the blue and the pink bunny alike, for what they had given her. That Babs would give her buck to her ... some gifts were beyond price.

The night before at Acme Acres she had not slept a wink, lying awake on the empty seat of her abandoned car home. It had always been a place of hope, but suddenly hope and Hamton had been gone. Living in a junkyard had been something of a joke to her before - as the long dark hours crawled past on her lonely back seat she suddenly felt it suited her as never before. Someday at least her scrap car home had a whole new life awaiting even if it was via the crusher and the furnace. All things ended. Her rusting Cadillac had finally become less than watertight in the last Winter rains, and the door seals were letting in drafts as the rubber perished. Had she been staying another year she would have needed a new home. It had been snug and comforting for years, always there when she needed it - not smart or flashy, but dependable. Like she had always thought Hamton Josef Piegenthaler, as she told herself through the long hours to dawn.

"Le sigh," Fifi stroked the buck's soft cobalt-blue fur, so softly she did not wake Buster. Babs trusted her with the most precious thing she had to give - and despite her passions she had resisted asking Buster to give himself as she had wanted Hamton. Babs deserved to be the first that way with her buck. "Certainment and you shall ... graduate with honour. Full honours."

Buster turned over slightly in his sleep, and Fifi squeezed back against the wall to give him room. She ran her gaze over his form - the fur pattern was very like Babs' own, with the white patch starting at the throat, widening at his chest and narrowing down to the tummy. She wriggled, her eyes wide with delight at the sight of his red pullover hanging up on the hook inside her door, with her own pink hair-ribbon draped lovingly around its shoulders. Actually, given their bathing traditions there was no piece of Buster's fur she had not seen before, but viewing it all at once was a treat to a toon. She knew she was hardly the only girl in class who had imagined Professor Bugs with his gloves off, or felt a twinge of envy for their teacher's new bride. "Honey Bunny she eez a very lucky girl," she whispered to herself "and today - zo am I."

Amazingly enough, at breakfast time it was a fairly unscented Buster who escorted Fifi down to the dining hall arm in arm, with no signs of having had his fur corroded off or even scenting of tomato juice. Fifi gave him a grateful hug and skipped off lightly, to sit down next to Babs with a contented sigh.

"Sooooooo?" Babs and Shirley chorused, eyes glued to their friend.

"Babs! Thank you! My 'eart, eet is mending." She cast a grateful glance towards Buster. "I am, bringing him back to you. Ze goods ... returned intact for you." She whispered in Babs' ear, then to Shirley. "If 'e evair asks to dine again on cheesecake and skunkette - 'e deserves to 'ave it. Formidable! Babs, you 'ave ze finest time to look forward to."

Plucky was looking at Buster with a mixture of awe and bafflement. "Buster - how come she didn't burn your pigment clean off?" In their first year a much rawer and more annoying Plucky Duck had irritated Fifi to the point she had turned her scent on him full blast, and bleached him to a shadow. A translucent duck shape had wandered Acme Acres for days practicing ghost impressions while his colours returned.

"Plucky ... don't ask that sort of question. This isn't a locker room" Buster looked at his friend shrewdly. "But - remember that Action Adventure part we auditioned for in "*Thar she blows!*", when the drilling rig hit gas?"

"Oh joy. Oh happy memories. I may weep." Plucky had stuck his head down the drilling pipe to see what the rumbling was, and had his bill blown clean off by the blast. Buster had got his head out of the way in time. "Oh yes. Mister "Lookit-my-Reflexes" got the part as always."

Just then a collection of toon ears went up at the sound of panicked commotion from the hotel desk where a large and particularly grizzly bear in a tight black suit was having words with his staff (evidently cleaning staff, to judge from the mops and buckets they carried) who acting as one turned and pointed accusingly at the Acme party.

"Mondo negatory vibes heading this way," Shirley commented.

"Uh-ohh ... Buster. Tell me Fifi didn't Really burn the plaster off the walls?" Babs whispered urgently, pushing aside her half-eaten bowl of sugar-flavoured coffee flakes.

Buster gave an embarrassed grin. "What can I say? Seems it's a skunk thing."

A large bear-shaped shadow fell across them. "What's the big idea? Room 205 is trashed like a bomb hit it! And your party's the only ones on that corridor - this'll cost you big time!"

"The manager person appears annoyed," Marcia made careful notes in her Alien Cultural Studies notebook.

"Like, keep your fur on, Manager type person," Shirley stepped forward. She picked up a sheaf of plain white napkins off the breakfast table. Looking up into his snarling muzzle, she exerted her will. "You see my I.D.? The highest Government clearance you ever heard of. Actually it's higher." She thrust the blank napkin towards him. "Read and forget you ever saw it. This document here -" she waved another blank napkin imposingly "should tell you all you need to know about us. Alien investigation squad."

The bear nodded, dazed. "Uhh ... yes, Ma'm. But ... Room 205? The walls? The ceiling? The structural beams?"

"Aliens." Shirley whispered confidentially. She waved Marcia Martian forward. "You see? Even now they walk amongst us. This one's a friendly, working with the Department."

"Yes Ma'm." the bear reeled on his paws. "Aliens did it. I'll ... move you all into new rooms. No charge."

"Your cooperation is appreciated, citizen" Shirley nodded curtly. "Remember - these are not the toons you've been looking for." She gave an arcane gesture, her aura glowing brightly.

"They are not the toons we've been looking for..." the manager shouted to his staff, scattering them like chaff as he headed back to his desk.

Plucky gulped. "Shirley... he believed that?"

The loon snapped her wing-fingers, smiling. "Get crucial, Plucky. Weirder things happen here for real like, daily? This IS California."

Babs completely failed to hide a smirk, spin-changing into an oddly familiar sci-fi uniform. "Engaging loon power, dead ahead at Charka Factor Nine, Capt'n!"

Plucky cast her a dirty look. "Spare a thought for a poor Dilithium Crystal..."

Fifi cast a playful gaze over him. "So says Monsieur Clean, Green renewable energie. 'E will not be cruel to ze windmill evair again."

"Mmm. Bit of a comedown. He always wrote himself into the script as the jet fighter ace." Buster raised an eyebrow. "'Loon's spare fuel tank" somehow hasn't got quite that ring to it."

Plucky glared at him, his bill jerking up disdainfully. "Hummph!"

From the staircase, Mary Melody called a cheerful good morning as she and Jaggi came downstairs together. She was dressed in a long white beach robe that covered her from neck to ankles, although the sun was shining brightly. "This is K-ACME, roving reporter Mary Melody, reporting from the coast on the holiday special show," she announced to an imaginary microphone. "Weather, hot and bright, with slight chance of skunk smog later on. Radar reports suggest a possibility of heavy aura activity by late evening."

Shirley gave Plucky's hand-feathers a squeeze under the table. "I predict your predictions are like harmonious, seriously," she smiled. Suddenly her eyes went wide, and she whispered something to Plucky. The drake's eyes went wide.

Plucky's reply was clear and indignant. "What? No way. She wouldn't. You're pulling my tail, Shirley."

"Hear and believe, Plucky. Or put your billfold where your duckbill is. One dollar, ten to one against?" Shirley winked at Mary Melody.

"You're on!" Plucky scribbled something on a napkin and handed it to Fifi. "You hold the bet, Fifi. Shirley never gambles, she'll be no good at this. In ten minutes I'll hold ten crisp new smackaroos!" His eyes turned to dollar signs, while behind his back Shirley and Fifi exchanged conspiratorial smiles.

Ten minutes later the beach echoed to an anguished bird cry as the party unrolled towels on the sand - and Mary Melody stepped out of the long robe to show what half an hour's artistic work with two tubes of Acme's strongest white sun-cream could do to make her match her zebra-striped boyfriend. Plucky's eyes bulged, and the green duck turned even greener as he clutched his chest melodramatically. "Oh, my heart." then he blinked, a look of greater horror coming over him. "Oh, my wallet!"

"Ne vair bets, hmm?" Fifi smiled, confirming what was written on the paper. "She never gambles - eet was ze sure thing. You are ze wannair, Shirley. Plucky, pay 'er,"

The loon gave a serene smile, levitating three feet off the sand while Plucky thrashed and wailed in an overdone "take". "Give it to charity, Fifi. Gambling is bad karma. I just predicted... today is a good day for my predictions."

Plucky subsided, the duck looking extra green with envy as he looked on at Buster. The blue buck relaxed

on his beach towel between Babs and Fifi - both girls taking obvious pleasure in grooming him. "Sheesh. Mister Popular, as ever." He raised an eyebrow, looking at Shirley. "But, hey! A duck of this quality doesn't get lent out like a pair of bowling shoes at the Acme Bowl-o-rama."

Shirley smiled sweetly. "You are so right, Plucky. I'd never lend you. Not to a friend."

"Aaaah. Sweet appreciation, at last your day is here." Plucky basked happily, closing his eyes. Which was just as well - as seeing Shirley, Babs and Fifi just managing to stifle their giggles would have quite spoiled his mood.

A relaxing morning on the beach was followed by a picnic luncheon up on the grassy bluffs looking out over the Pacific. Shirley had been calmly meditating, chanting her mantra for half an hour as she levitated a yard off the ground. Suddenly her eyes snapped open. "Plucky ... you still play "Stealth sniper" on the console till your eyes go square?"

"Yeah?" Plucky asked "So?"

"And so... like, remember when a target shows on radar and your 'puter squawks "*enemy unit I.D.'d*?" I've got a psychic contact just like that - twenty yards, over there. Don't look round but - those bushes. Someone we know." Shirley inclined her head slightly towards a dense patch of flowering bushes up the hill.

While Shirley conjured up a showy aura display to fix the attention of whoever was watching, Babs and Buster spin-changed into "big-game hunter" outfits complete with oversized butterfly nets and went round one side of the clump while Jaggi and Mary went around the other. The tall zebra wore a similar practical khaki bush outfit most of the time anyway; he was often typecast as either "Native Guide" or "game warden" but never seemed to mind. Ten seconds later the bushes shook and a triumphant cry of "Gotcha!" rang out.

"Well, well. Look what the cat, I mean bunny, dragged in," Babs looked critically at her catch, before dragging the wriggling net round to the front of the bushes to dump it in front of Shirley.

"Threat library identifier..." Plucky imitated the console's voice "Target locked, Rhubella Rat."

"Will you Acme Loo-sers get this off me?" An annoyed rodent glared up through the mesh.

Babs raised an eyebrow. "So, what's Miss Evil Queen of Perfecto doing sniffing around at our little clambake? This isn't your usual kind of resort. No gold-plated beach sand."

"Yeah, Rhubella. And where's the rest of Team Snob? Don't see any limos parked around the corner." Plucky looked at their captive. Even allowing for being netted and dragged through a hedge backwards, the rat looked miserable.

"This is Mary Melody, reporting from the Acme zoo expedition to Surf City," Mary pulled out her pen microphone. "They searched for the monster, and found its lair. Was it an alien invader? A ghastly genetic lab experiment escaped? A mutant crawled from the toxic swamps? The jury's still out on that, folks."

Rhubella just sniffed, her sharp nose raised in a vain attempt at dignity. "That's all I need. Getting captured by a pair of beach bunnies and a pair of jungle-bunnies."

Shirley's aura crackled. "Try staying awake in class sometime, Miss Preppie Princess. Zebras don't live in jungles - you find them on the Great Plains."

"Like Kansas?" Plucky queried. Everyone ignored him.

Babs gave a fiendish grin, spin-changed into a historical costume and pointed towards Shirley. "Ve haff ways off making you talk," she intoned as she strutted stiff-legged around the net, popping a monocle in one eye and slapping her black breeches with an elegant riding crop. "If ve let Shirley loose on your mind... so regrettable" She dropped the accent and black uniform but kept the riding-crop. "Still, you've not much to lose in there." Her grin became manic. "Your spirit torn apart like fresh bread! Thrown in the pond to feed the ducks! In itty bitty crumbs!"

"Plucky needs the calories, these days," Jaggi commented neutrally.

Babs gave a cackling laugh, rubbing her hands together in her best Mad Science mode. "Doing that'd give Shirley bad karma and .. and .. and that'd make her get REALLY mad at you!"

"As in, cool it Babs, I'm picking up some seriously bad karma already," Shirley raised a hand.

"She IS from Perfecto," Buster pointed out. "You know, "*We Never Lose*" Perfecto? Isn't that part of their dress code?"

"'Fer sure, Buster. But - not like that." Shirley directed her voice so only Buster could hear. "As in, her aura's flat-lined like Fifi was yesterday?"

Buster considered, and untied the Acme "Happy Hunting Grounds" brand patent toon-proof net that boasted Elmyra as its best customer. He sat down, next to the depressed-looking rat. "So, what's the story, Rhubella?"

Rhubella cast a glance at Buster. "Oh, what's the use? What do I care if the spotty toons of Acne Acres laugh at me? Everyone else has."

"Gee, I didn't know anyone in Perfecto could raise a joke on a thousand acres," Plucky observed.

"Plucky!" Babs and Shirley snapped warningly.



“So... what are you doing here? Alone?” Buster asked. “It’s a nice place but it’s not exactly your usual five-star.”

Rhubella gathered up her skirt and some of her dignity. “Roderick got two exclusive holiday tickets. There’s only two black-market permits issued a year, in the world, to go big-game hunting in the Galapagos Islands. That’s where he is right now, laughing his head off and blasting away at stupid old turtles with a fifty calibre.”

“Two permits?” Buster’s ears raised. “So why are you here?”

“So we all played poker for it and Margot Mallard’s his girl for the trip!” Rhubella snapped. “Then we had a re-match and I lost again - Danforth Drake got me!”

“Ewww...” Plucky stuck his tongue out. This time nobody complained.

Babs frowned, her ears twisting together as she thought. “And if you’d have won?”

“Then I’d have won Danforth!” Rhubella snapped. “Duh!”

“And the difference is what, precisely?” Jaggi Di Speckle was scribbling in his notebook, a puzzled expression on his long muzzle. Mary was the Newshound but he was often cast in the films as “scholarly adventurer” - not in a leading role as yet, but more the kind of loyal friend last seen wounded and sacrificially holding a pass against a horde of Natives as long as the ammunition lasted while the party got away. Acme Looniversity was more diverse than most people realised; its vaults held massive stockpiles of Romance, Film Noir and War films even if the most high-profile classes did concentrate on comedy.

“The difference, horse apples, is that ... I ... Lost. There! Now you can all laugh at me.” Rhubella folded her arms defiantly. “Like I care what you think.”

“And Danforth is, exactly, what? Apart from a duck?” Jaggi had heard a lot about the ongoing rivalry between the two academies, but never met the “command squad” before. “Danforth and Margot Mallard, are they ...?”

“No relation,” Rhubella snapped.

Buster looked at Babs, a wry smile on his face. “Haven’t we heard that line before somewhere?”

“Danforth,” Rhubella considered. “Well. He has a very good car. He’s pretty well off in proper Old Money, and has a finger in a lot of very low-overhead manufacturing overseas. So he’s pretty high up the scale, I could do worse.” Her eyes scanned around the Acme toons, reading their incredulous expressions “So?”

“Do you like ‘eem?” Fifi asked brightly, her eyes shining. “Ees ‘e good to you?”

Rhubella looked at her as if the skunkette had grown an extra head. “He won me, lame-brain. Why should he bother?” Her long naked tail twitched. “Anyway, after the first night he went out to tour the Casinos up the coast, looking for some “classy feathered action”. Furred girls don’t much hold his interest. He’s not been back since.” She was silent, before looking around again. “Well? Why aren’t you laughing?”

Fifi gave a disappointed sigh. “Pauvre Rhubella.”

Buster looked at his friends. “Babs? Shirley? What do you say?”

Caffeinated neurons worked fast under a pair of long pink ears. “Rhubella. Do you want to join us instead?”

A full psychic blast from Shirley could hardly have rocked the rat back any harder. “Join you? The Acme Loo-sers? I’m staying at Danforth’s six-star hotel up on the hill not some flea-bitten beach motel. Just because I saw you in the distance and... tracked you and... heard you ... laughing and... having fun and everything ...” Her voice trailed off. Suddenly she raised her head again, her eyes defiant. “If I go with you I have to know one thing - it’s been driving us nuts for years. Your status and control over each other. Just how DO you keep score?”

There was the over-dramatised noise of wind in the trees and distant chirping crickets for half a minute while Rhubella looked from one face to another. The colour slowly drained from her face. She clapped her paws to her cheeks as realisation sunk in. “Oh, for Toon’s sake ... is that IT? Roderick hired private eyes to watch you for weeks and stole six hours time on a supercomputer to try and crack it and the answer is ... you don’t care?”

Babs gave an embarrassed grin. “You know, I always thought there was something I forgot to ask about on Day One. So, is anyone keeping score around here?”

“Only playing Astro Blaster,” Plucky quipped. Shirley smiled, her aura mirroring her.

“We’ve enough food fer sure, if you want to join us,” Shirley held out her wingtip invitingly. “And yes, it’s free.”

From her expression at first, Rhubella anticipated that as soon as she had accepted lunch the Acme crowd would sit on her and force-feed her with Thai bonnet peppers till she spontaneously combusted. But gradually she relaxed, though obviously thoughts of being slipped laxative-packed cookies were never far from her mind.

“So, this is your last trip together?” Rhubella looked around. “We’ve got dossiers on all of you, you know.”

Babs grinned. “I hope you file mine under “humour””.

"It's good to know that we're having our star profiles written already," Plucky nodded. "Did your dossier mention my three series of 'Bat-Duck the Scourge of Crime?' A stark and gritty docu-drama - my best piece of method acting though I say it myself."

"We did file that one under humour." Rhubella deadpanned.

Shirley nodded significantly at Babs and Fifi, and the Amazing Three relaxed. "It's fer sure our last trip from Acme together," the loon confirmed. "But it's you know, our first trip - together, for some of us."

Rhubella nodded, counting the obvious couples and mentally comparing them with the expensively produced dossiers that Perfecto held on their rivals. Ex- KGB personnel worked cheap these days. "Is everyone here? I know Mr. Maximilian is away on a religious pilgrimage to Fort Knox. And Miss Duff is still in hospital after she tried to *"hug and squeeze a cute punky kitty"* - that wasn't one."

"Porcupine?" Babs asked dryly.

"Porcupine," Shirley confirmed.

Rhubella did another head and tail count. "Apart from that - you're only missing Hamton Piegenthaler?"

"She knew. Everybody knew! My best friend and I never knew his real name," Plucky's grumble broke an otherwise stony silence.

"Some of us are ... missing him more than others," Buster said.

"Life 'as its rainy days," Fifi said, looking up at the clouds coming in from the ocean. "'Zis was to be the special trip of 'Amton and moi. Aftair zo many years, my mind eet was made up. On the final day - 'e is so shy, if 'e 'ad not proposed ze marriage - I would 'ave asked him. I 'ave ze ring for ze engagement sitting lonely in my purse." She sighed. "But no - now 'zat will nevaire 'appen."

"He dumped you too?" Rhubella's naked pink tail swished angrily. "Boys! Jerks, the lot of them!"

Fifi gave a sad smile. "Ah, non. Mon 'Amton, 'e gave up his own 'appiness for 'is family. Eet is sweet and romantic - but not for moi. 'Is famille, 'zey 'ave known about us for ze years. When 'e was only three 'eads high eet was no problem. A skunk girl to share ze 'omework and ze weenie-burger, yes. Zey are not liking zat we are, getting ze serious."

The rat cast her a sour look. "You Acme brats. Haven't you ever heard of lawyers? You could sue the fat off him for Breach-of-Promise, and his parents for ... whatever, that's a lawyer's job. I've read the dossiers on that family ... a Perfecto lawyer could serve them up for you in great steaming rashers. At least you'd get something out of Hamton."

"I 'ave. Five years of ze 'appy memories. And 'Amton - 'e is foravaire a friend." Fifi raised an eyebrow. "Is money and winning all you evaire think about?"

"Asked the loser ..." Rhubella snapped. She looked into Fifi's eyes, her own full of confusion. "What is it you Acme toons WANT of me? Just say it."

Fifi looked her over, the rodent glowering and sad. "My mentor Pepe Le Pew, 'e is a very wise toon. 'E say - *"in love and friendship, what you give is what you get"*. I 'ave ze most generous friends."

Large rat ears blushed. "You're not joking. Right?" Rhubella sat down heavily. She felt a strange and unpleasant feeling in a little-used part of her spirit, as she recalled all too clearly how she had lived at Perfecto and where it had got her. "You're actually not joking." She stroked her tail-tip nervously. For a minute she was silent, her eyes on the ground. "Fifi. I ... I think I'd like that. I'd like to try."

Fifi smiled, looking out at where Babs and Buster were happily chasing each other around the beach with firehose-calibre water pistols. "You are welcome."

A Toon rabbit retained nature's excellent sense of approaching danger, which years at Acme pitted against screen villains in and out of class had honed keenly. Although Buster lacked Shirley's ability to read an unfriendly aura, he could feel his ears itching a warning. Suddenly he pointed at a party of tall toons in bright yellow chemical suits. "Fifi - they look as if they mean business - and they're coming our way." The dozen Hazmat-suited toons had "County hazard control" stencilled on their backs, and were waving what looked like small vacuum cleaners as they methodically worked their way up the coast.

"They could just be, like, channelling DEVO," Shirley suggested innocently.

