

## Chapter One

Every year around Midsummer, something strange happened around Acme Acres. The crash of anvils and pianos falling on toons faded away from the Western side of the city - and though it was harder to pinpoint on the map, gossip columnists found it harder to fill their pages without character assassinations and complex scams traceable to the far side of town.

Acme Looniversity and Perfecto Prep had no formal truce in May and June - but it was nearing final exam time for both and nobody had time or energy to spend on anything but furious preparation. Or, almost nobody...

"She loves me - she loves me lots. She loves me - she loves me lots..." Plucky Duck grinned at the sight of the final petal in his feather-hand as he approached Shirley McLoon's house. An instant later his expression turned to wide-eyed panic as he realised he had demolished the expensive bouquet he had been bringing over for his loon fiancée. His eyes darted around the landscape and a crafty expression attached itself to his beak. "Methinks a little rapid improvisation is in order."

"Like Hi, Plucky." A minute later Shirley opened the door just before he was about to knock, as usual. Although she was well turned-out as ever, her feathers had lost some of the glossy outdoor vitality she had built up in the sun and fresh air of Spring Break. "Shouldn't you be home studying?"

Plucky knelt and presented her with a fresh bouquet. "How can I think of dumb film gags and dusty scripts when the loon of my life is so near to me?"

Shirley took the flowers, and sighed. From their aura she could tell they had been picked from her own garden." Happy thoughts, Plucky. Eight out of ten for sincerity." She had sworn not to read her friends' minds uninvited, but since finally accepting Plucky as her fiancé his was the exception - and besides, it was usually a very thin volume to read. "You'd better come in. I've been working since sunrise - my Aura tells me she needs to like, harmonise my energy flows." Her powder-blue astral body separated from her physical form and looked at the green mallard hungrily.

"Eeep..." Plucky turned a paler green. "I had to ask."

Shirley smiled, pulling him in and shutting the door firmly. "We're all alone today," she whispered seductively." Mother's gone clear across the country, all week, to consult the forbidden archives at the MiskaToonic University or some junk. It's just us - you and me, and You and Me."

The mallard winced as his astral form was dragged out of his body into the embrace of Shirley's astral shape, and the two left in a direction exceedingly difficult to storyboard without the use of higher dimensional inks. "I swear I'll never get used to that!"

"Now, Plucky, what were you coming to talk about?" An hour later, the two waterfowl were sharing a beanbag and a pot of herbal tea in Shirley's inner sanctum. "I predict Babs and Mary are like dropping by this evening fer sure - tomorrow we're going to the Acme Giga-Mall to look at dresses for Babs. White, expensive dresses." Shirley's eyes misted over slightly.

"Babs, check. Mary, check. Has anyone seen Fifi lately? I haven't." Plucky's voice was more serious than usual.

Shirley considered. "She was in study hall Monday morning getting some books - I don't, like, see everyone every day now." Since returning from Spring Break the final-year Looniversity scholars had blank class timetables - generally with the word STUDY written over them in large letters as a reminder.

"I've not seen her in two weeks. Not a scent of her on the breeze. We should go over and check. I hope she's just, "studying" with Rhubella." Plucky's eyes crossed slightly at that thought. "As long as she's all right."

Shirley stroked his tail-feathers, the twinned rose quartz crystal she wore in place of an engagement ring catching the evening sunlight streaming in through the attic window. "Plucky? You know, your ego's astrally tied to your aura. When they're both off elsewhere - the duck that's left behind, is the Plucky Duck I like." She smiled, raising an eyebrow. "My aura's bringing him back from the third plane of existence in ten minutes, just before I prophesy Babs and Mary get here. But until then..."

In the incense-scented room the sound of beaks clicking in a kiss was not loud, but it went on for a very long time.

"And it's Babs! The one and only Miss Babs Bunny - no longer Ms because I'm going to be a Mrs!" A blur of pink and white energy swept up the stairs as Babs kept her appointment to the second.

At the door behind her a powerfully-built but pretty African-American toon sighed wearily.

"Shirley - she's been like that all the way over. It was like trying to ride herd on a lightning bolt. Can't you... earth her charge to a water pipe or something?"

Shirley gave a snort of amusement, but shook her head. "I'm mondo forbidden from tampering with natural disasters," she explained. "Balance of Nature, you know? I can't stop earthquakes, volcanoes, typhoons or bunnies in love."

"Pity." Mary Melody took the stairs one at a time, not in bounds of five like a certain bunny. "We passed Plucky on the way - he'd been here?"

"Oh, fer sure," Shirley ushered her friends into her jasmine-scented sanctum. "Sometimes I think his next incarnation won't be some diseased rutabaga after all. Then he does something totally stupid and I change my mind. But not for long."

Babs was standing posed as an angelic statue, the evening sunlight illuminating her face in a wash of gold.

Mary cast her a glance, and smiled. "Don't worry, Shirley, we've been studying all day. She's been spin-changing till it triggered national tornado alerts. We've rehearsed comic and straight gags all afternoon. She even changed species so I could work on "Hound-teasing tricks" for Professor Leghorn's exam papers."

"And the wonderful and talented MISS Babs Bunny has MISSED no chance to put her skills to every test - so her MISSION to get top marks won't..."

"Like, flunk, as in miss?" Shirley grinned. All three snickered. Suddenly the loon's expression became serious. "Have you heard from Fifi? I've not. Plucky hasn't. We're like, worried."

Babs considered. "We worked together a whole week on gag duos just after Spring Break. But that's three weeks ago now. I've hardly been anywhere, not even twice to Weenie-Burger. I've not met a lot of the class at all."

"Me neither," Mary admitted. "I'm studying at home, or with Jaggi."

Babs grinned mischievously. "Squash and stretch, Toon basics for you. For him - still not taught him everything he needs to know?"

"Everything improves with practice," Mary said with mock dignity. "I may not be in the market for a white wedding dress - but there are compensations."

"And I'm sure he compensates you as in major-scale," Shirley steered the discussion back on track. "But like, Fifi? You've not seen her either? We should go and like totally check up."

"You're right." Babs blushed. It was rare to see the pink bunny looking embarrassed. "Being busy is no excuse."

"I hadn't wanted to disturb her. She's studying, and then there's her and Rhubella." Mary blinked. "At least - I assumed."

"Tomorrow!" Babs declared "Saturday morning. Before I go to the giga-mall and shop for the most beautiful pure white dress ever made - we'll go to the junkyard and shop for a white and purple skunkette!"

Just at that moment, the toon in question was deep in the film vaults of Acme Looniversity, quite unaware of her friends' concern or even the passing of time. She had been there all afternoon.

"Le sigh." Fifi sat alone in the dark, her cheek-fur propped on her hands as the sixth Pepe Le Pew film of the evening ran through the projectors. She felt her tail twitch in a reflex action at the sight of the young and handsome skunk and his dashing pursuit of lucky females - generally Penelope Pussycat. Fifi's ears went down somewhat at Miss Penelope's preoccupation with getting off-camera and preferably upwind. Some folk had no appreciation of the finer things in life.

"Le sigh, encore." The film finished and left Fifi in the quiet darkness, with only the dim safety lights of the screening room around her. "Zo many years I ave done ze same. But neva'ir ze success. Until..."

Fifi thought hard. Professor Le Pew's pursuit had been successful in the end – three years earlier he had married Penelope, whose fur was now willingly dyed skunk-striped. Just to really confuse anyone studying toon genetics, just changing her external pattern had proven to make far deeper changes. Starting in the Autumn, Mrs. Penelope Le Pew was going on maternity leave despite her being born a different species to her husband. How their litter would turn out remained to be seen.

"Zere ees no special one for moi to pursue. Or I would 'ave chased zem foreva'ir. Babs and Bustair, Shirley and Plucky 'zey all 'ave one of 'zeir own kind."

A cold chill ran down Fifi's luxuriant tail. Sitting alone in the darkness she had a revelation of a fundamental law of comedy that had never been told her in five years of Acme Looniversity classes.

"Naturellement, things only work when 'zey are funny. But zhere ees more to eet zan zat..." She whispered to herself in the silence. There was a real thought there, and she tried her utmost to pin it down and read its shape. Pepe Le Pew had finally caught his feline bride only to discover her willingly dyeing skunk stripes on her fur, which had been hilarious in its own right. Fifi had at last found someone willing to fall into her arms (rather than out of the nearest window to escape). Had that been the "skunk-hunk" her hormones were hard-wired to chase, that would not have been comic.

"Ze law of conservation of Comedy..." she whispered to herself. Professor Coyote had let slip that for years he had been chasing down that elusive law in his Summer research at the National Pie Accelerator complex under Akron, Ow-Hi-Oww where custard pies were boosted to almost the speed of light and the fundamental particles of humour studied in their collision. The hints that had emerged of the ongoing project were that comedic energy could never be created or destroyed, only transformed into another gag form.

Fifi's tail went rigid as she felt the implications sink in. "Eet weel not be a mattair of good luck or ze trying 'arder ... to find an 'andsome Skunk-Hunk, eet would break ze laws of ze Toon Physics. It can nevair 'appen for moi." She shivered. "Nevair. No mattair what I do." As she put her fears into words, the Fundamental Fun Principle took shape. For a few seconds she buried her face in her hands.

Then she smiled. "I weel 'ave ze last laugh, regardless. I 'ave ze compensation - ze tender lover for Fifi, even if she does not study ze comedy!"

Several miles away, an imposing building reared menacingly to challenge the normally stormy skies around its spires and high walls. Had anyone asked an Acme Loo student why Perfecto Prep was usually lashed by horror film styled special effects as weather, they would probably just shrug and suggest "It's a Toon thing." This might have made more sense if Perfecto studied toon gags and special effects, which it did not. Some days it saw its fair share of drama, but nobody scored points for that in class.

"Rhubella, please ... it's been a month. I've said I'm sorry - won't you take me back?" In one of the senior class rooms an expensively dressed rat was currently wearing out his knee fur against the genuine Persian carpet. Not Iranian, naturally.

"Oh, ignore him, Rhubella," came a voice from the doorway. "It's easy. I generally do."