"I recognise those moves, Shirley, some of us take Predator Evasion class. They're tracking a scent trail. Looks like someone doesn't appreciate Fifi's perfume," Buster frowned. "And I think there's too many of them for Shirley's mind trick."

Rhubella gave a small smile. "My hotel's air conditioned. Very much so."

Fifi sniffed. "Well, good for you." The weather was getting close and humid, and despite Mary's predictions there might be more than loon-powered lightning that evening.

The rat gave an exasperated snort. "It works both ways, Miss Hazmat. Come up till the heat's off, they won't find you in there" She sighed. "Since Danforth took off, I've not t...talked to anyone in three days." Hotel staff did not count, she thought - then her tail twitched guiltily. Did the Acme toons think that way?

"Won't the desk staff notice?" Buster asked. "A post-grad ninja couldn't sneak a free guest into our place."

"Not that you'd want to..." Plucky grumbled.

Rhubella gave a tight smile. "In my kind of hotel, rabbit, you get staff service exactly when and only when you want. Other times ..." she held up an electronic card "private street entrance and elevator, duh? Private rooms are just that. You could host a military coup in there and nobody's going to object - they just put it on the bill."

"Danforth is a duck, so he puts everything on his bill," Buster mused. "Logical."

"Hostiles incoming, estimate three minutes to impact," Babs intoned. "We need a diversion. Plucky, I need your beach towel - I've got mine here. Fifi, wrap them round your tail."

"Eet is not ze disguise that would score ze marks in Professair Coyote's classes," Fifi shrugged, but did as Babs suggested. "And now what?"

"And now ... Buster, kiss her. Now. Kiss her for me." Babs' eyes were alight in fiendish glee as she looked on. "Hostiles, two minutes and closing."

"'Tis a far, far better thing I do, than ever I have done before," Buster proclaimed dramatically, stepping up into the skunkette's willing arms. He had learned that Babs' schemes were generally insane enough to work.

Rhubella looked on in shocked surprise as the rabbit and the skunk kissed - first softly, then passionately. Buster held her close, his fingers caressing the skunkette's ears gently, something she had showed him to do the night before. Fifi's tail twitched, and the towels began to fume with a virulent yellow-green vapour soaking through them. The quartz sand on the beach began to corrode. "Babs? But I thought he was, your..."

"My buck - who I trust with Anything, shave-tail." The pink bunny grabbed the towels, gauging the wind direction from the toxic plume that was wilting bushes and boulders alike. "Rhubella! Up the hill with Fifi. Plucky! Take this, go North, lay a trail. I go south. Shirley? Mindsmog the hunters, jam them all you can. See you back at the hotel tonight!" She began to accelerate and with a cry of "Engaging After-bunner!" turned into a red-shifted blur and vanished, a visible green skunk contrail following her and settling on the ground as she wound up to full speed. In a few seconds the double bang of a regular sonic boom echoed across the hills. The louder bang of a Toon supersonic one followed a few seconds later.

The green duck winced as the corrosively dripping towel scorched his feathers. Flapping it as if it was scalding hot, he dashed up the beach road. "Whoo-hoo! Whoo-hoo! Whoo-hoo!" he yelped, running in a crazy leaping zigzag out of sight.

Shirley cast a smile after him, her powder-blue ego separating and floating after the duck like a guardian angel carrying serious psychic fire support. She looked down at the blue Toon puddle on the floor that was slowly reconstituting; evidently Fifi had given quite as much as she got. "Buster? Is it just me or - are the vibrations getting better around here?"

"So, this is it. It's not much, but it's home for now." Half an hour later Rhubella clapped her paws, and the lights in the suite came on to reveal a palatial set of rooms - the bathroom alone was twice the size of Fifi's whole hotel room, and tastefully furnished in gold and marble. "Usual stuff - the thousand channel TV is all that wall, the room service is five minutes guaranteed for meals - cleanup maids arrive in two minutes." She cast a glance at Fifi. "Impressive or what?"

Fifi shrugged. "I live in ze junkyard. I 'ave the bath in ze tarpaulin when eet rains. I am not 'zhere for long most days, I am out with Babs, and Shirley, and 'Amton and all ze othairs."

"Well, tonight you can do things in style. Danforth's treat." Rhubella paused, looking at Fifi's expression. "You don't care about all this, do you?"

"Zhe gold-plated bath taps? Zhe chandeliers? I care about friends, Mademoiselle le platinum-card," Fifi looked at her steadily. "Ze telephone - now zat is a luxury I will say yes to. Eet is looking dark outside. I 'ope Babs and Bustair and ze rest are safe."

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Five minutes on the phone to Babs left Fifi looking more relaxed. "La! 'Zey are all back safe at ze 'otel. And just in time - here eet comes, ze storm. I shall be wet when I return to ze room. Pas de problem." Fifi put the handset down and threw the curtains wide, looking out at the dramatic skies. "Heh! 'zat Babs, she lay ze false trail all ze way to Tijuana. She say, "when ze bunny speed comes up till ze shock-waves zey lean right back - it covers ze distance." Formidable, non?" With that she went in to shower, noticing with interest the wide choice of Tiny Toons Bar Soap that the hotel offered its guests for their entertainment. Half an hour later she emerged, freshly groomed and happily humming a tune. Outside night was falling early as the clouds moved in.

The hotel was perched four hundred feet up the hillside, with a wide view over the bay where a storm front was rolling in as evening fell. A brilliant burst of lightning flashed less than a mile away, silhouetting the skunkette in stark black and white. "Magnifique!" Fifi shouted against the thunder, her eyes wide and her tail

swishing in excitement as she stood by the picture window, the lights dimmed in the room behind her.

"Could you ... c...close the c...curtains? Please?" A small voice sounded behind her.

Fifi turned, her tail waving in the lightning to see Rhubella looking lost in the middle of the Empress-sized bed that could have accommodated a dozen of her, clutching her knees tight to her chest and with the silk blanket pulled up to her neck. "You are not liking ze thunder? But it ees Nature's free light show! So grand!"

Rhubella winced. "I can't cope with it. I had two years of the best psycho-analysis there is - nothing worked. At home I have a soundproof room in the cellar I have to go to when it storms."

"Pauvre Rhubella. I am no Doctair ... but I know when it is no time to be alone." Fifi sat down on the bed. Even a yard away she could feel Rhubella shivering violently. "May I?" At Rhubella's mute nod she relaxed companionably beside her, sitting up with her back resting on the huge headboard. Fond memories of sleepovers with Babs and Shirley came back as a comforting glow. They had camped out in forest clearings smaller than the bed here, and still had room for a campfire. "In ze junkyard eet much louder." She giggled. "Zhey say such bad things about girls 'oo spend time on ze back seats of cars. I live on one - but without ze company."

Rhubella looked at her. "How do you manage? Living all alone like that?"

"I am nevair alone," Fifi said quietly. "I thought I was so when 'Amton 'e must tell moi au revoir, that night. But 'e ees thinking of me always. And ze othairs. Does Roderick not do zat for you? Hold you when you need 'im?"

"We go to the best restaurants. We play golf on the finest greens. We've cruised across the Caribbean." Rhubella's defiance faded under Fifi's steady gaze. She swallowed. "Does he hold me in a thunderstorm? Of course he doesn't. He hates weakness - in everyone. He hates till you can smell it in his musk. He tries to overlook it in me though, sometimes."

"Charming, non?" Fifi's snout wrinkled. She hugged the rat close, remembering what Buster had done for her on the coach over. In half an hour, Rhubella's shivering stopped. Fifi smiled. When she fell asleep, Fifi would tuck her in and head back downhill to her own hotel - it was still pouring outside, but the one comfort her room had was a hot shower. Not quite big enough for two, as she and Buster had found out that morning - or rather, too small for two and a half including her tail. Babs and Buster would have far less trouble should they try it in their own room, as she knew Shirley and Plucky already had in theirs.

The bed certainly was more comfortable in the six-star hotel than the zero-star. Fifi found herself getting sleepy, holding Rhubella in her arms. Just as she was about to mentally shrug and fall asleep there, her ears pricked up. Years of living alone in a junkyard had honed her danger reflexes at certain sounds and especially stealthy footsteps approaching; apart from her natural scent as a defence she kept a truck tyre iron handy under her back seat bed and had needed it several times. Gently, she nudged Rhubella awake while briefly squeezing the rat's jaw shut in a mime-show to be quiet.

"So!" The lights had dimmed, but they clicked to full as Danforth Drake entered the room. "I leave her alone and what do I find when I get back?"

Coming next – Chapter 3 – "Duck and Cover!"

Danforth Drake stood by the door, the avian's feathers bristling in fury. He tossed his brownish quiff of head-feathers back as he glared at the two Toons. "Oh, really, Rhubella. I'd have thought even you could do better than ... That. A no-account skunk. A hobo from a trash heap. I thought only Acme would take in rubbish like that!"

Rhubella sprang to her paws, her chisel teeth gleaming and her eyes wide. "Yeah? Well, mister high-roller, where were you when I needed you? Fifi's kind, and generous, and ... she doesn't just take. She gives. And shares."

The duck raised an eyebrow. "Where was I? I've got six clothing factories in Indonesia that I don't have to hang around being nice to either. I own them, and that's all they have to know. Forgotten our card game, Miss "paw-full of threes and twos"?"

"Eenough of 'zis!" Fifi's fur was sticking out as if the lightning had struck her. "Danforth - If you theenk she is yours consider 'er ... stolen!" Danforth had been holding his breath obviously expecting a scent attack. Instead Fifi wound up with everything in her from the toes upwards and launched a right uppercut like a thunderbolt that knocked the Toon's beak clean off and launched him back through the open doorway and ten yards back into the emergency stairwell, where he hit the far wall with a splat like a mud-pie and slowly oozed down.

"And eef you come back, Mistair Duck - I weel give you orange sauce with 'zat!" Fifi shouted, scooping up the duck's fallen card key and slamming the door shut, setting the manual bolt.

Rhubella looked on, her eyes wide. "Fifi," she stammered "I... I owe you one."

Fifi Lafume smiled, her breathing slowing to normal. "No, mon amie," she smiled, looking at her. "You owe nothing. 'Zat was a gift. Mon plasir."

Rhubella nodded. Her eyes dropped. "You're the only one who's ever fought for me before," she said in a small voice. "I mean, for me. Not - to get me."

"Pfui. 'Im ? At ze junkyard I wipe my muddy paws on such. And 'zey say it is le skunks who steenk!"

"And rats." Rhubella looked outside; the rain was running in sheets down the windows. Distant thunder rolled around the hills. "Stay here. Please? You'll get soaked to the skin out there."

Fifi hesitated, and nodded. "For ze night - I weel stay. Zat duck may 'ave another key." She raised an eyebrow. "Ruby, tell me - 'ad you been "*Miss pawfull of ze kings and aces*" in zat game - 'ow would eet 'ave been different, you and Danforth?"

Rhubella blushed. "Nobody's ever called me Ruby before. Even Mother doesn't. She'd say it's undignified." She hesitated. "We'd have done - well, exactly the same, I suppose. But I'd have called the shots. That was one good thing - even though we're Toons, ducks and rats don't have to worry about me hatching a duck egg. He'd have done everything I said, or I... I'd have thrown him out, I guess."

Fifi's snout wrinkled. Toon genetics were complex considering they did not actually have genes as such. But things usually worked as if they did - and she knew Maria Mandarin at least had inherited some of her outstanding features passed through the female genetic line from a maternal grandmother who had fur rather than feathers. "And ze cards in ze first place? Zat was ze boys' idea, I theenk. 'Ow could you say yes to eet?"

Rhubella was silent for a few seconds. "The card game was Margot's idea. Our tutor Hatta Mari was a top Secret Agent, she teaches us seduction and control, and she's Margot's personal mentor. She'll do anything, she's so sophisticated. But I added a few details. It was a perfectly fair game, everyone cheated."

"Such sweetness they teach you, at Perfecto. With ze status thing, you can all four enjoy ze cheating on each othair and all ees fair and legal?" Fifi felt her scent glands arm themselves. Margot Mallard was the Alpha Female of the feathered girls at Perfecto much as Rhubella was for the furred toon girls. After scanning Margot's aura once and setting it as the standard for "*Like, Pure Evil*" Shirley had needed to ritually purify herself for a week to get her aura centred again.

Rhubella looked exasperated. "That's just, the way it is, you know? If you're not up, you're down, if you're down you're trampled."

Fifi tsked, shaking her head sadly. "Who needs ze friends, when you can be ze pair of mutual trophies? Now, 'ere is one Precaution we will 'ave to take, vous et moi." She looked round, and saw Rhubella's whiskers bristle in fright. "Ah, non - not like zat, what do you take moi for?" She pulled out a large Toon special-effect hole from her overnight bag and unrolled it on the carpet just in front of the door; selecting a nut from one of the snack baskets she tossed it in and listened with satisfaction as it rattled down out of sight. "Voila! Eef Danforth 'e comes sneaking in with ze spare key - Au revoir California, duck! I theenk 'zis model exits in ze Carlsbad Caverns. Ze deep, unexplored caverns." She moved the rug to cover the hole and put the "Do not Disturb" sign outside the door to deter zealous cleaners. "And now - to sleep."

Rhubella's muzzle held the ghost of a smile. "It's been a long day," she agreed. While Fifi phoned Babs to tell her not to expect her back till breakfast, Rhubella changed out of her day clothes. Her designer outfit would have bought a term's tuition at Acme Looniversity.

"You wear as much as a Toon 'uman, ze shoes aside" Fifi marvelled. "Sacre bleu! A toon girl who wears lingerie?" Suddenly her ears went down as she caught a full view of Rhubella. "'Zat duck ... did 'e ...?"

Rhubella blinked, as she picked up her yellow silk night-gown. She looked down. "Umm, no. Or yes, but ... I've always looked like this anyway." She cast her gaze over the luxuriously furred skunkette. "Not everyone can get away with bare fur. Some of us just can't "conceal" at all - you know?"

"Mais oui. Mary, she is ze same. My 'Hamton also." She sighed, then shook her head. "'C'est la vie. And now - to sleep."

Somewhere in the middle night, the storm returned. Rain lashed the palm trees, and dampened the spirits of two otherwise waterproofed parties from the County Hazard office who gave up the trail two dozen miles from where they had started to follow it. Had they only known, the scent-soaked towels they had been following were already soaked in tomato juice and hanging on a hotel balcony to air and wash clean, not two hundred yards from their start point.

Four hundred feet up the hillside it was that much closer to the thunder. Rhubella lay awake and shivering, her eyes wide. Some ten feet away from her Fifi Lafume lay fast asleep as the triple-glazed windows rattled with the storm's fury.

Rhubella looked at the skunkette, her form picked out in the flickering lightning. Fifi was deeply asleep, curled up in her own luxurious tail and evidently dreaming with a small smile on her face. Her eyes twitched under long-lashed lids.

*So that's what it looks like, she told herself glumly, sleeping the sleep of the just. We used to laugh at that idea. Every cent I own couldn't buy that smile from her.* She remembered the film scenes where the giant reptiles and insects waded through the city and every weapon the Japanese military possessed bounced right off; suddenly she knew how the troops felt. Something seemed to snap inside her, as if she had been skating on expensively groomed ice and a great void beneath had unexpectedly opened up beneath her paws. Rhubella lay down, just close enough that a few strands of Fifi's tail fur touched her. *To see her smile for me. Why do I want to see that so much?* Much to her own surprise, although the thunder still rolled outside - in a few minutes she was asleep.

Fifi awoke, stretching luxuriously; unlike her last room the bed could have accommodated her whole class. For a second she lay with her eyes closed, her ears and nose active. She could hear the sound of soft breathing, whistling slightly through rodent teeth - much as it had the morning before with Buster asleep beside her.

*Ohh la la, Fifi felt her smile growing as she realised that Rhubella had unconsciously drawn her tail over her like a coverlet Fifi, she is getting to be la belle of ze ball on zis trip. Nevair ze waiting for ze dance. Bustair, 'e could punch my dance-card any time 'e desires - nevair would I say no.* She was quite used to sleep-overs with Babs, Shirley and Mary - even with Sweetie-pie and Marcia on occasion. Somehow this trip was different.

Opening her eyes, she looked at the spacious room. Bright sunlight was streaming in through the windows; outside the coast sparkled freshly washed by the rain. Gently disentangling her tail from the sleeping rat's grasp, Fifi slid out of bed and rolled up the portable hole by the door. She was still shedding purple fur, and the maids cleaning the room would have enough to do without dodging booby-traps meant for Danforth. One of the other avian Perfecto students she had seen was a pure booby by birth, but it looked as if Danforth had managed it purely by inclination.

"Wake up, ze sleepy-ead," she called over to Rhubella. "'Ze smart money says, 'zat duck 'ee will be closing this room account on us today."

Rhubella sat up, her eyes wide. "He will! He'll probably ask for the ultra-heavy-duty "rock-star clean-up", too."

"'Ze clean-up?"

"Uhhm, like - after a rock-star's party ... there's toon groupies and hangers-on passed out all over the place and everything, you know? These hotels hire in special teams who ... just take them out and drop them off a few miles away. In the swamp, probably. Danforth's studying Star School, we all are, and they teach that there." Rhubella grabbed her clothes, as if expecting a respectful steel-shod boot at the door any second. Perfecto did not teach toon gags and cheap laughs; many of their graduates became Hollywood lawyers and acquired well-paid laughs.

"Star School? I 'ope 'zat duck 'e has an extensive career in dozens of ze films." Fifi's voice was low. "'Zat we see 'im - all over."

"You do?" A puzzled rat looked at her.

"Mais oui! Bit-parts in ze slasher flicks - duck bits and parts all ovaire ze screen and may ze studio Janitor never find all of zem!" Fifi looked around, surveying the room. "Ze 'eavies, 'zey are not 'ere yet. All 'zis is still on ze tab, non?" She had noticed an elegant gold-edged menu on the bedside table the night before, and reached for it. "Ze six star Room Service, and breakfast, oui! For ze first time evair - I shall dine on ze dearest dishes on ze

menu!"

As Rhubella had boasted, the food arrived in less than five minutes. Fifi had ordered double portions of fresh oysters and abalone for them both, and a picnic-basket suitable for making a rapid exit with. Her mouth watered as she looked at the silver trays that appeared. "Formidable! 'Ze shellfish I eat most days are l'escargots of Acme woods. Nevair will 'zey appear in the Michelin starred restaurants." Her tail flicked. "And ze chef at ze beach motel is I think ze reject from Weenie-burger."

"A dozen oysters for breakfast." Rhubella strained an ear. There was a silence outside, but a hotel with this level of discretion would not permit even the most uncompromising "clean-up squad" to run up the stairs in noisy boots shouting commands. They would wear dark suits and approach discreetly via the service area, polished shoes quiet over lush carpeting. "That's ... quite something."

Fifi savoured the oysters, taking her time and swallowing them whole. Her ears drooped for a second. "With 'Amton, this is a meal I could nevair share. La reputation ees they give – energy and encouragement to a shy lovail. Eet is something 'e needed. But with 'Amton ... impossible. Shellfish are not being ze kosher."

Rhubella squeezed lemon over the freshly opened oysters, and suddenly found her appetite was ravenous. "I've never had this for breakfast before - though I guess I could afford it every day if I wanted."

"Where did it come from, ze money of your family?" Fifi asked as they ate, interested.

Rhubella shrugged. "You know when you're walking on a city street and you tread on one of those loose rocking paving stones? The ones that shoot filthy water all over your legs when you step on one edge? My family patented them back when Taft was President - they had the clout with Tammany Hall to get millions of them installed all over the cities. Mostly outside Government offices, churches, all the important buildings where you really need clean outfits. We've been living on the profits and interest ever since."

"But - once 'zey were put on ze street, what are ze profits?" Fifi wondered.

The rat looked a little shamefaced. "Well, none. Not from them, exactly. Did I mention we also started with a chain of emergency dry-cleaners?"

The skunkette sighed. "Ruby, mon amie. Tell me. When a Perfecto graduate she thinks to marry, do zey first ask ze lawyers before ze boyfriend?"

"Of course! You should see Margot's pre-nuptial agreement, she's been working on it for years. Long before she was dating anyone. It's got secret clauses hidden in it that makes nuclear waste look like cream cheese. It's brutal! Professor Hatta Mari gave her top marks in our whole year for it." Her voice was full of admiration. "Margot was grinning for a week when she managed to shock her own family lawyer with the traps she'd laid - and it takes a lot to do that to one of our legal staff." Rhubella's voice trailed off, as she looked at Fifi's expression. "What? It wouldn't even ... cross your minds, at Acme?"

"Ruby," Fifi looked at her, shaking her head sadly. "Hatta Mari, zat pigeon is not ze good influence on you. Eat up ze abalone and pack ze bags. I shall take ze picnic basket. We are, taking ze petite road-trip. By ze service elevator."

Breakfast up the hill finished without too much haste as Fifi savoured the only six-star meal of her life. She gave a happy sigh, replacing the silver covers to the dishes. "Et, voila! Now for ze Great Escape. We shall vanish like ze smoke in ze wind and ... mon Dieu!" She had seen the pile of designer suitcases Rhubella was cramming expensive clothes into. "Ruby! You were, planning on ze setting up house with Danforth?"

"It's only what I normally take for the weekend," Rhubella protested. "Some of us have more than a spare hair ribbon to pack."

"I 'ave a friend who could teach you much," Fifi shook her head despairingly. "Jaggi, 'e must learn what ze Action characters do for real. One petit rucksack and a gallon of water, and 'e could 'ave walked 'ere from Acme Acres." Jaggi and Mary were planning to spend two days returning on skates over the hills, which would certainly be an Adventure and the first one of its kind they were having together. As a Roving Reporter paired with an Action toon, Mary hoped to have a lot of Action to report on.

"That's all." Rhubella clicked the ninth suitcase shut. "The rest of this in here is all Danforth's." A wicked grin washed over her snout. "Fifi! You're a skunk. You could ..."

"I could, what, exactement?" Fifi asked coldly, resting her hands on her hips and looking Rhubella straight in the eyes.

"Umm, nothing." Rhubella felt a shiver running down her spine. *I've blown it. I hope I haven't. Use every trick you have to defend yourself, yes - and the portable hole if anyone tried sneaking in when we were asleep, fine. But - she didn't spray Danforth when he was knocked out - or his clothes when he's not here. She really wouldn't do that. Roderick would if he could. So would any of them.* She gulped, as she saw Fifi's expression relax. She had quite clearly thought "Them" about Perfecto when the day before she would certainly have said "Us."

"They can't throw us out if we're already leaving," she realised. "No need to sneak out the back, Fifi. I can have half of these cases sent home direct from the hotel front desk - and there's nothing Danforth can do about it."

Just keep the overnight bags - and I'm ready to go."

Fifi looked out of the window to see a large unmarked black van pulling up outside the service entrance, and her tail twitched. "Good! Because ze welcome 'ere, eet 'as just ran out." She made one last raid on the bathroom; Rhubella had assured her that items such as the soap were always thrown away every day whether they had been used or not.

Ten minutes later two figures struggled down the road from the hotel, a heavy suitcase in each paw. "Eh, Ruby, ees it true zat your family 'zey come from above ze Arctic Circle?" Locking and jamming the door before leaving it might have gained them all the getaway time they needed. Having Danforth billed for a broken-down door would be an added bonus especially had he requested the room be vacated with extreme prejudice.

Rhubella paused, panting for breath - Perfecto had an elegant and well-equipped gym but she had not made enough use of it that year. "No ... Boston. Why?"

Fifi's teeth showed in a fierce grin. "Why? Alors, your "overnight bags" 'zey 'ave enough for ze slumber party at ze North Pole for ze three months darkness!"

"Oh. Sorry. I'm not used to carrying things around myself." A thought struck her. "Where are we going?"

"Heh. You are at Perfecto for ze education comprehensive, non? Eet will be comprehensive if you see how ze othair 'alf zey live." Fifi had phoned the beach motel and checked they still had spare rooms - then before quitting Danforth's room spent ten minutes on the telephone to her family in France, much to their delight. She generally rationed herself to one call a semester, plus the Looniversity's T-mail. "I 'ope you enjoyed ze breakfast as much as I did - ze next fresh shellfish we see on ze menu are ones we catch ourselves!"

Down at the beach zero-star hotel Babs was waking up late, unused to the quiet. With a whole house-full of siblings her mornings at home tended to resemble waking to a street riot outside her room, and her alarm clock was set to get her to class in plenty of time. Every day she and Buster walked in together, sometimes hardly saying a word but just sharing quiet companionship. Some things had changed over the years, but not their walk in to Acme Loo. That past Winter with the growth of their cold-season fur had come a sign of change for both of them - instead of two "spikes" of fur on their cheek-ruffs they both now had three, the same as Professor Bugs and his wife Honey Bunny.

Babs yawned. She had been definitely tired the night before from running decoy. "What a rush! Tijuana never knew what hit them. Ten straight minutes on full After-bunner, I must have drawn speed lines all over the map. There goes the calories from a few carrot-cakes!" It had taken thirty miles over Sonora just to turn around. The Road Runner could beat her on the track by about half a mach number but he was skinnier by far, had decades of practice and hard scaly toes that only an avian girl could call remotely cute.

She looked down at her slim pink and white figure as she groomed her fur. Though she wore a skirt for effect, in fact she could just as modestly have done without it as Shirley and Fifi did. There was nothing actually visible besides toony smooth fur. "I'll never look like that overstuffed Julie Bruin ... but not bad, Babsie, not bad at all." She glanced at the open door to her balcony; Buster's was next door and it would have been just as easy for him to step over to her room as it had been for him to visit Fifi. Her balcony door had stayed invitingly open and yet the night had been conspicuous by a complete lack of blue bunny practicing his Romeo.

"Oh well. If the mountain won't come to the bunny, the bunny must go to the mountain," she grumbled, putting on her favourite yellow shirt and lavender skirt, carefully tying the ribbons around her ears before stepping onto the balcony. Fifi had whispered an account of how her own ribbon had been gently untied, and thinking about that still had Babs' tail twitching.

"Buster? Are you up yet? Of have you gone downstairs already? If you're not there don't bother to answer." She resisted the temptation to peek around the corner with her grooming-mirror.

"Just a second!" Buster's voice came, sounding muffled as if he was putting his shirt on. Babs smiled - if she had used the mirror she might have shared the sight that Fifi had so enjoyed. Fifi had done her best to repay Babs with a full and glowing account. Babs currently felt glowing, but far from full.

"Hi there, Toonsters," Buster Bunny addressed the clear morning as he stepped out onto the balcony, his red pullover freshly brushed. "And it's another fine day for the beach. Sleep well, Babs?"

There was a pink blur as Babs spin-changed into a sultry beauty, a gold lame dress falling sheer to her toes. "I want to be alone...." she husked, then went back to her normal voice - "Not!" She hopped over the dividing wall to his territory. Raising an eyebrow at Buster, she suddenly pulled him close to her. "Ah, mon cherie," she imitated Fifi, or possibly her mentor Pepe Le Pew. "I want you bad - in ze worst possible way."

"The worst possible way. Hmm" Buster considered the matter. "Standing up - in a hammock?"

Babs' eyes popped open wide in delight. "Nice, Blue-boy. I was thinking, backwards on roller-skates, but that's good too. We'll try both."

"And this is before you have sugar for breakfast..." Buster raised an eyebrow. "It must be catching, from Shirley. Some of that lightning last night was coming from indoors."



Babs pressed close to him. "Buster... have you ever ... had a near-death experience from ecstatic exhaustion?"

"Gee, I must have missed that class," Buster felt his tail twitching. Babs was back in her native mode - she knew that however seductive her spin-change outfits might be, this was the genuine article and the one that had the greatest effect on him. Babs being anyone else was not a pale shadow on Babs being Babs.

A pink and white bunny gave a predatory smile that a month before she would never have guessed she could have copied from Shirley. "Blue boy ... this time tomorrow - the answer will forever be "yes"."

"You Have caught it from Shirley. And I thought it was Oreo energy not Orgone you ran on." Buster stepped back. "Babs ... you know how I feel about you. But ... once we cross that line - we can't ever go back and we won't ever stop."

"Sounds good to me." Babs' long pink ear caressed Buster's blue one. "Mmm. I've heard you're a good Bun Scout. Always prepared. Good at untying knots. Especially undoing girls' ribbons." She wriggled. "I've got two. For you to undo. We've got all day. Babs wants to play." She looked at the narrow room; it had a bed, a shower and Buster in it and that was all she wanted. The bed and the shower were strictly optional.

Just at that moment Buster spotted two figures coming down the hillside road. "Look! Fifi and Rhubella! And a tonne of luggage. It looks like they'll need help with it."

"Ooooooh." Babs stamped her foot-paws in irritation. "Rhubella can afford a taxi. She can afford a trucking company. Buster - just what is wrong with me? You can keep Fifi company well enough ..." her eyes crossed. "Very, very well." She hesitated. "We could ... start easy. Like you did with her - but I promise I won't blow the doors off the room." Her eyes flashed fire. "Much." She faced him with a smile. "You've nothing to worry about. With a family burrow as packed with baby bunnies as mine is - do you think I've not thought about that? I've been prepared since the day we started going steady." She raised an eyebrow. "I bet Rhubella bills Roderick for her precautions whether she gets to need them or not."

"Umm... Fifi needs us out there." On the road above, Rhubella had dropped another suitcase.

"Blue-boy ... I need US. In here. Now would be nice. Why not?" Suddenly Babs' eyes went wide as a thought hit her. The bunnies had worked for years as a natural comedy team, their chemistry exactly fitting the roles they had shaped for each other. Babs knew that comedic chemistry would change one way or another as they got closer - hopefully for the better but perhaps not. Perhaps ruining everything. "Plucky got exactly what he always asked for, and half the time now he's wishing he hadn't. You're worried it'll be the same - for you? And we'll only find out too late?"

"No, Babs. I'm not worried for me. For you." Buster kissed her.

For a second Babs continued to seethe. "I can walk away from a grand piano hitting me from cometary orbit just as well as Plucky or Calamity can. Just how fragile do you think I am, Blue-boy?" But then she relaxed, slumping bonelessly as she melted into his embrace. "Buster - you DO know how to turn a girl down." She heaved a sigh. "You should practice less. Well, if we've nothing better to do let's see what Fifi and Miss Preppie Princess have been up to."

Five minutes later, an overheated rat was putting her suitcases down in a hotel foyer of the Brutal Western Minimalist architectural school, wondering if her arms would ever contract back to their usual length. She waved her credit card as she checked in, and pinged the reception bell. "Bell-hop!"

An eerie silence fell. Outside a tumbleweed drifted past.

"Oops." Rhubella clapped a paw to her muzzle, embarrassed. "Is there a lift?"

The receptionist, a dusty-looking goat toon, gestured towards the end of the corridor. "There 'tiz. But we don't use it ourselves. Not since ... the accident."

"I'll walk." Rhubella picked up the first two designer cases, and headed towards the stairs where she spotted a familiar pair. "Babs! Buster! I'm moving in."

"Good to see you. Fifi - shall I take that?" Buster grabbed the other two from Fifi.

Fifi smiled. "Bustair - always ze Gentleman."

Babs Bunny shook her head ruefully. "Sometimes too much. I'll tell you later."

The hotel rooms being far too small for a general meeting, the Acme toons assembled by the pool for the second day.

"This is Rhubella - Some of you have met her before. For this trip - let's say she's an exchange student," Buster waved down protests. "Yes, I know. But we've had Japanese toons and European Film Noir toons here before - we all learned from each other. Rhubella has things to share."

Plucky's eyes went starry. "Perfecto cheerleader skills. Rah. Tons of money. Yah. Things she wants to share."

"This is Plucky. Intact feathers, unbroken bones. Some remaining sanity. Things you want to keep,

Plucky?" Shirley relaxed lazily, keeping a firm eye on the green drake.

"This is Shirley. Mind like a haunted house that goes on for miles ... and the rest of it's like the Emperor Ming's radium power station," Plucky caught her gaze, as if daring her. "Complete with slaves toiling in the heat."

"At least I've got room in there to build one," Shirley retorted. "Believe me, guys - the mental 'mansions' he's got in there, a hillbilly would have torn down to build a proper shack."

"Those two needle each other like Sumo porcupines, but I'm sure there's a point in it somewhere," Babs said. "And this is Sweetie Pie." She looked at the tiny pink canary. "Ooh, she makes a jalapeno pickle seem sweet. The law of opposites kicks in for any toon getting stuck with a name like that." One of their European transfer students the year before, Morgrenoth the Dark Destroyer, had turned out to be a perfectly light-hearted comic who was admittedly a disappointment to his family.

"Yeah," Plucky grumbled. "Toon dynamite is legitimate in class. With Sweetie it's toon dynamite - with broken glass and six-inch nails wrapped around it."

"Just for starters," Sweetie gave a malicious chuckle that was as disturbing in its way as squeezing a rubber bath ducky and hearing the tones of Darth Vader from it. "Ever seen a fuel-air blast using enriched Dip fuel? It'll wipe out a toon down to the model sheet. Anyway - you're not going to sneak the secret formula for Weenie-burgers back to Perfecto or anything?"

Rhubella pulled a face. "Weenie Burger? You pulled a good one on us that one time we went there. I don't know how you managed it, but you got us served something like the rejects from a plastic recycling factory."

There was a dead silence. Plucky nonchalantly pulled out and flicked a yo-yo, and Babs looked innocently up at the high clouds. Shirley practiced her serenity.

"Let's guess. It wasn't a trick. It's ... really like that?" A naked rodent tail dropped like a slack firehose. "We have a proper chef at Perfecto. You skip Looniversity meals because ... Weenie Burger is better?"

Calamity Coyote held up a sign; *Weenie Burgers contribute to science! I have discovered 3 previously unknown forms of matter in their makeup. The "Happy Baby Puppy-Face Meal" currently defies the best Earth or Martian scientific analysis.*

"Welcome to our world, Rhubella," Buster gave a deep bow. "As they say - you're welcome to it."

While Shirley and Babs went up to change into their swimming costumes, Plucky looked from Rhubella to Fifi then back again, as if the coin had just dropped in his imagination. "You two? I mean, last night like you and ... you ? As in, together?" His eyes bulged slightly.

"Le sigh. Ruby, 'zis is Plucky. Ze duck with ze mind like ze archaeology site. Shirley, she dig through ze mud and rubbish to see if anything is of value down zhere. Moi, I am not betting one Euro cent at any odds." Fifi's tail swished.

Rhubella squeezed Fifi's paw gratefully. "Last night - thank you for - Everything." She smiled, facing Fifi and winking at her unseen by Plucky. "It was wonderful. Have you - ever done that before with another girl?"

Fifi saw the duck's tongue starting to hang out, and stifled a giggle. She recalled sending Danforth for his short ballistic flight, and nodded vigorously recalling the times she had defended herself before. "Mais certainement! I 'ave done as much in ze junkyard many times. Eet sometimes involves - ze tyre irons."

There was a moan and a thud as Plucky fainted.

"He's probably practicing playing dead, for when Shirley gets back," Buster offered.

"Ah, Plucky," Babs sighed. "This is the duck who spent a month telling everybody there was no such rabbit as Honey Bunny. Just because Professor Bugs has sometimes done a pretty good female form..."

"Which often happens to look rather like Honey Bunny..." Buster reminded her. "Nobody knew he was copying her."

"Imitation, being like, the sincerest form of flattery," Shirley put in.

"Well, yes. And Plucky insisted that they'd never been seen on film together. Even if they were - with the Special Effects classes Professor Bugs teaches, that wouldn't prove much." Babs gave Rhubella a ruthless grin. "I let Plucky bet me every red cent against me being wrong. I was a bridesmaid at Honey and Professor Bugs' wedding, while Plucky was in shock and poverty..."

"Earth girls are Difficult," Marcia Martian shook her head wonderingly. "No wonder they call you all Space Aliens." It was difficult to see her features since apart from her orange-red curly hair and long-lashed eyes she had none clearly visible under her Roman-style helmet. She presumably had a mouth somewhere as she spoke, breathed and ate - at least she devoured things. Mars was an ancient and dying world and having being brought up on recycled food and water substitutes the Acme Looniversity cuisine held no terrors for her. They at least had real water except on Tuesdays.

*Life does get complex.* Calamity Coyote confirmed. He had been friends with the Martian girl since as a fellow scientist she had been the first to identify the Mystery Meat in the Acme cafeteria - it had come from a life form only she of the class was familiar with. His nose blushed in embarrassment, and he pulled out a sheaf of what looked like technical diagrams. *Marcia. You had certain - technical questions?*

Marcia's blush manifested outside her helmet, as she unrolled a rival set of her own. They appeared to be a cross between a football game plan and the inner workings of a mutant pinball table. "Like this?" She offered the first diagram. Calamity stared hard at it deep in thought, turned it upside down, contemplated again and shook his head.

He proffered one of his own efforts, which seemed to combine an industrial building's plumbing blueprint with a tango. *For your consideration - perhaps this?* His sign was tinged in embarrassed pink. Marcia's eyes went wide. Her complexion at home was regarded as having excellent patterning, but here it appeared as totally light-absorbing as it featured five different Colours Out Of Space that did not register to Earthly senses.

"It's close. It's almost - within experimental distance." She seemed pleased. "Finally. And to think I said Earth males were - even more difficult." The two relaxed, Calamity now with a distant smile on his red nosed muzzle.

"What was all that about?" Rhubella puzzled as Babs and Shirley returned dressed in their bathing suits.

Buster shrugged. "Who knows? Calamity's head of the class in Advanced Toon Physics. Even in the first year Plucky gave up trying to crib answers off him."

"He wouldn't tell? At Perfecto anyone'd just up the price till they got a deal." Rhubella paused. "Unless they had some other leverage they could use."

"Heh." Buster's tail twitched. "He'd tell, all right. That's the problem. He'd sit down in a corner and carefully explain EVERYTHING. In ten minutes Plucky'd start screaming and run off to stick his head in a fire-bucket before it caught light. QuanToon Physics does that to you."

"We don't do that sort of course," Rhubella said, her tail swishing. "QuanToon Physics?"

*But yes!* Calamity's placard seemed to be in shocked lettering. *Professor Wile-E Coyote works in the Looniversity holidays with the Government at the High-energy Toon Physics Laboratory at Akron, Oww-High-Oww. He discovered the fundamental force of Toon nature, the Schlesinger Field!*

"He really is a super-genius ... even if he did try and capture Professor Bugs a time or two," Buster admitted. "Mary - didn't K-ACME screen an article on the Schlesinger Field last month?"

"We did, Buster," Mary Melody raised her sunglasses. "It's the fundamental Toon farce in the universe. And I do mean farce. All that missing mass folk looked for is bound up in big, heavy virtual particles. They just need enough energy in the dramatic tension field to become solid for awhile."

"Do tell," Plucky looked disgusted. "Big, heavy, particles. Just happen to be anvil-shaped. Swell. Rhubella, know any "no win no fee" lawyers interested in suing the Universe for me?"

"Like, careful, Plucky," Shirley warned. "Those negative thoughts of yours are making a disturbance in the force. I can feel those "dramatic tensions" hovering over you like flies on last week's potato salad. Someone who dropped Toon Physics in the third year better not mess around like that - or other stuff starts dropping."

"Physics? No loss to an actor of my calibre. What care I for Physics? I want ..." suddenly a dark shadow appeared over the duck. His voice trailed off into a frightened squeak. "a medic..."

Rhubella winced as half a tonne of the Missing Mass turned up with a metallic thud, entirely failing to miss the duck. "That's got to smart." She looked at a yellow bill sticking out of the impact crater.

"Only smarts he's ever had," Babs said. "Well, he sued the Universe - he got damages."

The sun shone brightly on the beach after the rain, and the Acme toons and friends grabbed towels, surfboards and beach umbrellas to make the most of it. Rhubella's picnic basket turned out to be as six-star as her breakfast had been, and she happily shared it as brunch. Fortunately Dizzy Devil and his stunningly beautiful human girlfriend Mitzi had made their own dining arrangements, the trucks delivering them having arrived right on time.

"Some guys are so obsessive about cars," Babs commented, as the Tasmanian Devil spun past her. "With Mitzi - well, some girl somewhere just had to have a thing for trash compactors." Exactly what Mitzi saw in the Tasmanian Devil was a mystery; it might have been his charming manners or sophisticated conversation, had he had any. Without trying, Dizzy had acquired a pack of human admirers who amazingly got on with each other. "Thanks for the picnic, Rhubella - it's the best we'll eat this trip."

"Ah, 'ow ze rich zey do live," Fifi sighed, reclining on a beach towel with Rhubella. "Ze oysters for breakfast. Ze whirlwind full-body fur-drier in ze bathroom. Ze bed with silk sheets big enough for ze parachuting, certainment party-sized." She nudged Rhubella, and silently pointed to where Plucky was hanging on their every word with his tongue hanging out. "And if 'zhere is ze mess affair - ze cute uniformed maids are ze ones to clean it up!"

"Oh, yes," Rhubella gave a languid sigh. "One can order massage, fur grooming, and indeed any ... discreet Room Service one desires. What the hotel does not have in-house they can phone out for."

There was the sound of a strangled squawk and the scent of scorching feathers. Shirley sighed, splashing Plucky with water before the duck went into complete meltdown. She was listening keenly, a mischievous smile on her bill.

"Zhe 'otel, 'zhey promote ze oysters especially," Fifi declared, her fingers crossed and hidden in her tail "ees parfait for ... boosting ze custom of the tres expensif Special Services."

"Not that we needed any," Rhubella looked at Fifi's luxuriant tail, suddenly feeling her own naked rat tail hideously inadequate. "It was just Fifi and me in there, all very friendly - until Danforth joined the party. Then there were three of us. The bed could have held a dozen in that room. Danforth paid for everything." She stroked Fifi's tail, and the skunkette purred luxuriantly.

"We gave 'im ze surprise treatment," Fifi confirmed. "'E 'ad something I think 'e as never 'ad before from a girl."

Shirley poured more cold water over a steaming drake. "Plucky, you know I can't, like, lie? My aura wouldn't let me. And I can tell if other folk are, fer sure." She smiled slyly at Fifi. "Every word they said is mondo one hundred percent true." *As far as it goes*, she grinned inwardly. Her aura giggled in response.