Rhubella Rat smiled as she beckoned to her friend. "Margot! Roderick's practicing his new favourite position." She gestured to the kneeling rat.

"So I see. Is it your favourite view? He doesn't really harmonise with that carpet. One of them ought to go." Margot Mallard was dressed in the top part of a precisely tailored business skirt-suit (sans skirt) commissioned from the finest tailor in Connecticut. Nowhere in Acme Acres remotely met her standards.

Rhubella sniffed disdainfully. "Get up, Roderick. Or stay there, I don't care. You can go hang by your ears from a washing-line, the answer will still be no. We're through."

"Roderick and Rhubella Rat... no relations." Margot smirked. "Has a certain ring to it. Which is something I'm sure Roddy-kins won't be giving you."

"Not from him." Rhubella felt her heart leap within her. "But I have hopes - I'll soon be wearing one from someone I care about."

"It was just one holiday with Margot - and that wasn't my idea - it was in the luck of the cards," Roderick pleaded. "Besides, we didn't ... do anything. Be fair."

Both female toons snorted. "Sorry Roddy, but I tell her - everything. All the details. Bad and - indifferent," Margot hissed. "It's not just safari you're lousy at, laser sights or no."

Rhubella turned her gaze on the kneeling rat. "Be fair? That's like saying you're not really a crook if you don't rob banks every day. Go jump in the Dip pool, Roderick. I said we're through. I've found someone better."

A dejected rat slunk out, leaving Margot and Rhubella in the elegantly furnished room. Rhubella sighed, relaxing on the designer sofa.

"Roddy's a pest - and that's me, a rat saying it. I'm worn out enough with studying. It's all I do any more."

"An investment that pays big dividends, though" Margot preened her feathers and sat next to her. "You do know, Danforth and Roderick are spending half their time trying to crack your master plan?"

A mischievous smile came to Rhubella's narrow muzzle. "I know. I also know "someone" stole nine hours processing on the Sandia Labs' supercomputers last week on that job and I'm inclined to tip

them off who it was.”

Margot raised an eyebrow. “But seriously - you didn’t mind me taking your place with him on that Spring Break safari in the Galapagos Islands?”

Rhubella cast the mallard a curious gaze. “I found someone better because I missed that trip. As for Roddy - if you managed to have fun, I’m glad for you. If he was partying with another girl, me and him are through no matter who it was. What about you and Danforth?”

Margot contemplated her already impeccable finger-feathers. “Danny-boy is impossibly jealous, and that’s just the way I like to see him. You cut him down to size very neatly, pretending to fall in love with that Acme Loo-ser! And a girl too! You couldn’t have pushed Danny-boy’s buttons any better if I’d sold you his owner’s manual.” She laughed.

Rhubella did not laugh. She had told Margot the plain truth about her and Fifi - if her friend refused to believe it that was up to her. It was the same with her “master plan” to get to the top of the class - everyone else was falling over each others’ conspiracies and triple-crosses as the senior year cheated and backstabbed their way towards graduation.

She had not meant to fall in love. Rhubella knew it was changing her from the insides out; fortunately she could still behave like a case-hardened Perfecto Senior with her classmates and hopefully for long enough to graduate. Unlike them she was rising through the grades quietly, like a bubble rising from the depths rather than a crayfish snapping and trampling its way towards the top of a heap. She had dropped enigmatic hints of her own sinister plan, and the fact that nobody had discovered a scrap of it so far had focussed their efforts to find it. In the meantime she had spent her time working and studying. All her time.

Rhubella blushed. “Tomorrow - I’ve got to go into Acme Acres. And not by limo. Something less conspicuous.”

Margot winked, and tapped the side of her beak. “Say no more! I can spot intrigue dug in behind a bush, a thousand yards down-range through a fog bank. So, your big plan moves along?”

“Oh yes,” Rhubella nodded, her eyes wide. “I hope it does!”

Fifi LaFume awoke that Saturday morning as usual, alone on the back seat of the rusting Cadillac. She sighed, stroking the worn Naugahyde seat cover. “Zo many nights, vous et moi...” She shrugged, smiling. The ageing car had sheltered her all her days at Acme Looniversity, but in a matter of weeks she would be saying farewell to both.

Suddenly a noise from outside had her ears pricking up; someone was approaching through the scrap-yard. She glanced down in a reflex, checking the truck tyre iron was within reach before she wound the window down.

“Ruby!” Her tail twitched at the sight of the rodent girl; she had the door open and her arms around Rhubella in four film frames. “You ‘ave come back to moi!” Her scent began to build visibly.

“Oof!” Rhubella felt her breath squeezed from her body. “I missed you too. I wanted so much to see you – but I’ve been studying non-stop.”

“Moi aussi. But – eet iz ze weekend, time for ze relaxation, non?” Fifi’s luxurious tail enwrapped Rhubella, pulling her close on the seat still warm from her night’s rest.

“You really are pleased to see me. I just couldn’t get away from Perfecto.” Rhubella’s tail swished on the smooth seat.

“Zat place.” Fifi’s ears went down. “Ze only surprise is you ‘ave not, ‘ow you say, bumped each other off by now.”