Babs raised an eyebrow at the billowing plume of steam and scorched feathers rising to the skies as a duck went into meltdown. She spin-changed into a high-tech engineer with hard hat and white nuclear "bunny-suit". "Activating emergency procedure," she intoned in her best Disaster Movie voice "Reactor DRAKE 1 has lost all coolant! We have an unscheduled thermal excursion!" She somewhat spoiled the effect by winking outrageously. "Tell the Chinese not to start cooking supper - some Roast Duck will be arriving there shortly."

After an hour sunning themselves the toons made a concerted rush for the waves carrying surfboards. Babs paddled out to beyond the breaking point, and awaited a suitable wave. Her idea of suitable generally meant a bad day for the coasts of Hawaii or Japan. She stood on the board, "hanging six" with her staggeringly cute toes locked on the edge. Long pink ears waved in the imported sea breeze, the special waterproofed ribbons glistening in the sunshine as she sang:

*"We're toons with elation, we're here on our vacation  
Relieving our frustration with a party by the sea  
So don't you mess with Acme, we preserve our mystery  
Some knew the facts but they got whacked, in nineteen thirty-three...  
We're teeny, we're spoony, we're going to change our tune-y  
This is the trip where Babsy finally get her Buck  
And that is his good luck!"*

Just then a mountainous wave roared in. She looked down and saw Gogo Dodo upside down underwater, surfing the other surface of the wave. Babs waved and spin-changed into cow-girl costume, grabbing reins which had appeared on her board as she rode the wave down onto the beach. "Yee-hah! Ride-em, buckaroo!"

Two more hours of fun and indeed sun proved exhausting. After a long lunch break the various toons split up, heading their separate ways - Shirley took a bus out along the coast to see a Native art gallery, to which she dragged a reluctant Plucky. Mary and Jaggi rented a sailing boat and put out from the marina for the afternoon, leaving most of the rest on the beach.

Fifi stepped out of the beach restaurant shower, back in her usual costume of a single ribbon. "Brr. Le sand on ze wet fur. Helas! My tail alone, eet can hold twenty pounds! I feel like ze walking concrete truck."

"We can take a walk up there if you'd like," Rhubella suggested, pointing up at the green wooded ridges rising up North of the resort. "It'd be cooler."

"Certainment! Ze salt and ze sand, ees enough once in ze day." Fifi nodded happily. "Bonne idee!"

"It certainly does look real, doesn't it?" Rhubella looked up at the sky and landscape stretching out for miles in all direction. "Do you think they used reference material?"

Half an hour's walk brought them into the woods, a mixture of live oaks and pines with trails winding up onto the high ridges. Rhubella struggled to keep up; despite her short legs Fifi was extraordinarily powerful and her soft purple fur hid rather more muscle than most toons would guess. *As Danforth found out*, she smiled to herself. *If he comes back for more - he'd wish he'd taken that Summer job as a stunt toon on Happy Tree Friends instead...*

"Ah! A fine view, n'est pas?" Fifi pointed up to a towering rock edge that looked out above the tree tops into the next bay. "Courage! We shall make ze ascent."

"In Perfecto we ... don't train as second-storey cat-burglars ..." Rhubella puffed as she scrambled up behind Fifi. *No, but we certainly hire them when we want their services. Why do I feel like I ought to be .. making confession?* She lost concentration and her paws slipped, and for half a second she felt herself starting to slip towards a twenty foot drop. "Fifi!" She yelped.

Just in time, Fifi grabbed her and pulled her up. In a few seconds more they were standing on the room-sized flat top of the crag, Rhubella's heart pounding with fear and effort. "That's ... twice you've saved me."

"Ah? But eet was my fault, zat you were on ze rocks." Fifi was not even breathing hard.

"It was me who ... wanted to climb after you. You wouldn't get Danforth up here."

"Pity." Fifi mimed shoving something off the edge.

Despite herself, Rhubella smiled. She looked round; it was certainly a good viewpoint with both bays in clear view. Around them some other rocks and clearings were visible on the hillside, but nothing within half a mile. Nobody could see them except from the air. Relaxing, she sat down.

For a few minutes the two lay side by side soaking up the sun on the warm clean rocks. Suddenly, Fifi giggled. "Ah, eet was fun to tease pauvre Plucky. Do you not think?"

"Oh, yes. The way he melted down ... you do amazing Toon Takes, it's something I've never learned. Undignified, they'd say." Rhubella frowned. "It seems ... very effective though."

"Ah, yes! Ze soul of ze toon comedy!" Fifi gave a delicious wriggle. "You could learn. Nevair too late." She ran her fingers through her tail. "Poof. Ze leaves and burrs, ze price for a walk in ze wilds. Eet will take me ze hour to clean zem all out."

Rhubella swallowed, her heart pounding. "I have a fur-brush in my bag. Do you ... want any help?"

The skunkette smiled. "Certainment!" She lay on her front, her huge tail waving luxuriously. Rhubella began to run the comb and her finger-claws through the soft fur, feeling for tangles and burrs then gently smoothing them out, careful not to pull the fur. "This is all new to me. With a tail like mine or Roderick's I just sponge it down."

"Mmmm?" Fifi winced slightly, but not at any fur pulling. "'Zis fur, eet is what cost me mon 'Amton. Helas - I am leaving a purple trail for half of ze Spring. Could we 'ave just swapped tails ... 'ad you been me - Ah, but zat ees ovair."

Rhubella blinked. "I'm the wrong one to envy. I've read Hamton's dossier. I don't think his family would appreciate him dating a sewer rat either. Folk don't like rodent infestations, especially in the family tree." She went to work with the comb. Five minutes saw the worst tangles out of the tail, and hesitantly she began to work on Fifi's back. Long, slow strokes of the comb running down the skunkette's back stripes had her purring contentedly.

Fifi's nose twitched. "You 'ave done 'zis before? So good. You could work at ze grooming parlour."

"No ... nothing like this. Do you like it? Professor Hatta Mari teaches us a lot of ... social grooming at Perfecto." Rhubella caressed Fifi's back, all the way from her head-fur to her tail root. There was a gradually emerging scent of skunk.

Suddenly Fifi looked embarrassed. "When I - enjoy, mon parfum, eet starts to grow. Eet eez the othair problem zat ... lost me mon 'Amton. Le family, 'zhey could nevair accept eet." Hamton's mother had made it very plain what she thought of the idea of Fifi as a daughter-in-law. Worse, with Hamton being their only child and no other close relatives apart from Uncle Stinky (enough said) - Hamton was the last of his line. The hygiene-obsessed Piegenthaler family somehow did not favour Fifi turning their whole future forever skunk scented.

"I'm a rat, Fifi." Rhubella said in a small voice. "My ancestors, they lived in places that smelt a lot worse. We can just - block it out. We're built that way, we had to be." She carried on grooming with steady strokes. The skunkette shivered under her touch, leaning back against the pressure. Her purring increased, as did her scent.

Suddenly Fifi turned over; the rat and the skunkette were lying on their sides facing each other with noses inches apart. "Ruby." Fifi brushed her lock of head-fur from her eyes, her expression serious as she looked into Rhubella's eyes "When we were teasing Plucky, what we said ... about what we did last night, vous and moi... did you ... really enjoy thinking of 'zat?"

Rhubella nodded. Her heart hammered in her chest. Looking into Fifi's eyes, she greatly dared - and kissed her on the nose. "I did."

"You can blame ze oysters," Fifi purred. "If you wish."

"I think Fifi's having a fine Spring break, you know," Babs' ears went up in surprise as she looked out Northwards. "A very fine holiday."

"I hope so. Any particular reason?" Buster asked.

Babs grinned. She pointed over the hill to where a billowing mushroom cloud of yellow-green vapour was rising. An aircraft clipped the edge of it, staggered and diverted off to an emergency landing. "Oh, no reason." A pink nose twitched. "A dozen oysters for breakfast, she said." An even pinker tongue ran seductively over her white-furred face. "That sounds like a good idea for us."

"And since when do rabbits eat oysters - even if they were on the menu here?" Buster asked, an eyebrow raised. "This place isn't exactly gourmet. I've never seen a menu with "Hashburger helper substitute" and "Ersatz Tofu" before. Not one that admitted it."

Babs cast him a glance that had his fur scorching. In her carbonated, caffeinated mind was a clear idea and a scent she recalled several times from dining at Shirley's house. *Hang onto your tail, Blue-boy*, she told herself *let's see if the shops here stock... Oyster Mushrooms?*

As evening fell, the Acme friends reassembled at the hotel. Babs waved cheerfully as Plucky and Shirley stepped down off the bus - Plucky almost being poured off as a green slurry.

"You should see the museum, Babs!" Shirley enthused. "Full of mondo harmonious Native artefacts and artwork. They had a dream-catcher there that could get reception all the way from Seattle to Hollywood! Mostly broken dreams coming out of there, fer sure."

"Eeeh," Babs dipped an ear. "I think I'll pass. You were there all afternoon? No wonder Plucky looks washed-out. He wouldn't know culture if you hit him with a totem pole."

Shirley winked. "They'd got a map of local sacred sites, tuned for all sorts of rituals, you know? We stopped off at a suitable one on the way back. It was ... cosmic." She cast an eye down to the melted puddle of toon duck. "I kinda plugged us both into the Infinite. Like, Plucky's fuses aren't up to it yet."

"I wondered where that thunder was coming from," Buster raised an eyebrow. "And not a cloud in the sky."

Babs whispered something in Shirley's ear, and both looked appraisingly at Buster. They snickered in stereo.

"Do I want to know what's going on?" Buster asked nonchalantly "Or is it something that you'll spring on me when it's all much too late?"

"As if we'd do a thing like that," Babs pressed her paws together, an angelic expression seeming to radiate innocence. "We're just planning what to do tomorrow - organise a nice picnic for all the boys."

Plucky had managed to get upright at last. "Why do I feel like the Road Runner getting a dinner invitation from Professor Coyote?"

"You're on holiday," Babs said sweetly "You ought to relax a little. Unwind."

"Relax! I'd get more relaxation covering myself with barbecue sauce and dating Dizzy Devil's wicked sister. After she just quit a week's starvation diet," Plucky sighed, looking at Shirley who surprisingly did not look annoyed. "Where did that sweet loon I used to know go to?"

"Same place that sweet forest went to in our first year camp when you were playing around with matches," Buster suggested. "With one difference."

"That was an accident!" Plucky glared at him.

"And that's the difference." Buster cast a glance towards Shirley, who was calmly meditating and showing no signs of being about to scorch any green duck tail feathers. "Do you think it's safe saying that kind of thing right in front of Shirley?"

The drake looked daggers at him. "It doesn't matter where I say it. Or even think it. She's a mind-reader, yeah?"

Babs looked at Plucky, and folded her legs imitating Shirley's trademarked Lotus Position, though the type of Lotus she preferred had two doors, a powerful engine and preferably was on someone else's insurance. "*Oh what a bun I amm ...*" she intoned, pressing fingers lightly to her forehead. "I can see the future ... yes, it's getting clearer. It's a duck's future." She paused dramatically. "I see anvils. Big anvils. They're far out in space but getting closer. Miles and miles a second."

Plucky sniffed. "Sheesh. Having one astral void-head around is bad enough."

Babs's skills comedic skills were not set up to plug Plucky directly into his own console games, but her imagination was well up to it. "I see white lines of fire slash across the horizon as the anvils punch into the atmosphere! The nose-cones glowing white-hot on re-entry! The duck sees them - he panics - he tries to run - he tries to hide but ... oh! Oh, the humanity! I ... I can't talk any more, folks.... Fade to black, cut." She shook her head, sorrowfully. "And that's all, folks. See you same duck time, same duck channel, next duck incarnation."

Shirley looked on with evident amusement. "Take heed, Plucky. That was like, the Ghost of Christmas Futurologist, or some junk."

"I wondered what kind of junk it was." Plucky's feathers bristled. "Here's me - the finest dramatic actor and heroic star Acme Acres has ever seen..."

"Must have been quite some fog that night..." Buster said. Babs squeezed him approvingly.

The green duck ignored him. "I, Plucky Duck - upstaged by little Miss "Mutton Underground" - if her IQ matched her shoe size Calamity would have a rival in genius class. Don't you have any scruples?" Plucky asked, disgusted.

Babs spin-changed into a seedy black-marketeer with a greasy homburg hat pulled down low over her eyes. She opened up one side of her trench-coat to reveal bundles of currency tucked in the inside pockets along with gold-effect watches and paper-effect passports. "I got roubles! I got shekels! I got long green, short green, golf greens... scruples, today I ain't got. Come back Tuesday. That's my day off."

"Oh, funny ha-ha. Don't let that truck full of Oscars go to your head."

"Why, Plucky. It makes a change from your usual safes and pianos." Babs smiled sweetly. "If somehow you manage to graduate - there's an endless stream of aspirin commercials just crying out for a duck with your

experience.”

"Yeah? The last time I saw a pink bunny on screen someone was pushing batteries inside to see how far she'd go. I'll stick to the anvils." Plucky folded his arms defiantly.

"Oh, Plucky. Saying that kind of thing, your tank-top really should have better armour plating on it," Babs handed the drake a piece of stray paper. "Here, this'll double it."

Further escalation was delayed as Fifi and Rhubella appeared, paw in paw, their tails twined together lovingly. Shirley felt one of her principles creak as she bent it slightly and peeked at their auras. Her eyes widened briefly. "Like, I didn't predict that." She looked at Plucky in amazement. "I hate to say it, but you told me so."

Fifi giggled. "Why, Shirley - you must be down on ze energy. It ees time to drill anoithair well in ze duck oilfields?" She kissed Rhubella.

"Oilfields? Not Shirley's style. Plucky's more a tidal barrage," Babs mused "More eco-friendly. Once you plug it into the system you pull power out of it four times a day, forever."

Plucky appealed to the heavens. "Will this Duck Season never end?" The heavens made no obvious reply. But far out in the dark beyond Pluto, a swarm of icy bodies left the main Steinway Belt and began to fall towards the inner solar system and their date with duck destiny.

"I'm sure the Passenger Pigeon asked something just like that," Buster said "and got about the same answer."

"Don't worry, Plucky," Babs consoled him. "If you're worried about your future you can ask Shirley to look. I'm sure she can see you two still together when you're old and grey-feathered."

"Yeah, but for him is that next month - or next week?" Buster asked in a stage whisper.

Babs was busily scribbling on a notepad, having spotted an oriental grocery store in the backstreets of the town. She had a working title - "*Spring Surprise stir-fry*" sketched out. Spring greens and carrots were included of course, as were oyster mushrooms and a large paw-full each of ginseng and ginger. Her eyes gleamed. She had seen the store had fresh Salsify root, which she recalled was sometimes called "vegetable oyster" - and on the list it went. Tomatoes had been called "love apples" long ago, and joined them. Rabbits might not eat shellfish but she was not going to let the idea of using them as a love-potion go to waste. Toon life often worked like that.

"Top secret, Babs?" Buster raised an eyebrow as Babs passed Shirley the notebook and the loon broke up into a broad smile.

"Recipes, Blue-boy," she looked at him sweetly. "You wouldn't be interested - it's a Girl Thing."

Late at night, the hotel cleaning staff gathered to cheerfully discuss the many hideous things they had been exposed to in the day's duties. "Don't know why the Boss puts up with that Acme crowd," one grumbled. "Cleanin' Psychic phenomenon ain't in our contract. There wuz ectoplasm manifested all over the top floor."

"Ayup. That and spent orgone energy half way across the corridor outside Room 317 last night," another confirmed. "Took me two bottles of bleach to shift it."

"Psychic phenomenon?" Another scoffed. "Ain't no such thing."

Just then, the ghostly shadow of a green avian floated through the wall, a terrified expression on his beak. His translucent webbed feet scabbled furiously at an unseen surface as if he was trying to gain traction on a freshly polished floor. As he vanished through the far side of the break room, a similar ghostly golden-feathered avian girl floated in after him as effortlessly as a soap bubble, evidently as sure of her surroundings as if she was walking along a smooth pavement. Just before the powder blue waterfowl aura vanished, her eyes began to glow brightly and very un-avian vampire fangs popped into existence on her glowing bill.

"Nah, them's not phee-nomenon." The last worker gestured towards where hunter and prey had vanished. "We had a convention of them came in last year from the Cal-Nev nuclear plant up near Linear Valley. Goddam atomic vampires!"

The third day dawned bright again, although there was a stiff breeze that whipped the beach sand up and promised to make eating ice-cream there an abrasive experience. Babs was first down at breakfast time to replenish her caffeine deficiency; she grinned as Fifi and Rhubella came downstairs together. "Had a good night's rest?" She asked mischievously.

Fifi looked up at the ceiling innocently. "I am saying nothing, on ze grounds eet may incriminate me - and ze Tiny Toons Bar Soap people." She hugged Rhubella, and stroked the rat's tail tip. "So, Babs, what is ze plan for today?" She waved as Mary Melody and Jaggi came down to join them.

"A walk in the woods!" Babs exclaimed. "There's picnic spots! Shady trails! We can lie on the beach other days."

"That'd be good," Mary Melody said "After lying around on the beach I could use the exercise." She had changed into a sensible pair of hiking boots, comfortable cargo pants and a sturdy jacket; Jaggi's outfit as usual looked very like a uniform without quite being one. His remote ancestors were as African as Mary's, but his family

lived along with many action heroes in Even Bolder, Colorado.

Babs snorted. Mary had the room next door to her on the other side from Buster, and the walls were thin. "I can hear you getting plenty. Much more "exercise" like that and you'll come back thin as a pencil lead."

Mary's blush manifested itself eight inches clear of her body. The other toons applauded the effect. Shirley and Plucky appeared, Plucky arguing about a side-trip he wanted to make to the Sado County Auto Show. Shirley responded with a brief psychic lightning show.

"Anyway, if we're heading out all day - we're doing the cooking." Babs looked round at Shirley, Fifi and Mary. Rhubella, it turned out, could burn water. "So someone else can carry!" Babs raised her coffee mug. She had perfected her breakfast brew over years of experiments. It was basically Turkish coffee with extra sugar, so black and corrosively strong one could stand a metal spoon upright in it and watch it dissolve. Traditionally it was served it in egg-cups. Babs' innovation was serving it by the pint.

"Hmmmph." Fifi cast an eye at Babs. "Eet ees ze twenty-first century, Babs. Why should ze women still do the cookery?"

"Fine principles, Fifi," Shirley applauded. "But think of it - do you want to eat a lunch done by Dizzy Devil and Plucky?"

Two hours later, the Acme University Expedition was fully supplied and heading into the backwoods. More accurately, they were five miles from the resort on quite well-marked hill trails. Shirley was walking rather than levitating, and led the way navigating with a dowsing rod. At the back a collection of baggage and firewood seemed to move on legs.

Babs spun-changed into a Western costume, pushing her broad-brimmed hat back as she surveyed the trail. "*Mule train! Ho! Clipperty-clopping through the mountain chain ... soon they're going to reach the top, clippety-clop, clippety-clippety-clipperty-clopping along...*" she sang and cracked her prop whip encouragingly. "Cheer up! Only another hour to the picnic site. Then you get to eat."

"We could have stayed to eat on the beach and not had to carry the hamburger stall with us..." Plucky grumbled. "Whose great idea was this - walk miles through a forest ... carrying wood. What's next, importing smog to Pittsburgh? Corruption to Washington?" The National Park laws forbid the cutting of timber, so the boys had loaded up with dry branches found just outside its edge; strapped to his pack Jaggi also carried a brand new nesting set of wok type pans they had bought at the same Oriental grocery as most of the vegetables, along with a full set of utensils.

*It looks as if someone is preparing to set up house for two, read Calamity Coyote's sign board.*

Jaggi just smiled. He had passed the Acme character specialisation written and acting tests in "Strong, silent type", there being no oral exam. His film future would probably include "*the tough toon sergeant*" role when he was old enough to fit the part - though he would never apply for "*the young lieutenant who panics.*"

"Setting up house? It feels like someone's carrying one. Me." The trail was deeply imprinted by the prints of laden webbed feet, and they were not Shirley's. "Next time I'll carry a microwave oven. It's still lighter than this luxury log cabin kit."

"There's no electricity for miles in these woods, Pluckster," Buster pointed out.

"I carry the microwave, you carry the extension cord. Do I have to think of everything around here?" Plucky snapped back.

"Cheer up, Plucky. Imagine it as an Action Adventure film. Idaho Babs and the Lost Picnic Site," Babs struck a heroic pose atop a boulder by the side of the trail. "Fair's fair. We're all carrying our share of essentials. I've got the matches. Such big, heavy matches."

"Oh, joy. Fair division of labour is a wonderful thing. One day we ought to try it." Plucky cast her a dirty look from under his bundle of logs. "I'm putting my load down right now - and you can't stop me."

"Oh ? I'm carrying the weight of this too. *Minimum wage! Hyaaaahh!*" Babs grinned, swinging the prop whip. It cracked just behind Plucky's tail-feathers, bringing a yelp from the drake. "It's hard work this, but you don't hear me whining." Her eyes went wide, spotting Plucky scrambling forwards at double-time. "Hey, I think this thing would work on slaves! Who knew?"

At last the picnic site appeared through the trees, a wide clearing with four stone-built cooking areas and a standpipe for water supply. While Jaggi demonstrated how to light the fire with only one match and no need to rub boy scouts together, Plucky and Buster worked on preparing the vegetables while the rest relaxed.

Relaxing for more than two minutes was "*not a Babs Bunny thing*" as she declared after three minutes. "Practice! Practice! Practice! Come on, who's got the best Wild Takes in the wild woods?"

"Ah, we are on ze 'oliday," Fifi raised an eyebrow. But she applauded as Babs threw herself into one Toon gag after another. "But - ze Takes zey are fun, certainly!" With that she flipped through a rapid-fire sequence and the woods rang with the sound of an ocean foghorn as she finished on an "Avery 107" complete with full stereo surround sound effects.



Rhubella looked on, amazed. "My last class at Perfecto was on Controlling Film Residuals," she volunteered.

"Residuals - like this?" Babs stepped up and kissed Buster unexpectedly on the nose. With a happy sigh, the blue bunny melted into the grass. "There's some residue right there."

"You can do eet!" Fifi nudged Rhubella. "You are a toon, Ruby. Eet is your 'eritage. Forget what zose Perfecto snobs say."

"Like, go for it," Shirley nodded. "Get in touch with your inner nature. Let the Take energies flow."

The rat frowned. Not only did Perfecto not teach this style of acting, but she had spent years joining in with them ridiculing the "Looniversity" that did. Even as a cub years before that, she had been sent to her room in disgrace for such "undignified behaviour". She looked up, hoping no spy satellites with feeds to Perfecto were watching at that minute. "I'll try."

While the rest busied themselves with the fire and food, Rhubella tried to copy Babs and Fifi. Her shape stayed depressingly solid even when Babs shock-changed into one giant eyeball in the 'Clampett corneal catastrophe'. Rhubella could hardly make her own eyes bulge.

"Just go with it," Babs suggested. "It's like a sneeze - your body knows what to do. Don't stop it."

Rhubella's ears drooped. "But if you don't have a sneeze on the way - you can't force it." She cast an eye at Little Sneezer. "It's not as if I had any allergies that could make me "wild-take" the way he sneezes."

Fifi crossed her fingers, hiding them behind her tail. She sat down next to Rhubella, gently pressing the rat's paw to her own luxuriously furred tummy. "Le sigh. Ruby - affair what we 'ave done - when this Winter our cub ees born, I 'ope she weel 'ave ze Take talent from my side of ze family."

The assembled toons stopped and applauded as Rhubella flipped into a spontaneous '*Avery type 47 bis*' Wild Take, complete with three yards of exclamation marks and fire siren sound effects.

"You go, Rhubella!" Babs grabbed a couple of the exclamation marks out of the air and used them herself. "I knew you had it in you!"

Plucky's eyes went out on stalks, in a well-done Freleng 21 Wild Take. "And I didn't know Fifi had. I didn't know she could. Not like that."

Fifi kissed the still trembling rat on the nose, showing her crossed fingers. "Fifi, she makes ze leetle fib, not ze leetle cub for Christmas." Her eyes went wide. "But for a toon - 'oo knows? We 'ad bettair do as Shirley and stay away from ze coast to ze South, where ze map says Point Conception."

Half an hour saw the food ready and Rhubella managing her second and third toon Wild Takes, with Babs and Fifi coaching her. "It's easier when you remember how it feels," she commented, her nose twitching at the scent of the meal being dished out by Jaggi and Mary Melody. "I know I could do it when I was a cub."

Babs winked, while she handed Buster an extra-large helping. "And now, we eat. More food for the workers, Mary! They've done the hard carrying today. They're going to need all their energy later on, too."

"Vegetable and mushroom stir-fry," Buster sampled the dish appreciatively. "Nice! Makes a change from the Looniversity food. They say they use real vegetables - I think they mean photographs of them."

"They use real photographs? Who knew?" Babs tucked into the lunch with even more than her usual enthusiasm, rivalling Dizzy Devil. She caught Shirley's eye, and winked conspiratorially. Whatever else its effects might be, she made note to save the recipe as a very tasty meal.

"Mmm." A pink bunny relaxed in the deep shade at the edge of the picnic site twenty minutes later, while a collection of already very clean licked plates was being rinsed by a dishwasher Calamity had assembled from twigs and string. The diesel-electric drive had been the tricky bit to hand-carve from a stump with a pocket knife, but Calamity was not a Genius grade inventor for nothing. "Buster ... it's a fine day for a stroll."

"Babs, we've already had one of those - and we'll have to do another to get back," Buster was lying on his back nearby, enjoying the rare and endangered sensation of doing nothing at all. The feeling of being on the edge of a cliff had been growing on him all Spring, in more ways than one. Starting off at Acme Looniversity seemed a lifetime ago; he had grown used to being able to lie back like this with his friends around him and nothing urgent to do. Now it was a matter of counting the golden days left - he knew things would change soon, but hopefully not just yet. Every minute of his old life was precious now.

The blue buck reached down in his thoughts and brought to light what really troubled him. He was still the leader, the leading man (buck, rather) at the top of his social food chain whatever the carnivores in class might think. In a few months he would just be Buster Bunny, an unemployed unknown trying to break into films or television with no guarantee of ever getting there however good his Looniversity degree. *Big fish, small pond, small fish, big pond*, he told himself wryly. *Gee, and I don't even like fish*. As a plain fact he knew it would be the same for everyone, Concord Condor and Lightning Rodriguez included - but he had the most to lose.

Babs picked a long flowering grass stem, and tickled his nose with it. She gave a most un-rabbit-like purr. "Well, Blue-boy - we've hours to spend here before we need to head back. Why not - go for a walk in the woods,

just you and me, and pick flowers?" Her tail twitched. Across the clearing she could see Shirley leading Plucky off in the other direction. "I just know there's a ... special one just waiting for you somewhere." *I've been keeping it for you to pick*, she smiled, trying to beam the message telepathically into a dense blue and white furred head. As she looked over Buster's form her tail started to vibrate. A scent rather more pleasant than Fifi's was in the air.

Suddenly she realised she was talking to a sleeping rabbit. The idea of a bucket of cold water as a bunny alarm clock flicked through her head, but she decided to let him sleep. She snorted, and with a wry smile lay down beside him, her ears entwined with his in the soft grass. "What Does a girl have to do to make an honest buck around here?"

"A lot of good those oyster mushrooms and everything did!" Babs's ears drooped as they returned through the woods three hours later. Cleaning up never took long when Dizzy Devil was around. The trick was not to bring him in till the end of a picnic, or it would be a picnic for one. "I thought it'd be a sure-fire love potion for Buster. It worked for me. I had to sit in the stream or my cotton tail would have caught light."

"What if they declared a war, I mean a Rabbit Season, and nobody came?" Mary Melody asked the quiet woods.

"Babs - aren't you forgetting your first-year Toon Physics?" Shirley asked, an eyebrow raised. "Like, you can walk across thin air over a cliff as long as you don't know about it? Toon medicine should work the same." She cast a glance back to where her aura was levitating an exhausted mallard as if on a stretcher. A dark green feather fell on the trail unheeded. "The meal was mondo ... stimulating. I could feel it working on my basal charka fer sure. Not that I needed it. Or Mary either."

Babs blinked, her ears crossed in thought. She suddenly clapped a paw to her head. "We knew about it, and it worked for us. The boys didn't, so for them it didn't!" She paused, considering. "Can I say, 'D'oh?'"

Shirley briefly communed with the infinite, in which there were an infinite number of lawsuits colliding. "Negatory, Babs."

"D'oh!" A pink bunny slapped her head again.

"Babs!"

"Sorree..."

The Acme Toons returned to their hotel without much incident, and after a rapid shower and change into a fresh yellow blouse and violet skirt, Babs bounced downstairs to see about some supper. A mysterious figure loomed in the shadows of the corridor as evening fell.

"Hello, Plucky. I'd recognise that mysterious looming style anywhere. Needs work still. You only got a Pass grade in Looming because Professor Daffy marked the papers." She cocked her head and studied the green drake critically. He was freshly showered but still looked very much the worse for wear. "So, what's up, duck?"

"Babs, you've got to help me..." Plucky appeared from the broom cupboard where he had been hiding. "I can't stand it any longer. You know Shirley ... there's got to be something I can do to get me out of this ..."

Babs' ears went right down under an oriental helmet as she spin-changed into a fully armoured Samurai, except that instead of a sword in each paw a mallet was held in a classic Samurai pose. The Acme Acres crest flapped on her back-banner. "Plucky?" She asked sweetly "I just don't know What you mean. Are you asking me how to cheat your way away from my very best friend? After what you've done?"

"Well not cheat, exactly ..." Plucky writhed slightly under Babs' stare.

The pink bunny fumed visibly, if less corrosively than Fifi. "No, Plucky. You'd probably be reincarnated as a field of Soya beans very soon after asking me that - Shirley will just get you again with every Tofu burger she eats. And I hope the mealy bugs nibble all your leaves first. Slowly."

With a shudder, Plucky noticed her mallets were not the usual toon sort. These looked like genuine steel. A steel more genuine than most actual pieces of the metal. In fact, they looked like steel soaked in the concentrated toon essence of steel. Light twisted oddly around their angles as if it was being pulled in to impact on the ultra-dense faces. "I didn't know how it was going to be. I didn't know! I ... I just want things to go back to being the way they always were!"

Babs sighed, dismissing the hammers. It took a lot of energy to maintain so much neutron mass out of Hammer-space for more time than it took to swing them. "Plucky," she looked the duck in the beak "I know Shirley's seen every bit of you by now - except for one thing. Show her some pluck, won't you? It's never going to be the same again and you know it." She gave a fiendish grin. "You want me to help you get away? Well, all right. When she's found a much better replacement - which would take her about ten seconds in a desert - I'll suggest she throws your dry shrivelled husk onto the compost pile. You've made her all yours till then. Like the saying goes - you can unscrew a light bulb but ..."

"All right, I get the point. You don't have to hammer it home," Plucky looked crestfallen. "About Shirley."

"Hammer it home? Why ... you must be quoting her. Maybe there's hope for you yet." Babs gave him a

quick peck on the cheek and skipped off happily.

Not half a mile away and rather higher up the hill, a bird of a different feather was busy making plans. Danforth Drake was in the same hotel as before but a different suite - one without the association, let alone any lingering scent of skunk.

"Gotcha," He looked down at his laptop with a smile on his bill. "Rhubella, Rhubella ... what will our Deniable Projects tutors say? Using a known credit card like that when you know someone like me can track it." He shook his head in mock sorrow, having found her credit trail not back home at Acme Acres or in a fashionable resort up the coast, but a cheap hotel within sight of where she started. That was the one piece of planning their Tutors would have given marks for - while most fleeing furs would go as far and fast as possible, Rhubella had hidden almost in full view. Grudgingly, he added another mark as he looked online at the "facilities" on offer there - nobody who knew Rhubella would have looked for her in such a slum.

The yellow-green drake nodded, as he triggered a suite of expensively commissioned programs. Modern life had so much bureaucracy that every day was a piece of paper away from going hideously wrong. Most furs were walking as if at the receiving end of lines of dominos that most of the time needed just a push to start toppling but most days they missed. Getting everything to happen at once - that was the trick. The programs riffled data on the ACME personnel file, hunting for weak spots and suggesting lines of attack.

Half an hour passed as he sat in the dim light brooding, his finger-feathers pressed together in contemplation. Suddenly he stood up, a sly smile on his bill. "Yes! That will do. That'll do very well indeed." With a firm press he hit the "send" key. Ten seconds later, the information from Danforth's machine had spread out across the coast to various interested parties.

"Why spend your own time and energy harassing people - when there's organisations who do it for a living?" He asked posterity.

Smiling subtly, Danforth shut the laptop down. It was the latest model anyone who was anyone at Perfecto was using that month - the ultra-light computer was as slim and fragile as a piece of thin glass and so had to be permanently carried in a designer ten pound armoured steel case. Danforth rubbed his bill ruefully; even for a Toon, getting radically dismembered hurt severely - and at Perfecto they lacked the constant practice of physical slapstick that Acme Looniversity was famous for.

"It wouldn't have made that skunk smart so much," he counted his wrongs for the dozenth time that day "So I'll have to arrange - something better for her. In fact it'll be fun to see what happens when it all comes together. The Perfect storm. Better still - call it ... the Perfecto Storm."

### Chapter 3 - The Perfect(o) Storm

All characters © Warner Brothers except Jaggi De Speckle and Col. Fenix

Hans von Haflinger relaxed at the side of his private pool in Perfecto Prep University. The tall grey equine had stayed in Acme Acres over the Spring Break, working on an elaborate insider trading scheme that would make him more money than Roderick Rat was spending on his whole Galapagos safari.

Hans yawned. He had a finger, or more accurately a hoof, in every pie in Perfecto. He was on all the profitable sporting teams, and organised recruiting and training the "Sports scholars" - generally hulking wolves and bears who were brought in to add brutal weight to the Perfecto teams. The turnover rate was quite large; one after another they were always found to be "in breach of contract" and replaced by someone as brawny and hungrier to do the job without question. Intelligence was not a desired qualification; the last thing Perfecto needed was someone that size realising how expendable they really were.

Suddenly a light began to flash on his screen. "Danforth!" He made the link. "What do you want? And what will you pay for it?"

Within twenty minutes Danforth's plans began to take form like patches of treacherous black ice silently freezing on a pavement on a frosty night. Hans and the three available "Sports scholars" were on an air-conditioned coach heading towards Acme Acres' small airport, where a chartered aircraft was available to take them to the coast. With modern technology, the "Perfecto Storm" went global inside a minute as it briefly colonised Toon Tech computers in Outer Baltistan, sneaked back across to California and started waving alarm flags in Government computers there.

Perfecto character assassination programs did not charge ahead with the wasteful energy of a quarterback. They were more like a skilled sumo wrestler - the world was full of powerful, blundering forces already available to use without squandering your own resources. A sidestep, a misdirection and a small but well-planned trip were all that it took to bring them crashing down - and woe betide anything trapped underneath.

The day's woodland picnic had been voted a success by most of the Acme toons, and indeed the sight of sand whipping along the beaches as they returned that way confirmed it.

"There goes Sandy Castle and the Abominable Emery Board," Babs quipped quietly as a pair of the other hotel guests staggered into the reception, their wet fur plastered with windblown beach sand. "But hey! Today every beach snack contains twice the minerals of yesterday, free!"

Fifi giggled. Then her expression changed, and she tapped Babs with her tail as soon as they were alone in the corridor. "Babs. May I ... borrow Bustair again tonight?"

Babs' ears drooped. "Be my guest," her voice was flat. "A romantic walk in the woods and a special meal weren't enough to - rouse his interest. At least, not his interest in me. If he's really got one. You might be luckier." She gave a small smile. "I hope you have fun. Somebody should."

Fifi hugged the pink bunny. "Babs! Thank you! Be sure I will..."

"Return the goods undamaged, like before? That's good of you." Babs looked into her eyes. "Fifi. I don't know if I should keep worrying about that. I'm starting to think Buster only ever wants me as a - comic partner." Her ears twitched. "I know I always said I'd only ever date my own species but ... I wonder if Vinnie the deer is doing anything this week?"

"Babs! 'Old on to Bustair! 'E is ze one for you." Fifi's eyes were wide in alarm.

Babs squeezed the skunkette back. "Try telling him that. You're the one he's going to be holding onto."

Buster was relaxing on his bed when there came a knock on the door. To be honest there was nowhere else in the room to relax - there was hardly enough room on the floor to unroll a sleeping bag, and not for the first time he contemplated the difference between a one-star and a zero-star hotel. "Come in! It's not locked!"

His ears went up at the sight of Fifi standing in the doorway. In one paw she held a covered dish.

"'Allo, Bustair," her voice was low. "I've, come to repay ze complement. I 'ave brought ze carrot-cheesecake tonight."

Buster's ears went up. "The way to a buck's heart ... is through his stomach." His head cocked to one side. "You're not with Rhubella tonight?"

Fifi giggled. "Ah. Ruby she is, 'ow you say, worn to ze frazzle affair ze walk and - everything today. I left 'er sleeping with ze smile. She was, affected by ze meal." She locked eyes on Buster as she closed and locked the door. "Ze special meal Babs invented just for you? Ze special oyster mushrooms with ze ginger and ginseng?" She knocked lightly on Buster's blue head. "'Allo? Anyone at 'ome in zhere?"

"Oyster mushrooms. So that was Babs' big idea. Ow." Buster sat down heavily. "Now I get it."

Fifi shook her head sadly. "Bustair, Concord Condor 'e would 'ave found ze answer by now. Did ze fresh passion-fruit for dessert not give vous le clue?" She sat down on the bed and served up the carrot cheesecake. The buck and the skunkette sat and shared their supper in the narrow room.

"What a Spring Break." Buster said wryly. "This really isn't going to plan."

"Were you going to, play ze Romeo on ze balcony tonight, eef I 'ad not called?" Fifi looked Buster up and down. "Babs, she ees expecting you every night. Ze door is open."

The buck avoided her eyes. "I know. It creaks in the wind. I've thought about it every night."

Fifi kissed him, putting the empty plates out of the way under the bed. Her bare purple-furred paw stroked Buster's gloved one and sensuously peeled off the toon glove, as she purred at the sight of his blue-furred hand. She pressed Buster's bare hand to her hair ribbon, and gave a shiver of delight as he untied it. Fifi shook her head-fur free and pressed close to the buck, suddenly with a look of concern on her face. "You should do eet, not just theenk eet. Eet is Babs you should be with," she said. "Bustair! You will be breaking 'er 'eart. I know 'ow zat feels. Do not do eet to 'er. Please?" She relaxed on the narrow bed, patting the space next to her.

Buster winced, lying close to the purple and white skunkette, his own white frontal fur touching hers. "I know. I've only got one chance at this with Babs; I've been thinking about it for years, just how to make it perfect."

Fifi raised an ear. "Eet is a long way from 'zat right now. Babs she is alone, waiting for you. Go to 'er! Do not mind me - I 'ave Rhubella." She cocked her head on one side. "Nevair did I think of such an affair - always les "skunk-hunks" for moi, 'Amton aside. But Ruby and moi, we were two lonely toons. Babs she is anotheir."

Buster looked her in the eyes, his blue ears down. "I'll tell you why I haven't. There's something I need to get for Babs to make it perfect - and she deserves perfect. I planned and saved all year for this. I hoped it'd be ready before now." He whispered quietly in her ear for half a minute. "Now do you see?"

Fifi smiled as she digested the information along with the cheesecake. "Oh? Well, 'zat is something. I am glad to 'ear it. Babs she was asking if I know Vinnie Deer well. 'E is an 'andsome toon, certainment. Babs she says she nevair dates outside 'er species, but Deer hunks and rabbits, 'zey are both Bucks, and ze girls are Does. Maybe she ees thinking of what to do next if you let 'er down."

"I'd deserve it," Buster admitted.

Fifi relaxed. "Bustair, 'zat is a load off my mind." Her eyes widened, and she giggled. "Eet makes some

things better - knowing you are ze, 'scarce resources' - I will be 'appy to see you with Babs. But till then - for 'zis last night, I still 'ave Babs' permission." She purred happily, taking Buster's un-gloved blue paws in her purple ones. "And now, Bustair?"

"What Fifi wants, Fifi gets." Buster agreed.

The fourth day dawned bright and cheerful, with clear skies and a lack of whirlwinds whipping along the beach making Mitzi jealously watch Dizzy Devil's reaction. Babs woke up in a bad mood, the wind having carried the unmistakable odour of skunkette musk out of Fifi's open window and along to Babs' open balcony door.

She looked at herself in the mirror as she put in her contact lenses, checking her natural brown eyes had not turned green with jealousy yet. "I ought to play Fifi at poker this week. Unlucky in love, lucky at cards they say. The way I'm heading I could break all the banks at Vegas!" She held up her long pink ears, but the tips drooped sadly as soon as she let them go. *This whole thing was my idea, putting Buster and Fifi together. At least someone's having fun this trip*, she told herself. *Whatever next? The way things are going on this trip I'll end up dating Shirley!* She managed to giggle at that idea. That was one way for Plucky to escape that even the desperate mallard had probably not thought of. *Shirley's a good friend... but... nahh...* Her tail twitched. Stranger things had happened as Fifi and Rhubella proved – and it would just serve Buster right.

Tying her ear ribbons, she bounced down the stairs trying to recapture her usual good humour. That lasted till she reached the breakfast table and saw Fifi kissing Buster a good morning farewell.

"So!" Babs forced a cheery grin, which convinced nobody. "What are we all doing today?"

"We're hiring another sailing boat, this afternoon," Mary Melody promptly replied. "It should be good! The weather forecast's perfect."

"Aaah, there's the new Da-gum film premier showing down the coast," Fowlmouth waved a promotional leaflet. "Titanic Three – Revenge of the Iceberg." He slipped into Announcer voice mode. "Just when you thought it was safe to go back into the Da-gum Arctic Water..."

"Titanic Three!" Plucky's eyes went heart-shaped. "Shirley! It's the 'Don't Miss' film of the year! We Have to go!"

Shirley sniffed. "Get crucial, Plucky. You can see that any night at the Acme Acres Gigaplex next week. We are on a romantic Spring Break ... aren't we?" Her eyes flashed dangerously.

Plucky's head bowed. "Yes, Shirl." His tail-feathers drooped.

Mary Melody and Mitzi looked on, the humans' expressions hard to read without whiskers or flexible ears.