“Well, there WAS that incident last year with the tactical Dip warhead someone smuggled in from Eastern Europe...” Rhubella recalled.

The skunkette shivered. “One month more and you will be free of all zat. Aftair - ‘ave you ze plans?”

Rhubella smiled. She relaxed on the warm back seat, enjoying the feel of Fifi’s tail wrapped around her. “Nothing that doesn’t involve you.” She kissed the purple and white girl lovingly.

Fifi gave an almost feline purr, leaning happily into the kiss. Her scent increased.

Just at that moment came a hail from outside. “Fifi? Anybunny home?”

Fifi glanced at the wing mirrors; she had glued on extra mirrors from other abandoned cars to cover all directions. “Eh! Eet eez like ze Acme Acres busses - ze wait for ages then three come togethair. I’ve been alone four days and now Babs and ze gang zey come to visit?” She gave Rhubella a quick smooch and opened the door. “Babs! Shirley! Mary! Ze instant party, non?”

Babs grinned at the sight of the pair on the back seat, and the visible cloud of skunkette scent hanging in the air. "You should have one of those redneck bumper stickers, Feef – *"If this car's a'rockin, don't come a knockin"*. It's your birthday next week, I know - shall I get you one?"

Fifi blushed. "You 'ave come to join ze party?"

"Naah - we wouldn't all fit on that seat." Babs cocked her head critically. "We're on the way to the Acme Giga-Mall; want to come along?"

"Mais oui! I 'ave been putting ze nose to ze grindstone all ze week and living on ze dry textbooks. A leetle time to digest all zat learning will be fine. Eh, Ruby?"

Rhubella smiled. "Hanging out at a mall with the Acme crowd? At Perfecto they'd say that's SO beneath my dignity. With Fifi though - oh, yes!"

Twenty minutes later the five toons stepped off the bus at the Acme Acres Giga-Mall.

"I feel mondo greed vibes ... crass commercialisation totally running wild. Ewwwww..." Shirley muttered, flicking her wing-fingers as if to throw mud off them.

"Sorry. That's from me." Babs grinned. "There's a perfect dress in there somewhere and I want it! Greedy for that? Guilty, guilty, guilty! Wonderful bridal dress, you won't escape Babs the Huntress!" She spin-changed to an Indiana Jones outdoor outfit, except instead of a whip she had a string of charge cards she snapped.

"Are you not in ... ze market, Shirley?" Fifi raised an eyebrow.

The loon sniffed. "Well, fer sure, I could. Me and Plucky, we're getting major scale in-tune, even harmonious, sometimes. But I'm not like totally sold on the big retro "Promise to love, cherish and obey". So mondo heavy on the "obey". A spiritual blank cheque like that is so last-century."

As they walked into the great air-conditioned palace of purchasing, Mary Melody looked up at the distant roof. "I'm planning a long engagement myself, with Jaggi. If it's five years - we're both all right with that."

Just then the lift arrived and the five friends stepped in. Babs' eyes were wide as she read the directory screen. "Fifth floor - there's that new oriental bridal boutique, "Wedding peach." I've heard about that place." She could have spin-changed into any outfit she could imagine, but this was different. "It's just the place for me. When you think about it, I suppose I am peach-coloured ..."

Fortunately, the Japanese anime bridal wear franchise was quite used to toons with demanding tastes who insisted on trying out every style in the place.

"Eet ees a good thing Bustair is not 'ere," Fifi commented as Babs vanished into the changing-room for the twenty-third time.

"Why? Because it's bad luck for him to see the dress before the big day?" Rhubella was staring dreamily at row of display models - the "tail outside the dress" look was definitely back in, she noted with relief.

"Not only 'zat - by now 'e would be so dazed zat Babs she could appear in ze 1977 retro punk polythene bag dress and Bustair would nod 'is 'ead eef Babs asked if 'e liked it!"

Rhubella swished her naked tail, and smiled. Suddenly she took a deep breath. "Fifi. What colour would a purple and white skunkette bride look best in?"

Fifi's eyes went wide in a Wild Take that would have won bonus points in the Looniversity exams. She looked deep into Rhubella's eyes, feeling her heart pounding. "Ees zis ... a proposal?"

Rhubella kissed her broad pink nose. "Yes, Fifi. I don't care which of us wears the dress - or both. Fifi LaFume, will you marry me?"

"YES!!!" Fifi flung herself into Rhubella's arms and hugged with a force that Elmyra would have envied. "Oh, oui, oui, oui!" Toon heart shapes rose from the couple like bubbles from a bubble machine.

"Whoa!" Babs stepped out of the changing room, now back in her usual lilac skirt and yellow top. Her ears went right up at the sight. "Did I ... miss something?"

"It's a totally harmonious meeting of minds - and the rest." Shirley nodded approvingly. "So, are you going to like name the big day? If you want, I can check when the stars are favourable."

Rhubella blinked, still held tight in Fifi's arms. "After we graduate," she gasped, struggling for breath. "Apart from that - we'll let you know."

Mary clapped her hands together delightedly. "Another July wedding maybe? While everyone's still here? That'd be so great."