"Shirley – can't you cut him some slack?" Mitzi offered. She had changed out of her beach mini-skirt costume and wore a long, comfortable-looking robe.

The loon raised her beak contemptuously. "If Plucky gets any slacker, his tail feathers would like fall out."

Mary started to say something, then shook her head. She whispered something to Jaggi that Babs' long ears heard as "*What's sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose.*" – though to Babs' puzzlement the only waterfowl around were Plucky and Shirley.

Breakfast was an uncomfortable time; Babs and Shirley positively radiated bad feeling. The Acme toons ate rapidly and scattered out to the beach before either loon or bunny rearranged the landscape. Had the weather matched the mood on the beach, the studios could have filmed the Titanic sequel there and not paid a penny for special effects.

A few hours of sun and sandcastles put most toons in a better humour. "Lunchtime!" Sweetie came trotting over from one of the fast food stalls, carrying a family-sized box of fried chicken. The box was about the size of the pink canary, and the weight of cooked poultry matched her own.

Shirley's tail feathers splayed out in disgust. "You're going to eat that? You're a canary not a vulture. Mondo gross!"

"A gross? Naw – not that many - I only got only a dozen pieces. Want one?" Sweetie bit into a drumstick with evident enjoyment, and offered the loon another deep-fried avian leg. "Relax – it's nobody we know." Her eyes narrowed. "Pity. There's that booby at Perfecto ... I'd pay cordon bleu prices for him, fricasseed." She contemplated, a smile on her beak. "They do chicken-fried steak - why not steak-fried chicken? Or tuna-fried booby?"

Shirley turned a delicate shade of green, and her aura made retching motions. "Uncool, Sweetie. That is like, just so grody!" From his expression Fowlmouth was trying and failing to come up with a word for it.

"Disney ducks sit down to eat roast turkey at Thanksgiving – and they even put it out on film." The pink canary snickered. "Just think. They're meant to be the cute ones around here." She proffered the box of Unlucky Fried Chicken to her friends.

Calamity happily accepted a crisp, deep-fried chicken leg and bit into the tender meat. *Booby would presumably be like albatross; sea-bird flavoured* his sign read. *Classical comedic cuisine. These days, you get wafers*

*with it.*

Fifi and Rhubella accepted a drumstick apiece and the two omnivores sat back and fed each other, Rhubella offering the meat to Fifi and visa versa. Sweetie stuck her tongue out, ducking the stream of toon red hearts that floated away from the couple. "Sappy," she grumbled, but kept one beady avian eye on them.

Up at the hotel looking over the beach, Hans von Hafflinger signed over his charges to Danforth. "There you go, Danny-boy," the equine grinned "they're all yours to look after, your expense, your responsibility. But they're still contracted to Perfecto - we need them fit and well for the team next week. Get them lost or damaged and you break it, you bought it! And I don't do discounts. Sign here." He proffered a contract.

Danforth spent five minutes reading the single page then ten more thinking over the legalese. At last he nodded curtly and signed it. "You'll stay around and watch the fun? I've got those Toons so stitched up it's just not funny - and they don't even know it yet." He handed over the payment, strictly cash on the nail as always.

"Not me, Danny-boy. Every time you go against Acme they've made duck hash out of you. You're on your own!" Hans' tail flicked up in contempt; Perfecto Prep taught the value of saving one's own skin, preferably by sacrificing some other Toon for it. "Now - I'll see you in class or at Kappa Omega frat no doubt." With that he was off, heading straight back to the airport. Perfecto's Principal Miss Hazel also taught her customers not to stand around in harm's way gloating at a plot. Perfecto graduates with their own Secret Lair made certain the captured Secret Agent was really shot on the spot or eaten by the sharks, not just left tied in the pit with the waters rising and only their completely harmless wristwatch or belt buckle available to use.

Danforth rubbed his feather-fingers together gleefully as he checked on the hacked link to a beach camera that the Acme party were still sunning themselves. "Right, toons. You're here as backup. I've turned a world of hurt loose on the Acme crowd - but there's no guarantee all of it will stick." He pulled out a bag with an array of cameras in it, and distributed them. "I want pictures of what happens to them, for the Perfecto Paragon news-sheet. Roderick will be gnawing his tail off with envy when he comes back and sees it! So - we're going to be watching the show and if there's anyone left standing at the end of it - his webbed foot made as if to grind something into the dust "you make sure - they don't stay that way." He grinned, waving his camera. "And when you're busy getting mallet-happy - that's my turn to get snap-happy."

Down on the marina, Rhubella and Fifi were strolling paw in paw when Fifi felt the rat's body tense up. "Ruby?" Her ear cocked up. "What ees wrong?"

"Don't look now," Rhubella gritted, her bare tail twitching "We have company behind. Clue - who goes around in packs wearing bright yellow chemical suits in this climate?"

"Can eet be - DEVO?" Fifi clapped her paws together in delight. She span around, and her face fell. "Helas! Eet is ze County Hazard people again, to make ze difficulties for moi. If zey chase us in zis sunshine zey will cook in les couture chemical - I know, I wore one for my 'Amton. We can out-run zem!"

"Hate to mention it but - look ahead." Rhubella pointed to a distant line of yellow figures, holding a line a quarter of a mile ahead. "It's hundred foot cliffs here - no way to get off the beach strip. We're trapped."

"Not zo fast! We 'ave the ocean 'ere. And we 'ave friends zhere." Fifi pointed out to one of the dinghies a little way offshore. "Zat is ze boat Mary and Jaggy rented today - I would know zat black and white sail anywhere."

Rhubella's paw dived into her pocket and pulled out her phone. "You know their number? We could use a lift!"

Fifi dialled Mary Melody's number as she and Rhubella rapidly walked out to the marina; running would be far too conspicuous. "Allo? Mary - we 'ave ze problems. Can you be ze lifeboat for us? Thank you! We will be at the outer dock in two minutes." She heaved a sigh of relief and passed the phone back to Rhubella. "Eet will break ze trail, crossing ze water. And 'zose skunk-prejudiced toons zey can try tracking us to Tijuana."

By the time the sailing boat had tacked into shore, Fifi and Rhubella were waiting for it at the outermost dock. Turning round, Rhubella winced. "Just in time. There's a tide of yellow coming through the marina gates - they're hot on our trail."

"My trail, cherie," Fifi's tail drooped sadly. "I am ze one zey want."

"Our trail." Rhubella hugged her fiercely. She looked around, there were several parties of official-looking toons in suits waiting on the jetty, but they paid no heed to the rat and skunkette. "And thinking about our trail - the wind's shifted. They're tracking us by air-scent now, not having to pick it off the ground." Only two hundred yards away thirty yellow-suited figures were advancing confidently along the dockside.

"Mary! Jaggy!" Fifi waved happily as the boat pulled up, Mary throwing a line to the shore where Fifi secured it to a bollard. "Eet is tres bon to see you! We 'ave ze problem again with ze authorities."

"Them again? Well, they don't have jurisdiction at sea," Mary stepped ashore, Jaggy following. "Jump in - it's a squeeze but we'll all fit in. We can take you a mile or two down the coast, that should throw them off."

Just then the six human toons in grey suits stepped forwards. "Mary Melody? Jaggi Di Speckle? We're from the local Authorities. We've had reports about you two lovebirds. Could you step this way please?"

"Reports? What about? I have my sailing license, so does Jaggi," Mary asked, puzzled.

The leader pulled out a sheaf of printouts. "We're from Juvenile hall."

Mary blinked. "You're a few years too late. Look, here's my ID with my date of birth and everything - and Jaggi's a year older."

"And that's another report we have. Fake IDs! Grab them, boys!"

Jaggi held his hooves up protestingly. "No need to get rough. I'm sure we can sort all this out at the office." Mary nodded, stepping to his side.

Just at that moment the first yellow-suited pollution hunter stepped onto the dock - and spotted Fifi. He pointed, and waved the rest of the squad forwards.

"Cast off! We'll look after the boat, Mary!" Rhubella scrambled into the fifteen-foot dinghy, Fifi vaulting in after her. "There's nothing else we can do!"

"But ..." Fifi looked on in anguish. "We nevair desert a friend! Nevair!"

"You can't fight City Hall without a lawyer. Scent blasting them won't help anyone. And the goons in yellow are armoured against that anyway," Rhubella shoved the boat clear of the dock just in time. "We're not deserting them - we're making a tactical withdrawal. We know where they're being taken - but if we don't get clear ourselves - we can't help them. Can we?"

Fifi gritted her teeth. She sighed. "Ruby - I 'ate to say it - you are right. One good thing - you say you 'ave sailed before? You can sail zees ship?"

Rhubella blushed. "I've sailed across the Caribbean, yes. But - it was a proper yacht with a crew doing the work." She looked up at the flapping sail. "I used to watch them sometimes though. I mean, how hard can it be?"

A skunkette shook her head. "Eet ees as 'Amton and Sweetie told me. Le "Kon-Ducky" boat trip all ovaire again. We weel probably end up in Hawaii or ze Aleutians..."

Babs had spotted a clothes boutique at the end of the resort the previous day, that she and Shirley had set their hearts on. After lunch, they had made a bee-line for it and made the local economy very happy. Marcia had tagged along, marvelling at the hideously alien habits of Earth toons.

"Aaah. What to wear, what to wear?" Babs looked at a display of elegant gowns. "One like this, will be my new look." She ran her fingers through her ears, stroking her ribbons. "These are cute - but I've been wearing them too long. After graduation - a clean break. How about you, Shirley?"

"Fer sure, Babs," The look looked down at her long, elegant legs. "But today - a new ribbon for me. A green one of vegetable dyed bamboo fabric, like mondo eco-friendly." They made their purchases and headed out. Half a dozen avians were awaiting them on the street.

"You're, ah, all under arrest." The tall buzzard grabbed Shirley, while two more seized Babs and Marcia. "You're charged with, um, charges, OK?"

"Hey, we paid for all this!" Babs waved a credit card receipt. She cocked her head to one side as she looked at the half dozen uniformed toons. "They're using the military as store detectives? Tough town."

Shirley's plumage bristled. She focused her will. "We are not the toons you're looking for."

"Ayup, you are. You're coming with us."

Shirley focussed her mind on the trooper's. Her eyes went wide. It was like trying to argue with Concord Condor - there was nothing in there to grasp. "You're official? I saw that military recruiting poster said, like, "*Be all you can be*," but I didn't know they let just Anybody in!"

The buzzard drew himself up. "The Colonel, he'll want to see you, ah, yup. He don't reckon we're so bad. He said, we've an IQ so high we can't even count that far."

There was a brief silence.

"It sounds like," Babs mused "Your colonel took a comedy class or two at Acme Loo."

"Ayup. He's eddi-cated," the buzzard nodded. "You toons are, um, busted."

"All this time trying to get Buster ... and this is how it happens," Babs sighed. "Oh! I thought you said "Buster'd."

It seemed to be quite untrue that the Government always used unmarked black vans; the one Babs and Shirley were driven off in was bright orange and clearly marked "*Careful! Mutant Balloon animals in Transit!*" In California it attracted no attention whatsoever. In ten minutes they discovered just how secure the cells were as the door closed behind them.

"Well, I don't think anyone managed to follow us." Babs frowned as the guards left them. "That leaves us to get ourselves out of here. How about the door?" She spin-changed into Wonder Babs, and suddenly grinned. "How about a 'Super Babs Bunny kick' to take that apart?"

Shirley concentrated her talent at the door and suddenly flinched back as if she had touched a hot stove.

“Babs! It’s backed with tubes full of pressurised liquid ... some kind of solvent mix. I can’t read it but I’m getting like ultimate dark, heavy vibes off it. Don’t try and break that door! It’ll blow into the room!”

“Booby-trapped? With Dip?” A set of pink ears went rigid, then drooped. “Now, isn’t that – inconvenient. At least the boys weren’t caught. Buster’s hard to stop and Plucky ...” Babs’ ears drooped briefly, but then perked up. “Well, he’ll do something. Or make a good diversion trying to. If he wears that Ninja outfit he’s the most conspicuous target in town.”

Shirley sighed, looking at the cell. Even the areas not charged with Dip were lined with earthed metal mesh, thick lead plate and rune engraved rowan-and-elder wood laminate making it impervious to high-energy and high-magick attacks both. In California there were evidently enough high powered New Age styled criminals to make it worthwhile building special cells for; Shirley’s powers could hardly dent the walls. “You think he’s, like, going to get us out?”

“Sure! Plucky’s probably phoning Hamton right now to sell all his DVDs and games consoles and try and raise cash for our bail...” Babs slowly ground to a halt as her optimism tank ran dry. “Or not, knowing Plucky. Oh well. Why don’t I just say, “This is another fine mess we’ve got us into.”

Shirley’s levitation seemed to run out of energy to match her bunny friend; she sank down to the steel bench like a hovercraft with the engines running down. “It’s not you. This is all the fault of me and my bum Karma, Babs. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“Done what?” Babs’ ears crossed quizzically.

“Mother told me, never to look at my own future. Trying to change what you see there always comes out wrong. Sixteen real futures I looked at, last month. Fourteen of them had two happy ducks in them, Plucky and Maria. She’s his species exacto-mundo, Babs - and she’s more like what he really wants in a girl. Believe me, I know what’s in his head.” The loon shivered slightly; despite being immaterial her aura always felt like it needed a wash in the mornings now. “If she’d been around at Acme Loo from the start ...”

“You could have been stuck with Fowlmouth all this time. Look on the bright side,” Babs suggested.

Shirley shook her head. “Plucky always asked why I couldn’t predict for him next week’s horse race winners or lottery numbers. It doesn’t work like that. I could show him a number but is it from, the timeline we’re in? I shouldn’t have tried to change what I saw. The sixteenth future was almost over and gone, I’d been like chasing it off every time I zapped Plucky’s tail when he got fresher than I wanted.”

“Um. But you’ve been on-and-off with him for ages. That ought to count for something,” Babs’ nose twitched.

“Maybe a year ago. It’d still have been harmonious, I could have changed my mind back then – but I’d already gone so far away from it I had to force everything back on track. Like building a levee where the river wanted to flow. My aura lost a few shades of pure that day.” Shirley sighed.

“Well, it worked. He’s yours now, whether he likes it or not,” Babs shrugged. She looked at Shirley closely. “Shirley? You’re having second thoughts about it? Hey, that’s allowed! It’s not like you married him already.” For so many years it had been Plucky who had been the pushy one while Shirley more or less tolerated him and slapped him down when he went an atom’s distance past the line she set. It had been funny at first to see them swap places, Babs admitted, but control of a cowed and terrified drake was no foundation to build a life together. A tamed and broken Plucky was not what she guessed Shirley wanted.

Shirley shook her head. “Babs. You know Plucky. I know Plucky. He’s greedy, selfish, egotistical and cowardly. He’s got the spiritual sensitivity of industrial waste. Do I really want to sit on eggs someday from a drake like that? Hoping they don’t turn out like him? That’s no way to be.” Her slender frame drooped. “And – I want him to be happy too. I saw that for him and Maria together, in all those futures. Those futures were real and I stopped it happening. I wanted what they had and, like, took it all away from them. Bad, bad karma.”

“Gee, I suppose you did.” Babs’ ears went down remembering the previous evening’s meeting with Plucky in the hotel corridor. “Umm - Plucky, he did say he’s feeling a bit, overwhelmed by it all. Oh well, better than under-whelmed. I suppose.”

“Mother says, if you love them then, like, let them go. If it’s real they’ll be back. If not - you were like fooling yourself major style anyway.” Shirley sat up straight, bracing her shoulders. “When we get out of this -“ she took a deep breath “I’ll let Plucky go. If he wants to go.”

Babs’ ears went down. “He’s a fool if he does.” Pink ears dipped further as she measured Plucky up for the fool’s outfit and knew how well it fitted. “He’ll never find another girl like you.”

Shirley sparked a burst of psychic energy between her finger-feathers as she had often toasted green tail-feathers with. “That’s exactly what I think he’s hoping.”

Although the male toons had been very happy to escape yet another wander round clothing shops, they had stayed close enough to see what had happened to Babs, Shirley and Marcia - though too far away to get to



them in time.

“Those weren’t the cops,” Plucky hissed, straining to hold Buster back. “That badge is listed in my big Who’s Who of Conspiracy Theories. They’re Unit 4 Plus Two, an Abnormal Forces unit. Specialists in Utterly Unclassifiable Threats. So top-secret they only have one chapter in the books.”

*Abnormal forces. Don’t you mean ‘Special Forces?’* Calamity asked, a grey ear raised quizzically.

“I know what I mean. Channel Nine tried to do an expose on them last year. They found ... absolutely nothing! What does that tell you about the kinds of power and support they must have for that kind of cover-up?” The drake’s feathers were shivering. “The book said - *“Don’t ask them where they go. Don’t ask them what they do. Don’t ask them how they do it. They just might take you along and show you.”*”

“Maybe that’s who they were. But I recognised those three big bruisers across the street who were watching with cameras. They weren’t Press either - they’re from Perfecto. Remember that last ice-hockey game?” Buster’s ears went up. “Wayne and Clint - the other one I don’t know his name – he’s the one who hit you into the back of the net, slice and dice.”

“Oh yeah. Now I know how a hockey puck feels.” Plucky winced. “What’s the Perfecto heavy mob doing here?”

“How does “revenge” sound?” Buster raised an ear quizzically. “I bet it sounds good to them. Think, Danforth. He was there too. Think, Perfecto never lose - they say.”

*They’re not tourists. Why would they turn up with cameras unless they knew there was something about to happen?* Calamity queried. *They must have had something to do with it.*

Buster grinned. “So, Danforth thinks it’s round two, and he’s in the lead. I say it’s round three. We can’t take on City Hall. Unit 4 Plus 2 are out of our league. But Danforth we can handle. There’s only one six-star hotel we’ve seen around here - I bet that’s where we’ll find him!”

It took ten minutes to get back up the hill to where Rhubella had been staying. Fortunately, although Rhubella had handed in her own pass key when she left, she had “forgotten” about the one Fifi had got from Danforth.

“That looks like the place.” Buster spotted an unmarked door in a corner of the building furthest from the main foyer. “Fifi said there was a private entrance. Guess the folk here pay for privacy.”

*What about security cameras?* Calamity queried. Then the coyote blushed slightly as he thought it through. *Oh. Of course. They want privacy so no security cameras here. Which works for us.*

“Right!” Buster tried the pass key, and grinned when the door opened silently. “And now – let’s see just what incriminating evidence Danforth left lying around. They always do.”

Five minutes later they were in the right room, spotting a “DD” monogrammed silk dressing gown hanging up in the wardrobe. Calamity Coyote versus any electronic lock was a very unequal contest; the young tech genius’s ears went right up as he pointed at a laptop left on the bedside table. A few more minutes saw to the password and Perfecto’s finest encryption system.

“Look! Danforth’s still got the plan open,” Buster pointed at the screen and scanned what was on it. “So that’s how he did it all.”

Calamity’s eyebrows rose, impressed as he examined the programs. *Letting the Authorities do their dirty work. And sending in the “hockey team” to mop up anyone who got away?* The coyote frowned. *Still, they’re still out there and outweigh us 10 to one!*

Buster brightened up. “So who’s going to challenge them to free-style wrestle anyway? My mentor Bugs always told me, *“ya uses what ya gots”*. We’ve got our speed and our smarts. Plus everything they’ve been teaching us at Acme Loo, all this time. We’ll use all of that.” He suddenly grinned. “And now it’s our turn to play - Buster Bunny style.” He turned to Calamity. “Do you still have your unlimited ACME charge account?”

The coyote nodded vigorously, a credit card appearing in his paw from somewhere not easily defined. His sign read *Paid up till end of term!*

“Meep Meep!” Little Beeper commented.

“Right.” Buster beckoned Little Beeper over. “So, here’s what we’re going to do ...”

Down on the main strip, the Perfecto team were on the road between the Acme toons and their hotel. Sooner or later they would have to come back that way and Danforth would be waiting.

“It’s just those three left now,” Danforth rubbed his wing-fingers together gleefully. “That duck split from them - he’s no sort of threat. I’ll handle him myself. Wayne! Clint! You know what to do. Stay in sight of the main three speed merchants. As soon as nobody’s around - hammer time.” He turned to Chuck. “Are you still keeping an eye on them?”

The hulking bear scratched his head in bafflement, putting down the binoculars. “Dey had a safe on a trolley at de end of de road, boss - I’s watching dem when dey started heading dis way. Dey turned sorta blue and

off-focus - cain't see dem no more..." There had been the distant sound of a bunny spooling up to full power but that had faded, oddly enough as the Acme crowd began to accelerate.

Danforth opened his bill. Although Perfecto taught no Toon Physics courses, he had been on the receiving end of the Acme crowd before. And then there was no time left.

"Gangway!" On its inertia-proofed Acme "super trolley" the four-tonne Acme safe was foreshortened by a foot and its light so far blue-shifted as to be invisible head on with Buster, Calamity and Little Beeper behind it, pushing at full speed. "OK toons - let's put this on full boost!"

"Meep Beep!!" Little Beeper commented wittily. Buster grinned.

"You said it. That's telling' em!" Buster put his shoulder to the safe.

*They could call you "Booster Bunny"*, read Calamity's sign, barely visible in a welter of speed-lines as Buster ramped up to full after-bunner. The coyote's calculations were perfect as always - as the safe and the three hulking Perfecto toons suddenly came together as the world's highest energy bowling alley. Letting the safe run on, they screamed to an instant halt in a style that would have made Professor Wile-E proud of his Toon Physics class.