Babs grinned. "If you make it a week or so after Buster and me - we'd love to be there. Before that - we'll be on our Bunnymoon. With "Do Not Disturb" signs on the door. Big, glow-in-the dark signs."

"We'll let you know." Rhubella kissed her skunkette again. Suddenly her ears went up. "It's a good thing we're at the Giga-Mall already... is there a good place here for engagement rings?"

Lunchtime saw Babs having made a "definite maybe" decision on a white lace and taffeta bridal gown with a veil held up on an almost medieval styled wimple to clear her long ears.

"I can't believe you two chose rings in forty minutes flat!" Babs forgot her carrot salad for a minute to stare blissfully at the matching plain silver engagement rings Fifi and Rhubella wore as they walked paw in paw towards the food court. "Everyone will think it's a shotgun wedding!"

Fifi giggled. "Less is more, as zey say. Eet is ze partnair who counts more than ze whole Acme Bridal wear catalogue."

Rhubella pressed her coffee-bean nose to Fifi's broad pink one. She squeezed the purple furred paw in her own brown-furred hand. "A shotgun wedding? That sounds all right to me. Which one of us has the, umm, little surprise on the way ... and how do we manage it?"

"We weel try," Fifi said firmly. "We are Toons, Ruby - ze impossible eet ees just a script-change away."

"Oh yes, like Sweetie and that Jurassic Park velociraptor she's dating." Babs imitated the pink canary's voice to perfection. "Poor little innocent birdie ... gonna be dragged off to his nest and get an egg the size of a watermelon off him!" She gave Sweetie's trademarked wicked chuckle.

Mary Melody applauded. "I know she's a Toon but she's not the size of a watermelon herself. That's going to be ... difficult..."

"At Acme Loo the difficult we do at once, the impossible we just have to rehearse for," Babs grinned, her ears right up. "And that pair are in full dress-rehearsals. Or is it undress rehearsals?" She pondered briefly. "Not that they wear much to start with ..."

"Encouraging, non?" Fifi relaxed at the table, Rhubella reaching back to smooth her huge striped tail through the seat's tail hole. "Out "dorm-mothair" Penelope LePew, she eez ze pussycat by birth – but affair ze fur dyeing she and Professor Pepe weel 'ave ze family. I am, 'ow you say, jealous." She squeezed Rhubella's hand.

Rhubella smiled back, ordering an extra-large chocolate malt and two straws. "I can't do much about my tail. But ... your teacher's not the only one who could dye a white stripe down her back."

"Mon Dieu..." Fifi's eyes went wide as she imagined the sight. "For moi – you would do zat?"

"You'd look like a long-tailed chipmunk," Shirley commented. "But if it gets your charkas energised ... go for it!"

Babs looked on as Acme Acres' newest engaged couple shared their malt with a straw apiece, noses almost touching as they gazed into each others' eyes. She sighed wistfully. "You know, what with Sweetie and Mr. Retro Scaly, I'm the only girl in class still shopping for a white dress." Her cotton-tail twitched. "Hmm. White's nice. But yellow would look good too ..."

"You're forgetting Elmyra..." Mary Melody pointed out. This was not amazing. Most people usually tried to forget the red-wigged terror.

A general shudder swept across the room as if a cold wind had frozen the food court.

"Please..." Babs' ears went right down "not when I'm eating! There's an idea that'd put me right off my carrot cheesecake."

Mary raised an eyebrow. "I'm just saying. There's only two male toons in Acme forest she's never caught in her traps – Mean Gene Wolverine and the Big Bad Wolf... they have been known to play to lose. If she ever hauls them back to play house with ... she might get more than she bargained for."

Babs' eyes crossed. "You know..." she said slowly "that's not the worst idea I ever heard. It'd serve her right. Binky Bunny's dating the wolverine right now ... she can have a battle of wits over him with Elmyra."

"Zat should be ze short battle," Fifi observed. "With zo leetle ammunition on both sides."

Babs' ears went right down like wilted pink leaves. "But that'd really make me the last in the white-dress market. I'll go down in history as the slowest bunny on record! A disgrace to bunnydom! Woe is me!" She struck a tragic pose.

"Elmyra. She's the red-headed human toon?" Rhubella had heard tales of the Terror of Acme Acres even at Perfecto.

Mary Melody winced. "It's a wig. It's a genetic thing – she's really got as much hair as Sweetie's dinosaur date. Even her eyebrows are painted on. We share a changing-room with her for the basketball team, we know."

Just then, Fifi's nose twitched at a scent she was hard-wired to respond to. Over by the tills, two

tall and handsome male skunks were buying lunch. By their accents they seemed to be French-Canadian.

Rhubella followed her gaze. She smiled. “Invite them over, Fifi?”

Fifi La Fume looked at Rhubella and down at her engagement ring. “Non ... surely not...” She whispered, her eyes wide.

“This sort of thing is going to happen, sooner or later.” Rhubella looked into Fifi’s eyes. “I’ll have to learn to deal with it. Say what you like about Perfecto, they teach us to be realists.” She cleared a space free of shopping bags; the food court was crowded and the newcomers were looking for a place to sit. Rhubella caught their attention and patted the seat invitingly.

“Eh, Mesdames – may we?” The taller of the two looked at the cleared space.

Babs, Mary and Shirley held their breaths, and not because of skunk scent. Fifi nodded graciously, her heart pounding. “Mais oui. Certainment.”

They sat, and there followed a rapid-fire exchange in French for a minute,

“They’re René and his younger brother Jacques, from Quebec, they’re new in town and here for a summer working as team coaches at the Acme Bowl,” Rhubella translated. “Fifi’s the first skunkette under the age of forty they’ve seen in town since they got here last week.”

“You speak French?” Babs asked, impressed.

Rhubella raised an eyebrow. “They do teach us a few things besides etiquette at Perfecto, you know.”

Babs looked on, her ears up. Both René and Jacques were fine examples of young toon adults, maybe a year or two older than Fifi – and like her they were comfortable “in the fur”, wearing only working caps and sports wristwatches.

Suddenly René smiled and broke off his conversation in French. “Alors – but it is zo rude of us, to talk zo when you do not all ‘ave ze language! I was saying – I see Mademoiselle Fifi she wears ze engagement ring – eet must be ze luckiest toon in ze world who she ‘as chosen.”

Rhubella almost glowed. “Thank you. We know that toon. I’ll pass along your complements.”

“Ah! ‘Ad we only arrived sooner.” Jacques sighed wistfully. “Ze bad luck for us. Are zhere any more at ‘ome like you?”

Fifi smiled. “In Toulouse, oui. But I am ze only LaFume femme in Acme Acres.”

They talked for another half hour, before Jacques and René had to leave with many a backward glance at Fifi.

Rhubella looked at Shirley, her tail twitching. “I’m much mistaken if you weren’t probing them like an X-ray machine – right down to their construction lines. What did you get?”

Shirley gave an embarrassed grin. “Fifi – you remember Johnny Pew? All the good looks and all the smooth moves in the book – but one mass of way toxic ego. Makes Plucky look like a Zen master, fer sure. He’d have used you like a doormat then left you behind without a thought.”

“Le sigh. Zey were two more like zat? And zey looked so nice.” Fifi’s tail drooped like a wet rag.

“Umm... I’ve like got to tell you the truth, ‘kay? Or my Aura would totally never forgive me.”

Shirley took a deep breath. “They were two genuine nice guys – their auras were as clear as crystal. Johnny Pew’s was mud.”

Fifi felt her heart pounding in her luxuriously furred chest. “Ze kind I ‘ave been waiting years to find. And zey chose today to show up?”

It was Rhubella’s turn to sigh. “This may not be the shortest engagement in history, but it feels like it.” She looked at her ring sadly. “It’s a good thing I kept the receipts for these.”

Fifi gave a strange, animal-like whine like a whipped puppy as she looked at Rhubella. “Ruby! When I said I wanted to marry you – eet is ze truth!”

“After you’d had five years of chasing any male with an accidental back stripe,” Rhubella’s voice was level as she looked at Fifi. “Do you think those two would run away screaming?” She squeezed her skunkette’s paw. “I’m glad you’re getting the appreciation you deserve. Better late than never.”

Fifi gulped. She turned to the loon. “Shirley – just because I ‘ave promised my life and soul to anotheir ... is zees going to ‘appen to me all ze time now?”

Shirley winced, taking a quick peek into the probability flows of the futures where a large number of skunk-type life lines were heading for near misses with her friend like asteroid tracks crossing Earth orbit. “Like, totally probably.”

## Chapter 2

Deep in Acme forest, far from the laid-out tourist trails and picnic grounds, the woods grew dense and untended with only the faint animal tracks that were invisible from two paces away. High bluffs rose above unmapped swamps and rivers that began high on Mount Acme, starting off wild and untamed before they ever saw a farm or boating lake on the way to Acme Acres.

Neatly blended in the bushes, a shadow moved. A figure was silhouetted for a fraction of a second, but it was not a normal toon shape - more like a walking bush, that blended again with the vegetation as soon as it stopped moving. Hidden from the direct sunshine by a mottled rubber hood, a large lens did not flash revealingly and give the position away.

*It's the last place I've looked - somewhere there must be cute animals still ...* a thought of simple, clear precision could have been read by Shirley or any other psychic within a hundred yards, after which any such psychic would instantly be using their teleport or their escape and evasion skills. The mind that broadcast it was as strong in its own way as a chunk of granite and usually had about as much processing power. Elmyra Duff had changed in some respects in the past few years; she was taller and had grown in all the expected ways. Physically, that is. A career of hunting down desperate animals for pets across the wilds of Acme Acres had burned off most of her puppy-fat, but in many ways she was much the same as ever.

*Goodness ... I have to work so very hard these days.* Elmyra's thought was tinged in sadness; she had discarded her black Oxford shoes and adopted spiked running shoes to help her pursuit of pets to hug, and after a year of trying Professor Fudd's style of traditional hunting costume she had moved on to wearing ACME military surplus. It was amazing what you could buy in terms of sniper chic these days. She suppressed a giggle; that distinctive sound could clear twenty acres of animals in ten seconds flat, as she knew to her cost.