"Strike!" Buster watched as Clint, Wayne and Chuck departed on new orbits round the sun. He looked down - being smaller, rather than being knocked for an astronomical home run Danforth had been run down by the trolley and was currently doing an impression of roadkill duck that had Calamity drooling at the sight.

"Beep, beep!" The young road runner looked down, a grin on his beak as he prepared another witty salvo at the duck's expense.

"You said it! One flat-packed duck - some reassembly required." Buster spin-changed into a chef complete with industrial-scale spatula. He looked down at the squashed fowl, whose eyes were blinking up at the Acme toons. "And now - it's confession time. Or does Calamity get Chinese style pressed duck for dinner?"

A mile up the beach road, a brightly painted helicopter clearly labelled "Traffic watch" touched down, attracting no attention whatsoever. Its passenger was officially meant to ride in a totally black-painted model without insignia, but had found they were far more conspicuous. He stepped out, ducking under the rotors and spotted his troop awaiting him. Four of them were buzzards, and the fifth was a large but sleepy-looking hound.

"Colonel Fenix? We've got the suspects, ah, all secured," the nearest buzzard saluted. "They're in, ah, secure holding." The party walked towards the compound that was clearly labelled "*Coastline party favours Incorporated*" and just to save confusion had another sign saying "*NOT a Government Front! Honest!?*"

A tall golden-feathered avian looked around at his staff with a tired smile as he walked in and shut the door behind them. He resembled an eagle slightly, though his tail-feathers were showier without quite having the extravagant spread of a peacock. In the dim light a golden haze somehow seemed to cling to him. He took off his cap and flicked it behind him: the hat travelled twenty feet and landed neatly on its proper peg. Being urgently recalled from long-overdue leave was something he could have done without, but his boss Major-General Snafu had been most insistent. As adult Toons aged no faster than the rocks, just by staying in the military long enough any Private Third-Class could rise to power in the Pentagon by sheer seniority.

"Let's look at this," Colonel Hal Fenix spread his tail-feathers comfortably around the chair. "Hmm. Emergency alert message in from USACEURMAID." The agency had no other name, and the only toons who had ever known what it stood for had retired long ago forgetting to pass the information on. "Aiding and abetting an Illegal Space Alien. Generic Conspiracy Felony. Aiding a known Threat to the Planet." He frowned. "That's a lot of major crime for toons who won't be legally buying a beer till next year. Does this look odd to you, Corporal Kaolin?"

"Uh, the Martian is listed as fifty-two Martian years, sir," Corporal Kaolin pointed to one of the attached files. "Boosts the average?"

"If this is genuine I should have felt it in the Farce," Fenix stared at the file. "I should have scented it. When I can't - either I'm losing my touch or something really stinks."

"Private Montmorill was there. They didn't resist, Sir," Kaolin puzzled "Funny. I didn't think they'd come quietly. We all were issued with earplugs just in case."

"Let's take a look at these dangerous criminals." Colonel Fenix said, standing up again. With a snap of his fingers the hat levitated away from the peg and returned to his head where it sat neatly. "This, I have to see."

"According to the books, I should be able to call my Ambassador." Marcia Martian sat slumped on the bench in the cell. "Unfortunately I AM the only Martian on Earth - so I am the ambassador too." She blinked. "Does your telephone work in here?"

"I tried it. The room's shielded and we can't get a signal out," Babs' ears went up a notch as a thought came to her "Shirley? Can't you send your aura out and see what's going on? It's being stuck in here not knowing that's driving me nuts."

"It's plain no-good-ville," Shirley stared at the walls of the holding room. "Whoever built this was mondo pro at channelling psychic forces into matter. I thought my aura wasn't affected by material things at all. But I can't even see through this."

In response, her powder-blue aura banged on the wall - only to wince and rub her knuckles. Just then, the aura's glowing eyes went wide in shocked surprise as if she had heard something - she rapidly retreated from the wall. Shirley blinked, communing for a second. "Whoa! Heads up Babsie! Something's heading our way. Something like major!"

A brightly glowing feathered hand materialised through the wall like a toon walking through a waterfall. It was followed by the rest of a tall toon avian - not an eagle, but something Babs had never seen before. She heard Shirley gasp in astonishment.

"What is it, Shirley?" Babs looked around the room. The glowing avian shape was as tall as Foghorn Leghorn and far more athletically built; it - no, definitely he, she corrected, - stood motionless for a minute just inside the room, looking around at its occupants with a keen interest. Shirley looked as distracted as if she was trying to juggle glass and hold a thrilling telephone conversation at the same time. The loon's aura had manifested a pair of designer sunglasses, and was looking up at the newcomer's own brilliantly glowing astral form with a coy expression.

"When I said, something like Major, Babs ... I wasn't far out. He's a Colonel. He knocked at my shields politely - but he could have been through them like they were a wet paper bag if he meant to," Shirley sat back, looking dazed. She cast an annoyed glance at her aura, who was preening powder-blue etheric feathers and looking at the new arrival as Fifi usually did at the sight of a handsome skunk male. "Cool it, girl! I mean it! Serious!"

"What is he? I've never seen a toon like that before," Babs's ears were right up.

The door to the cell opened silently and the solid avian walked in to stand beside his astral form, the toon wearing most of a uniform. "Colonel Fenix by name and Phoenix by nature, Ma'm," he sketched a bow. "I'd like to know what you're doing here."

"You'd like to know? But your crowd arrested us!" Babs' ears went right down.

The phoenix gave an acknowledging nod. "Yes, Ma'm, that we did. And yes, we ought to know why. We received information on you that makes no sense at all. Despite the first reports, I've checked and Miss Martian is here quite legally and has even signed a pledge not to destroy Earth."

Shirley cast Babs an embarrassed look. "He is NOT what I expected. He could have read me like the menu at Weenie Burger whether I liked it or not. He asked kinda polite, and I showed him direct."

"Saves time. I can tell Miss Loon cannot lie, even if she wanted to. I can also see that she's innocent of the charges. Which means someone else is guilty of fooling us, and we don't like that a bit." Hal Fenix raised an eyebrow. "When we find out who - that's where my talents come in. Although I don't have to give anyone the third degree - unless it's a dull afternoon and I feel like it. - I can always get the truth out of a toon." He gave a most unmilitary wink. "Ladies - we could carry on this discussion somewhere a little more comfortable."

On the roof of the secret government compound, a figure dressed in a somewhat ill-fitting Ninja outfit picked his way across the tangle of arials and ventilation outlets. Large webbed feet were not exactly perfect for stealthy climbing, and despite its owner hating the hard work of flying, he had made the effort to glide in from the top of a nearby building for an economy air-drop. He had responded to a sudden intuition as to where Shirley was - despite everything, the idea of her being in trouble bothered Plucky more than he liked to say. His ego still smarted as he recalled Buster and the rest had not argued or tried to dissuade him when he had dramatically announced he had to leave them on a secret mission of his own. Still, why share the glory?

"Hmm. The Big Secret book of Ninjitsu had a chapter on this," a recognisable voice muttered to itself. "Make the rope fast with that knot - or is it this one? Eeenie-meenie-miny-mo, catch a Samurai by his toe..." Plucky opened a rain cowl to reveal the traditional ventilator shaft entrance, and made the rope fast to a radio aerial. He experimentally put his weight on the rope, as he prepared to lower himself down the shaft.

There was a sudden zipping sound of fast-moving rope as the knot came undone. A second later there was no longer any sign of a Ninja assault in progress. But from the steel shaft echoed a plaintive cry of "*Plucky go down da hoooooole ...*"

By a staggering coincidence, Plucky fell through the ventilator grill in a classic "slice and dice" take - right into an office where Babs, Shirley and Marcia were sitting with large mugs of military-issue coffee, talking animatedly with Colonel Fenix.

"Well, isn't that convenient!" Babs' ears went right up, as she and Shirley rebuilt the blocks into an approximate duck shape. "How did you find us, Plucky?"

"How else? Brilliant detective work! Years of training as Bat-Duck pays off!" Plucky struck a pose.

Shirley gave a serene smile. "And his aura and mine are linked, Babs. It's just a matter of pulling him up by the astral anchor cable. As soon as we got out of the shielded room I thought it'd like, save time to bring him

over.”

“Sheesh! You just love bursting other toons’ balloons, don’t you? Still - Plucky is here to rescue you!” The green drake swelled in a dramatic pose.

“Plucky ... we’re rescued. The door’s open,” Babs pointed out. “And if we weren’t - what would you do about it?” As if on cue, a dozen armed buzzards surrounded Plucky. “Don’t worry guys - he’s totally harmless.”

“Well, thank you, Babs.” Plucky glowered. “If I need a publicist I’ll know who not to ask. I never get the respect I deserve around here.”

“Actually, you get exactly that ...” Marcia Martian put in quietly. A masked mallard glared at her.

“Mister Duck. Pleased to meet you.” Hal Fenix raised an eyebrow, looking down at the mallard in the rather ragged ninja outfit. “Your friends have been telling me so much about you.”

Babs, Shirley and Marcia snickered in triplicate.

“Plucky, this is Colonel Fenix. Someone set his team on us - and they usually handle major-style uncool spirits, invading aliens and like, massively grody stuff.” Her aura nodded vigorously, eyes sparkling.

Plucky looked up at the phoenix, his feathers bristling. “Yeah? All I’ve seen is a flock of trailer-park rejects and one stuffed shirt. You don’t look so hot to me.”

“We aren’t in the Hollywood movie business,” Hal Fenix raised an eyebrow. “The monsters we handle aren’t just special effects. I can tell you that we normally deal with things Toon was not meant to Know. If you could see what we’ve seen...”

“Like, you could tell him but you’d have to erase him down to the model sheet?” Shirley snickered.

The phoenix nodded. “Why do you think most of my troopers are ... simple types? They don’t understand what they see, which often helps a lot. The first team I had were regular troops. Some of them went mad twice.”

“Dizzy Devil’s not someone who could lose any more sanity, no matter what,” Babs mused.

“There’s no such thing as real monsters,” Plucky scoffed. “Anyway - I’ve watched all the Eddie Cougar movies after midnight. I’ve seen cute purple dinosaurs on the daytime channels. Nothing scares me, pal.”

Hal looked round at Shirley. “Miss Loon? Should I show him?”

Shirley gave a wicked grin. “Well okay but nothing like too mondo mind-shattering.”

“Hardly has any to spare, and that’s a fact,” Babs commented dryly.

“Hmmp. I can take it. Bring ‘em on, your spooks and bogeymen.” Plucky squared up his shoulders. “I spent two weeks on a plastic back seat sitting next to Hamton’s Uncle Stinky. I eat the Mystery Meat at Acme Loo’s cafeteria!”

Hal Fenix briefly concentrated, and in a mind to mind flashback showed Plucky five seconds of that which had walked alive in Anaheim the week before.

“Mama.” Plucky turned rigid; his body transformed to stone then crumbled into dust.

Shirley tsked, shaking her head as she reconstituted the toon with a bottle of humanely harvested natural spring water. “One of these days, Plucky Duck, you’ll learn to believe in psychic forces.” She turned around to see her aura passing a note to the golden phoenix’s aura, and scuffling her immaterial webbed foot bashfully. “Will you quit that, girl?”

Her aura cast her material form a disgusted look. Pointing at Plucky, she materialised a scoreboard reading “.001” - and pointing to the brightly glowing phoenix aura she switched the numbers to “10.0”. An enthusiastic “plus” sign appeared next to it.

“One second,” Colonel Fenix flashed the loon’s aura a smile. “We have some interested parties arriving. Anyone you know, Miss Loon? They’re thinking about you.” His aura pointed off towards the beach.

Shirley concentrated. “Babs! It’s the rest of the crowd - Buster and Mary and the rest.” She winced, her beak puckering as if she had unexpectedly bitten into a rotten fruit. “And one other. Mondo bad vibrations coming from over there.”

“If you’d like to follow me?” Hal Fenix led the toons outside to the main road.

In a minute the party came into view round the corner - including Danforth Drake securely held in the Acme “Happy Hunting Grounds” toon net carried on a pole between Mary Melody and Jaggi Di Speckle in true “Tropical Hunter” style. They halted on seeing the troops of Unit 4 Plus Two, but at Babs’ cheerful wave came over with their captive. Introductions were brief and to the point.

“Mary? Jaggi? You’re back?” Babs said. “Fifi phoned and said you’d been arrested too.”

“We spotted them getting out of an official-looking van. Some very embarrassed-looking officials were in the back.” Buster grinned.

“Oh, Hi, Babs.” Mary Melody waved. “It was all a misunderstanding. Someone had told them we were travelling under fake IDs. They checked out. And it was a good thing I had this with me, too. It cleared a lot of confusion.” She unfolded a sealed legal document from her pocket and proudly displayed it.

Plucky craned his neck to look over the human woman’s shoulder. His eyes bulged. “You’ve both got Parental Consent to marry. Legal in both your birth states and Acme Acres too. You actually carry that around

with you? And ... you all had it notarised back in Acme Acres?"

"And they could check on that, and they did. You should have seen the look on their faces." Mary gave a somewhat smug smile as she squeezed Jaggi's hoof affectionately. "We're not planning to need it for a year or two - maybe quite a few years down the line. But it's best to have everything ready. Just in case."

"There are things you can handle with first aid and survival kits," Jaggi patted the large pouches on his belt that he always carried "and things you can't."

"Meep meep?" Little Beeper asked, his head cocked to one side curiously.

"Umm, actually, yes." Both Mary and Jaggi radiated toon blushes. The road runner's language was naturally understood by all toons just as well as Tarzan's own dialect where "*Ungawa!*" had as many meanings when talking to jungle animals as circumstances required.

Buster handed over the laptop, and gestured to the avian whose bill was securely shut with duct tape. "This is the one you want, Colonel. Here's what he did - and how. He's been tapping into everyone just to spite us."

While the phoenix physically looked at the screen, Hal's aura sauntered over to the captive drake. It grabbed Danforth and started to pull something out of him - a sickly yellowish-green ghost shape. It took a close look at the figure and twisted it like a wet rag, wringing it out. Extracting data from Danforth's psyche had much in common to extracting juice from oranges, and left the donor in similar shape afterwards.

Plucky shuddered. "That hurts. Believe me. I know."

"He deserves it, believe us." Shirley nodded towards her aura, who was watching the Phoenix's performance enraptured as if he was a world-class gymnast performing a flawless routine.

"Does she mean Plucky or Danforth?" Buster whispered to Babs.

"Eehh... there's one of those questions that Toon was not meant to know the answer," Babs whispered back.

"This is all rather irregular," Colonel Fenix raised an eyebrow as his aura returned with whatever information it had prised out. "We don't appreciate toons hacking Government systems. I can do this through official channels and spend a month on a tonne of paperwork fighting Mr. Drake's lawyers. Not very eco-friendly, using all that paper. And why should lawyers profit from it? Or I can put it down to a computer glitch and walk away, leaving Mr. Drake helpless in the middle of the crowd he's set up for a fall. I wouldn't even officially see what his fate was - though I'm sure it'll be suitably hideous. As far as I'm concerned none of this will have happened." He winked. "You'd be amazed at the things I see that never happened. Sometimes the days are just full of them."

"What?" Plucky pointed at Danforth "You're not going to arrest him?"

The Phoenix idly polished his already impeccable finger-feathers. "Officially - if he's out of my jurisdiction inside the next minute I can't do anything." He broadcast a thought to Shirley, who brightened up considerably and whispered to Babs and Buster. "Corporal Kaolin - un-tape and release the prisoner."

"About time too. I'll sue if ... awwkk!" Danforth's voice suddenly Doppler-shifted as in a perfectly synchronised move Babs and Buster ran forwards, swung with millisecond timing and planted a full-power stereo Toon kick on his tail-feathers.

"Whooh! That'd clear the top of the Acme Bowl," Plucky marvelled as the drake soared towards orbit in free ballistic flight.

Rhubella watched open-mouthed as the figure headed for space, air friction scorching his feathers and leaving a smoky trail through the atmosphere. "That's got to hurt."

Beside her, Babs spin-changed into a conservatively white-shirted NASA engineer complete with horn-rimmed spectacles, pocket protector and wearing a bulky headphone set. She spoke with a slight crackle as if through an old public address system.

"DAN 1 has cleared the launch tower ... now rising 4 miles high and 10 miles downrange..." she intoned in a deadpan voice. "Approaching maximum air loading at the speed of sound... oh! Oh! DAN 1 has exceeded structural limits! DAN 1 has broken up in the atmosphere! Oh, the humanity!"

"Duckmanity?" Buster queried, looking at the cluster of glowing streaks heading out over the ocean.

Rhubella gulped. "He ... he's ... gone? Forever?"

"Nah. A toon? A toon with a health plan like I bet he's got?" Buster shook his head. "No such luck. They'd only need to find a few feathers to put him together. He'll be back. Same as the rest after an orbit or two."

"Chilly up there, but toasty on the way down," Babs's ears went up in appreciation.

Colonel Fenix grinned. "I neither confirm nor deny I've reached my week's ration of toons permanently rubbed out. Let's say I'm glad that one won't count." He looked around the Acme group. "My work here is done, I think. There's a possibly haunted water-tower on a Burbank film lot we're getting some very unusual reports about. Should I send in a highly skilled team of psychic sleuths to subtly investigate or just dust off and nuke the place from orbit? It's the only way to be sure, or so they say. What to do, what to do ..."

"Well, isn't that the eternal question," Babs sympathised.

Colonel Fenix touched his cap respectfully. "And now, it really is time to go. Apologies for disturbing you and your friends, ma'm. Enjoy your holiday!" He turned to Shirley. "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Loon. We could always use talented toons in our business - if the film career doesn't work out."

Shirley's aura looked up at the phoenix's golden astral form appealingly. The loon's better half stuck out her thumb like a hitch-hiker, posing to reveal a shapely leg. Shirley's demanding yoga exercises and years of cheerleading practice had left her legs extremely well toned and far from the "rubber-hose" shape they once had; her astral form mirrored her physical one exactly.

"If she was a dog I'd say 'heel'", Shirley muttered to Babs. "And I'd feel like one, too. Why should I stop her if she wants to go with him? She deserves to be happy. I mean, astrally speaking, Hal compared to Plucky ..."

"Golden Olympic champ against green champion couch potato?" Babs looked on, impressed despite herself. "No bets on that one."

Plucky waddled up to the phoenix, looking up furious and unafraid. "Hands off my girl, pal! You only want her for her mind."

"Oh?" The phoenix's eyes twinkled. "And how do you work that out? Though we always need talent, and Miss Loon is certainly a lady of rare talent."

"Should be a better match for Plucky than we thought," Babs whispered, snickering. "Well, he's rarely talented. Very rarely."

"I know how these things work. Drafting her into your team. Cloak and dagger work and black helicopters! Sending her out on missions, risking her life." Plucky's feathers bristled. "I won't have my girl getting hurt."

Colonel Hal Fenix laughed. "We don't recruit like that. Toons come to us when they decide to. Some work alongside us without formally joining the unit. Can you imagine Miss Loon of all people in uniform? "*Mondo uncool*", I think she'd say." He bowed slightly as he addressed Shirley. "But if you ever wanted to put your talent to better use than providing your own special effects on screen - we could certainly make it worth your while. Even working part time between films."

"You can't buy Shirley," Plucky scoffed. "Montana Max couldn't."

"Oh, not with money," Hal Fenix nodded. "I wouldn't even try. Miss Loon - we often confiscate fascinating artefacts from folk who put them to bad use. Spell books. Grimoires. Some items you won't find in the Acme catalogue. Better used by trustworthy toons in a good cause than put in the big warehouse and filed away forever with the rest. If you're interested in helping defend this Dimension - I'm sure you a mystic of your talents can find us again should you wish to. Till then, farewell."

Shirley's aura waved, seeming to droop like a deflating balloon as the phoenix departed with his troops. The powder-blue figure whispered angrily and urgently into her material body's ear. Her glowing tail-feathers twitched.

Shirley snorted. "Like, get real, girl. He's not our species, even." She cast a glance towards Plucky. "Yeah, I know, so neither is he. And that never stopped us before. I know what you mean, but ..." Her eyes suddenly went wide as a thought struck her. "Plucky! Did you just stand up for me against a toon who could physically take you apart feather by feather? Could make you disappear like last year's snow? Could do things to your mind you don't even have words for?"

"Yeah," Plucky's bill jutted out defiantly. "I made my mind up. If it's for you, Shirley - I'd do anything."

The loon's aura looked at him appraisingly, her ethereal head cocked to one side. She shrugged, and with a strange smile walked back into her material body. United, the loon and drake hugged lovingly.

"That's so sweet," Babs whispered into Buster's ear.

"And she didn't even have to use a cattle-prod on him this time!" Sweetie clucked, disappointed. "That's no fun. Sappy stuff."

The rest of the day passed without incident. Fifi and Rhubella had been carried miles out to sea before managing to tack back to the marina, but had phoned in as alive and well. Dizzy, Concord and the rest of the toons turned up with a fascinating story of being pursued half way across the State by the IRS, the FBI and the Shriners, that had finished in a toon battle over jurisdiction with all three groups swapping paperwork and realising they had been fooled. Dizzy still wore a Shriners' fez that had been gifted in apology.