Suddenly one of the vibration sensors hidden along the trail triggered, displaying as a flashing light on the huntress's heads-up screen. A few seconds later it faded then the next one awoke - something was certainly heading her direction. She hoped it was not one of those icky things that sometimes strayed out of the H.P. Lovecraft National Forest, on the other side of the mountains. Fuzzy and cuddly was the thing for her, not eldritch and slimy. That Japanese Anime girl who had been in class one year as an exchange student had been quite horrified at her preferences.

Elmyra held her breath as she saw her prey. *A bunny! A fuzzy-wuzzy!* She triggered the camera and grinned, trying to work out what sort of trap would work best and where to place it ... experience was a dear teacher, but she would have no other.

The rabbit who ran down the trail in a jogging-suit was not Buster or Babs; she was tall, shapely and purple-furred, with a blonde spiral twist of head-fur that looked oddly like a vanilla ice-cream whirl planted on top of her head. She panted, eyes wide as the old trail ended in a dead-end at the entrance to a caved-in mine.

*My goodness ... two bunnies arriving now? Bigger bunnies maybe?* Elmyra looked at her display again as the sensors triggered again on the trail, and with a far stronger signal. If there was anything better than a fuzzy bunny it was a crowd of them. Her eyes turned heart-shaped, imagining a whole warren of them to hug and pet and dress up.

With a ferocious growl, something that was not remotely lepine charged into the clearing. It was broad-shouldered and shaggy furred, as big as a bear but with a head that was more weasel-like than canine. A broad pair of lighter yellow-brown stripes ran down its back. As it caught sight of the rabbit, a low rumbling growl emerged and the hulking predator began to drool.

Elmyra's painted-on eyebrows rose. *It'd be such a shame if the poor fuzzy bunny got eaten ... but that's Nature's way. Poo. What's bad news for the cute seal-cub is breakfast for the cute polar-bear cub, after all.* Her television at home was permanently tuned to the Nature channels, and she recognised a wolverine when she saw one.

The purple-furred bunny shrank back, cowering back against the slavering predator as her cotton-tail pressed against the unyielding rock wall. She looked up, eyes wide at the muscular carnivore, her heart visibly pounding ... and suddenly kissed him on the nose.

"That was, like, a great chase workout, Gene," Binky Bunny nuzzled the wolverine. "Ten miles a day keeps me looking peachy keen." She stretched, flexing her muscles and her eyes flashed. "Just you wait till you drag me off to our lair ... I've got a special workout of my own just as good in mind, 'kay?" She whispered in the wolverine's ears ... and in a fine Wild Take steam emerged from them like a train whistle.



Elmyra sat back, stunned, her cameras recording faithfully as Binky jumped up to sit on Gene Wolverine's shoulders and they headed back into the deep woods, Binky's hands holding tight to the predator's shaggy fur and her rump wriggling. With a crashing of disturbed vegetation they vanished back up the trail.

Elmyra sat alone in the forest for an hour, not consciously imitating a bush as her mind played and re-played what she had seen like a skipping CD. Unfamiliar feelings began to build in her. Suddenly, something happened.

A loud special-effects crack echoed through Acme Forest for miles; the sort of crack a breaking continent would give at the birth of a new ocean. Driving along a deserted road at the forest edge, a van carrying two engineers to the Acme Acres nuclear power plant screeched to a halt. They were professionally concerned at unexpected loud noises.

"Sounded to me like one of those main-bore chemical valves snapping open on overload pressure." One of them ventured.

"Sure does. When it's finally blown after being locked shut for years. But what around here could that be?" His colleague shrugged. They looked around the peaceful forest for a few minutes, gave up and drove off. There were some mysteries that Toons were not meant to know.

Although they did not buy their products cut-price from ACME, there were other toons in the neighbourhood that Saturday evening with cameras and recording equipment. In a rented room in one of the town centre office buildings, Danforth Drake was pointing a 15-cm cassegraine telescope down rather than up as most astronomers would. The drake sniffed contemptuously; the deluded Looniversity students all wanted to be stars, so it was fitting to use an astronomical instrument against them.

"Roderick? There's no sign of anyone at the junkyard yet." Danforth had an encrypted phone back to Perfecto Prep and a data link to the camera telescope. It was galling to have to spend his valuable time on a job better suited to low-level minions or Perfecto first-years, but this was Rhubella they were dealing with. Whatever they discovered was liable to be part of her Prime Plot, something that had so far eluded their best efforts entirely. Four weeks to go and not a sniff of what it was, let alone how to tackle it! If there was anything of value involved he was not planning on sharing it with any first-years.

"Keep watching. She'll be back. We ought to pay some lowlife ten dollars to torch that old car. And we will, when we've worked out what's going on." Roderick's voice was clear over the phone; he was back in Perfecto, brooding.

"I ought to do it myself. Right now." Danforth's bruises had mostly faded after the encounter with the Acme Looniversity skunkette at Spring Break, except those on his ego. "It'd be worth it to see the look on her face when she gets back."