"Well, that was good timing. We'll see you back!" Mary Melody finished tightening the laces of her skates as she and Jaggi prepared to leave as they had scheduled. "It'll take us two days to skate home - the scenic route." The pair carried small packs including an ultra-light camping kit; Shirley had promised to take charge of all their heavier kit and get it back to Acme Acres.

Jaggi wore an odd hybrid of crash helmet and broad-brimmed, Pulp Action Hero hat. He touched the brim respectfully. "It's going to be country roads and trails all the way back to Acme Acres - no fun skating down the highway. We're in no hurry now, the two of us." He bent down to adjust his skates to check the off-road mode,

the tyres ballooning out.

"If there was a Gag-lev train track like the Japanese run between Mega-Tokyo and Giga-Tokyo, that could get us back in twenty minutes," Mary pulled down the heads-up K-ACME teleprompter display from her skating helmet visor. "Trouble is, it only runs when it's funny." She set up the teleprompter to feed her the route maps, and waved cheerfully. Her face was still zebra-striped with white sunscreen, giving her an oddly camouflaged look.

"See you back!" Buster called as the two skated off together hand in hoof. The pair of two-toned toons were soon lost to view behind the palm trees of the next bend.

"Meep Meep!" Little Beeper summed up the mood pithily. The toons pondered his words.

"Fer sure. I don't need to be, like, Nostradamus grade to predict their future away ahead," Shirley raised an eyebrow. "Striped toon foals. Lots of them."

"But for now there's fewer of us ..." Babs' ears drooped for a few seconds. "One more night of Spring Break to go!"

Sheltering the marina was a breakwater that was usually busy with tourist fishermen, but at sunset there were few folk around. Babs was there with Fifi, Rhubella and Shirley at the end of the breakwater looking out over the ocean as the sun went down; Plucky had vanished back towards the main strip in quest of some snacks.

"He still believes if he can find a hot-dog vendor just about to close up, he can get everything half price, you know?" Shirley said, spotting a green figure at the shore end of the marina. "He doesn't give up ... it's one good thing about him." She paused. "There are others. But I had to dowse to find them."

"I'm glad you can love him for his faults and all," Babs marvelled. "So much to love!"

The loon gave a wry smile. "Plucky is Plucky. Not a bunch of grade scores. He's, who he is."

"Ah, oui! And, in one or two of 'ees films, Plucky 'e was... tres effective. Le Toxic Revenger... not so bad, certainment." Fifi admitted.

"Not that we'd better, like, ever tell him that," Shirley whispered. The other two snickered. "Don't want to spoil him." She waved and gagged slightly at the sight of Sweetie trotting up carrying a grilled seagull she had been roasting on a driftwood fire on the beach.

Fifi's ears drooped slightly. "Shirley," she asked "Rhubella et moi ... I was thinking - 'ave I .. spoiled 'er?"

"I don't feel any worse," Rhubella squeezed Fifi's paw. "I've had a wonderful holiday. But my idea of - going back to Perfecto and boasting to everyone how Danforth was ... inferior to a Skunk from Acme ..." She frowned. "Well, it's true. It'd do his reputation no end of hurt, and I'd get good marks for that from Miss Hazel the Principal. But I don't feel like saying it just to squash him any more."

"Ruby - 'zis one last time we will all forgive you all ze Perfecto nonsense. 'E deserves it!" Fifi snorted. "I 'ope zey never found all the duck pieces."

Shirley raised an eyebrow. "If you want I can, look at your auras? You'll have to give me, like, consent."

The rat and skunkette nodded seriously, still holding paws. Shirley breathed deeply, the loon closing her eyes as she slipped into a trance. Her aura manifested itself in a toon nurse's outfit, peering into both heads with a flashlight for a minute before diving back into Shirley's body.

Shirley snapped back to consciousness. "I've mondo good news ... and bad news. Fifi - you're fine, your heart's healing. It was major bad before. Deep cracks everywhere, and spreading. Rhubella's been good for you, girl, but if there's some "skunk-hunk" out there you like and can catch - go for it! She's not spoiled anything that way."

Fifi smiled. "If he and Ruby want ... we can, 'ow you say, share and share alike." Her tail swished in excitement.

"And the bad news?" Rhubella gripped Fifi's paw tighter.

Shirley gave an embarrassed grin. "You've been like spoiled for Perfecto massive style, Rhubella. I predict the next time anyone asks if you want to cut cards for status ... if they get away with their ears and tail still on they'll be lucky. For Roderick and Danforth and all that junk you are ... ruined. For life." She paused. "You know you can do better, and I predict you will."

"Oh great. I'm doomed." Rhubella's tail drooped. "Graduating from Perfecto - you have to cheat and back-stab your way through the finals - that's the way it's set up. There's not as many graduate places as there are students, someone is guaranteed to lose. The more fiendish the way you win, the better the score. Betray your best allies for the top marks - and I can't do it any more. It's just not in me." She looked into Fifi's eyes. "But - I don't mind so much now."

"Cherie - you 'ave a back seat to share with moi - whatever 'appens." Fifi kissed her. The two held each other close. Rhubella ran her paw through the wondrous expanse of Fifi's tail.

Sweetie sniffed. "Aww, you two. Get a room."

Fifi smiled at her. "We 'ave ze room. If Ruby she is thrown out of Perfecto she will need it, maybe, yes?"

“Hey!” Babs’ eyes went wide. “How about this for an idea. What if you did something really sneaky – and didn’t cheat? They wouldn’t expect that, would they?”

The rat-girl blinked, considering the radical idea. “Expect? They wouldn’t believe it in a thousand years. They’d look for my plan. They’d go nuts trying to find it ... they just couldn’t believe there wasn’t one!” Her tail twitched, a slow smile spreading over her features. “I can bet Danforth he won’t find the Master Plan.”

Babs gave a fiendish grin. “Go for it!”

Just then Plucky arrived empty-winged. Evidently there had been a shortage of desperate food vendors willing to dump their wares and prices. “Did I miss anything?”

There was a quintuple chorus. “Naaaahhhh.....”

The last morning dawned damp, and the bus had its windscreen wipers running all the way to Acme Acres where the weather cleared remarkably. One after another the toons were dropped off, till only five were left. Little Beeper’s eloquent comment “Meep Meep!” had summed the mood up perfectly.

“So, that was, like, our final Spring Break ... well, it was mondo fun!” Shirley stepped down off the bus, waving to Pete Puma and checking he had Mary Melody’s luggage ready to drop off. “At least - for most of us.”

“Oh woe! Oh woe is me,” Babs stood by the roadside a hundred yards from her burrow as the bus drove off. She spin-changed into a peasant dress with a red hooded cloak, and struck a tragic pose. “Our break is all over and nothing to show for it. There’s nothing else for it - I shall wander helplessly through the dark depths of Acme Forest and surrender to the Big Bad Wolf my poor unwanted bunny body. Cute toes and all.”

Shirley held up a “9.5” score card. Fifi gave it a “9.2”, Plucky a “5.0” and Buster’s “10” had a hastily added minus sign on the front of it. Babs tossed her head, contemptuously. “The blue judge is disqualified for personal involvement ... or lack of it all week. Fast moves, from Mister ‘*We crack up all the censors.*’ So what was there to censor anyway?”

Shirley shrugged. “You’ll be too busy for much of that now. It’s going to be hard work in class from now on.” Her aura gave a brief crackle of lightning and manifested as a great bat-winged shape that wrapped around Plucky. “And that means I’ll need recharging. A lot of recharging. Like, Plucky, I hope you had a ... relaxing time. That’s over now. Now it’s ... hard ... work.”

Plucky gave an embarrassed grin. The two waterfowl hugged. Babs’ ears went right up as she saw Plucky’s pale green aura step out of his solid feathers and embrace Shirley’s own powder-blue astral form. Evidently his spirit body had been doing the equivalent of intensive bodybuilding.

“Ah, Plucky, ‘e weel nevair be cruel to ze battery jumper leads again,” Fifi smiled. She had kissed Rhubella farewell as the bus stopped in central Acme Acres where she could get a taxi home. Oddly, Calamity Coyote had insisted on stopping there too, claiming he had something urgent to collect in town. “And I ‘ave ‘ad ze holiday romance with ze difference!”

“No “Skunk-Hunk” this time round, eh?” Babs nudged her. “Fifi, you know that’s never turned out well for you when you DO spot one. Even a real one, not just some toon with painted stripes.”

Fifi shrugged. “Eet is, you say, ze “ard-wired” in moi. One day ‘zere will be one who will not run away but towards moi.” Her tail swished. “But, ze romance ees - ze romance wherevair it comes from. Vive l’amour!”

Sunset found the two bunnies (still no relation) sitting back to back on a grassy knoll looking at the tower of the Looniversity as the warm Spring evening lengthened and the shadows crept out over the Acme Looniversity campus. Tomorrow they would be back in class. Buster was not one to repeat gossip, but he had news of two of their classmates that Babs would want to hear. Or so he thought.

“Babs. It looks like Spring Fever’s claimed another pair of us. The strangest things are happening this year.”

Babs raised an eyebrow. “How strange? Barky Marky and Lightning Rodriguez have eloped?”

“Eh ... not THAT strange, even if it is California,” Buster shuffled a paw in embarrassment. “Calamity and Marcia. Officially.”

“Marcia Martian and Calamity Coyote are a couple now?” Babs clapped a paw against her pink forehead, eyes goggling. “Oy oy oy! Buster - her body ink chemistry’s Vanadium based. If he wasn’t a toon Calamity’d go into toxic shock every time he kissed her.”

Buster cocked his head to one side, considering the matter. “With a snout shaped like his, I’m not sure he can exactly kiss anybody... slobber maybe.”

Babs snorted. “That’s the least of his problems.” Marcia was officially listed as a girl, but from what she had confided in Babs once, Martian family life was more complex - Babs tried to remember whether the number of genders on Mars was eleven and a half or eleven and three-quarters. Martian TV dramas ran for decades; they usually involved tricky detective work as to who was currently in what form, and instead of having simple romantic triangles the plots required shapes normally needing higher dimensional mathematics to resolve. “I’d have thought



only Gogo Dodo might show an interest in Marcia - considering he's dated a fire hydrant and a parking meter. They're far more "the girl next door" than Marcia will ever be."

"Umm - exotic?" Buster asked.

Babs suppressed a giggle. "Buster. I've seen that girl in the shower and believe me, a pine tree and Calamity would be more "compatible". When she was sick last year they had to treat her for potato blight, not flu. She's built like nothing on earth."

"Who knew?" Both bunnies chorused automatically.

A cunning look came over Babs' face. "I was wondering what they were doing trading those diagrams. I bet it took even them a week to figure something that'd work for them both." She had tried hard to work out exactly what some of the coyote's latest vaguely biological-looking mechanisms were meant for - when asked Calamity's sign-boards came out spelt in Martian with bits censored out. "I saw one of those diagrams - I thought it looked like the parts of an oil refinery. It was someone's working parts, all right."

"And that's Calamity for you. Looks like Weird Science includes Biology." Buster suddenly locked rigid at the sight before him. Babs had spin-changed into a parody of a 1950's space suit, complete with skimpy metal foil bikini, goldfish-bowl helmet (with holes for her ears) and a TV aerial on top.

Babs fluttered her eyelids. "Do you like my aerial ... up, or down?" She bent forward to kiss the blue buck - and discovered the limitations of goldfish-bowl space helmets. There was a loud bump.

"Now that," Buster admitted, rubbing his nose "was Comedy."

Babs spin-changed back to her regular outfit and repeated the manoeuvre with more success minus the helmet. Buster gasped - and melted into a puddle again.

"No, THAT was comedy." Babs pulled an industrial-sized cocktail shaker from somewhere not clearly defined, scooped up Buster's genetic material, and poured him out into his usual shape, though looking somewhat dizzy. "Mmm. My favourite rabbit dish. Shaken a little - and stirred."

Buster returned her kiss, and with a happy sigh Babs melted in turn.

*We'll try to make sure this doesn't happen to us both at once*, she reminded herself before reconstituting. *"Amoebas in Love" though - hmm, it makes an original film title, at that ...*

Suddenly Babs' ears wilted like week-old lettuce as she ticked off a mental list. Mary. Harriet. Shirley. Fifi. Rhubella. Marcia, even! "Buster, how did this happen?" Babs was more shocked than tearful or annoyed, as she looked into Buster's eyes. "Or should I say how could this possibly fail to happen? The break was the perfect time for us. We'll never have another like it. I'd have bet my ribbons on us getting together. I waited every night with my balcony door open."

Buster stroked a drooping pink ear affectionately. "Babs. I'd wait forever for you. You know that. You don't have to go rushing into things till you're sure,"

"Hello? Earth to Buster. Are you receiving me? I have been waiting like forever, that is the problem. I don't want to wait any more. I didn't want to wait this long. "Rushing" would have been our first semester at Looniversity. Tomorrow it's our last. There's glaciers could give your "rushing" a head start and get there first. And hotter." Now Babs was looking annoyed. Vinnie Deer's number was already in her phone, though she had not dialled it yet.

Buster adjusted his collar, a cloud of live steam escaping. "Besides, it's not like you're the only one who's been saving themselves for the right moment."

"Yes. I know. I am not a happy bunny here, Buster. You know why? The only ones left are me, Sweetie and Elmyra - and I don't want to even start thinking about that." Babs' ears shivered. "They might beat me to it at this rate!" Being listed in that company was not a comfortable position for the leader of the Amazing Three; Sweetie had a personality that Shirley claimed had served a dozen incarnations as a rattlesnake, and Elmyra was spoken of in fear and loathing at least as far as Marcia Martian's homeworld. Even Elmyra and Montana Max were a couple in theory, if only because she was the only one who wanted anything to do with him irrespective of his fortune. For any other girl ... once they knew him, there simply would not be enough money in the world let alone in his vaults.

Buster hugged her, softly.

"Me and my adorable toes. I might as well wear army boots. Even that Margot Mallard's been there, done that... and that ... and that ... I wouldn't boast about it but she does. She's got phone camera pics, even. And shows them off." Babs looked down at the floor. There were ugly rumours of the Perfecto Prep's "Bad Girl" duck's tastes, mostly spread by Margot herself. Rodney and Danforth were certainly depraved enough to oblige her.

"I know I've got a friend who's mature enough to know her own mind. One I've been falling in love with for a long time now." Buster said, stroking her drooping pink ear.

Babs' eyes flashed wide in anger. "Who? I'll kill her! If it's that overblown bunch of balloons Julie Bruin I'll flatten..." she broke off, spotting that Buster was gazing only at her. "Oops. Heh. Sorry. And thank you."

"Babs. When did you ever worry about following anyone else?" Buster tried to reason with her. "You've

got plans you're happy with. They're yours. Stick to them."

Babs turned and kissed him again, feeling her tail twitching. "I had plans. But they took two. No plan survives contact with the enemy." She gave a wan smile. "Thanks, Buster. I suppose knowing you're always here for me means I don't have to grab my chances, like Fifi." She sighed. "I suppose it was someone else's turn to be in the limelight. I never really thought about it. I just assumed I'd be the first."

"And you can be again." Buster looked into the downcast lilac eyes. "I'm sorry I made you wait - and I couldn't even tell you why. I paid Calamity Coyote all my free cash for the term, but he came up with something. I hope you like it."

Pink ears twitched. "Calamity got his time machine working at last? We can go back to the start of the break and ... uh, uh. Bad move, Blue ears. I tried out his prototype teleporter, remember? Teleported home to the kitchen just in time for Mom to drop the day's vegetables right there on the spot." She shivered. It had taken a month to stop smelling of onions or mentally hearing carrots scream when she bit them, and she still had urges on a sunny day to stand outside and photosynthesise.

Buster smiled. "If you'd accept - this. I want you to be first again." Suddenly in his paw was a small box. He offered it to her. "Better late than never?"

Babs' pupils went wide till they overlapped Anime style in a figure-of-eight, then shrank to pinhole size. "Buster ... is this ...?" Her mouth opened and closed, silently as Buster nodded. She opened the padded velvet box with unsteady paws.

Inside was a silver ring, with a small stone sparkling brilliantly. Babs picked it up, her ears trembling. "An engagement ring. And ... is that a diamond? A lilac diamond? But ... there's no such thing!"

"There wasn't, last week." Buster looked deep into her gaze. "It's the only one on Earth. I had Calamity synthesise it to match your eyes. Will you wear it for me, Barbara Anne Bunny?"

Babs Bunny, mistress of mirth and the snappy one-liner, gave a small unintelligible squeak. But she nodded vigorously, her eyes wide. Buster knelt and slid the ring on her pink finger.

Buster kissed his fiancée, still kneeling at her adorable toes. "It wasn't ready in time or I'd have offered it to you on the very first day of the break. You don't know how much I wanted to. And every day and night since."

Babs found her voice at last, with a gasp. "It's lovely. But ... Buster! You could have proposed to me with the ring off a can of carrot soda and I'd have said yes!"

"You'd have malleted me flat!" Buster's eyes went wide.

Babs' grin was surprisingly feral for a bunny as she considered for a second. "Oh, well. So I would. But, then I'd still have said yes." She smiled, and whispered into his ear. "*Rabbit Season?*"

"Rabbit season," Buster whispered back.

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## Epilogue

Mrs. Barbara Anne Bunny awoke and looked up at the dawn light coming in through the windows of the bridal suite, and sighed a contented sigh. "Babs and Buster Bunny ... related. By marriage." Her heart thudded visibly under the sheets. Blue and pink fur mingled on them now; it was a sight she had been looking forward to for a very long time. She turned round to see the handsome blue and white buck lying beside her, still fast asleep.

The exam preparations had taken every waking hour since they returned from Spring Break and she had needed every minute apart from that just to sleep - even so, she had amazed herself by waiting till her wedding night rather than dragging Buster off and insisting on giving him a "dress rehearsal" or fifty. Once she had actually gone shopping with Fifi and Shirley and chosen a white wedding dress, waiting a little longer to wear it honestly had started to seem worthwhile.

Babs and Buster had graduated top of their class, winning the Looniversity's highest award of "*Summa cum loony*" and invited everyone to their wedding right there on the spot. Plucky had yelled and tantrumed the place down in a fine emulation of his mentor Daffy at having only scraped a bare Pass; he might have raised still more of a fuss had not his (surprisingly egg-heavy) loon fiancée turned the psychic equivalent of ten thousand volts through him to universal applause. Evidently they had agreed the one scoring the lowest marks was to stay at home and sit on the nest and Shirley had graduated the third highest in the class, even beating Hamton by one mark. Plucky and Concord Condor had scored level, and the buzzard had not even tried to cheat.

"Mmmm... well, at last I made an honest buck - and Buster made an honest doe of me. Who knew?" She stretched, running her fingers through her fur. On the bedside table were her violet contact lenses; they were entirely cosmetic and she would keep them off for the Bunnymoon. There would be a new-look Babs launching soon, ready to take Hollywood by storm that might or might not have the brown eyes she was born with. As befitted a film star with an established career, although she and Buster were married she had insisted on keeping her maiden name. Buster had raised no objections. *It's a good thing it's Bunny anyway*, she laughed to herself. *How*

*convenient!*

In a mischievous mood, she stealthily drew off the sheet and took a look at Buster wearing only the wedding ring whose twin she wore; his toon gloves and best tuxedo were scattered on the floor where Babs had torn them off eight hours ago. Her ears went down a little. *Well, it's not as if Fifi or Calamity had to add to their wardrobe even for a day or two, she told herself, or Plucky or Shirley either ... though birds don't often get that problem anyway.* She shrugged, smiling as she turned and looked at her pink-and-white reflection in the mirror. Her ribbon-less ears crossed as she looked down.

"Buster Bunny!" As an alarm clock it would have woken half the county. "What have you DONE to me?" She rapidly flipped through three random spin-changes - but spin changes always reverted to her basic shape and that stayed unchanged - or rather radically changed since the night before. Her usual lavender miniskirt was suddenly embarrassingly inadequate, and apart from the white wedding gown now hanging in the wardrobe she had brought nothing else with her but ten changes of her usual four-piece costume of skirt, shirt and ribbons. She had not yet decided on her new look; after all it was only a week since their graduation. They had wanted to be sure all their friends would still be there to see them married.

Buster opened an eye, taking in the sight. He stood and kissed his bunny bride on her trembling pink nose tip. "Good morning, Babs. Forgotten so soon, Mrs Babs *"Me on top! Me on top!"* Bunny?"

"But ... but .. but .. but ..." Babs' alarm faded to be replaced by a sly smile. "Okay, Blue-boy. I asked for that. But one line about Babs and "Bust-her" and you'll see whether or not I brought my mallet on honeymoon. Clue, three letters, starts with a 'Y.'"

"What, me worry?" Buster rummaged in his suitcase and held out an item that had been neatly folded at the bottom. "Looks like I won't be needing these for myself after all." He bowed, presenting the gift like a courtier to his queen. "May as well start as we mean to go on, Babs - in this marriage I don't mind if it's you who wear the pants."

"Buster!" Babs hesitated, but in a few seconds first she, then Buster broke up into gales of laughter, hugging each other tight and rolling on the bed helplessly. At last they subsided, relaxing paw in paw. Suddenly, both spoke together.

"Now, That's Comedy."

The End.