"Nix. Not till we know what the plan is. Burn the skunk out now and she could vanish to anywhere in town and we haven't time left to search every alleyway for her again." Roderick's naked tail swished. "You're just sore she beat you. A Perfecto senior, going up against an Acme Loo-ser? Should have been no contest."

Danforth ground his biologically hard-to-explain teeth in fury, redoubling as the sound produced a chuckle from Roderick over the phone. "She caught me by surprise, right? They just... don't know when they ought to give up."

Roderick snickered. "Well, you've got all night to put it right. Have fun." With that, he hung up to the sound of grinding duck teeth.

Danforth stared at the abandoned junkyard, on which the skunk's Cadillac sat. He knew from the dossiers that she had been there since arriving at Acme Acres, easily five years ago. That was a long time for any working scrap-yard to hang onto anything; turnover was profit and land this close to the city centre would be expensive. Idly he wondered how much rent she paid, and to whom. Suddenly an idea struck him. His beak stopped grinding and an unholy gleam came to his eyes. Turning to his laptop, six ounces of elegant and ultra-lightweight bleeding edge technology secure in its ten pound hardened steel carry-case, he began taking a hard look at the local trade directories for the past ten years and accessing lists of tax defaulting properties in Acme Acres' City Hall. Perfecto students did not waste effort with cheap slapstick when they wanted profitable payback.

"My stock portfolio has plenty of manufacturing already," he murmured. "Perhaps I ought to diversify - into recycling."

As evening fell, Fifi and Rhubella were walking paw in paw through Acme Acres' main park enjoying the flowers and each others' company. As they crossed a bridge over an ornamental lake Fifi stopped, her lustrous purple tail waving as she held Rhubella's paw.

"Eh, Ruby, 'zis 'as been ze 'appiest day of my life," she looked into Rhubella's eyes. "And now we must pay for eet. I will 'ave to tell my family about us - and you will tell yours, non?"

Rhubella's tail twitched. A holiday fling was one thing - but she could imagine her parents' reaction. "I'm going to be Mrs. Rhubella LaFume, and there's nothing they can do about it. It's legal in California and I'm old enough not to need their permission. They can't even cut me off without a cent - I get my inheritance when I turn twenty-one, and that's guaranteed whatever."

"Eet eez ze cast-iron guarantee?" Fifi raised an eyebrow.

Rhubella grinned. "Trust me, I'm from Perfecto, remember? It's not just cast iron, more like high tensile steel with diamond plating. We know lawyers. But it's going to raise a stink, all right - no offence meant."

"None taken," Fifi murmured. Her own scent began to increase, as she looked deep into Rhubella's eyes. "When we marry ... you would take ze joint French citizenship? To be with moi?" Fifi had never applied to change her nationality, and when her student status at the Looniversity expired she would have to think hard about what to do.

"I will." Suddenly Rhubella's eyes gleamed. "If anyone doesn't believe I'm marrying you for love - I'll tell them it's a tax dodge. That'll shut them up. They'll believe that."

"You ARE from Perfecto. But not for much longer, eh?" Fifi hugged her. "And now, mon amour with ze nude tail - for us it eez back to ze Cadillac. And when I see Babs I will ask her for zat bumper-sticker she mentioned, we will need eet certainment!"

Still holding each other's paws, the two toons entwined tails and headed back to the abandoned junkyard.

Across the park and a mile out in the leafy suburbs, Elmyra Duff had come home. She had wandered in something of a daze out of the wilderness, feeling as if a ten-tonne safe had fallen on her head. Today, everything had changed since she had seen Binky Bunny with her boyfriend and realised that somehow the idea could be applied to herself.

It was not that Elmyra was incapable of putting two and two together - more that she had never thought to do so. An avid viewer of nature programs on the Discovery channel, she had plenty of theory on one side - and she had noticed most of her classmates pairing off, though with as much detachment as she might look up at the clouds and spot cute animal shapes; interesting to observe but nothing to do with her.

She reached her family home, and looked around with a sudden sense of discontent. She had refined what she had always done over the years, of course - her pets were now guarded by better than cheap ACME products but it was the same house, the same hobbies - and as she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, much the same Elmyra Duff. Somehow it all felt ... hollow.

Acting on impulse, she de-activated the security systems of her pet room and opened the door to the outside world. "We've had such fun, snugly pets." Hesitating a moment, she took the keys and unlocked the half-dozen occupied cages. There were six red-shifted blurs and the windows rattled with sonic booms as her pets took the chance to escape. She watched them go, sad as always that after her most enthusiastic care they still wanted to leave her.

"Silly puppy-face has a lot of catching-up to do." She raised an eyebrow at her reflection. "How does she start?" She pulled off the ACME camouflage suit, threw it in the laundry basket and put the motion sensors and head-up display helmet away in the cupboard. "Puppy-face needs advice." She thought hard, going through the list of her classmates, trying to decide which of them would be best to ask. Suddenly a brighter than usual (five-watt) bulb appeared, slightly illuminating the air above her head. "Of course! Puppy-face will go and ask her tomorrow."

Sunday morning at the abandoned junkyard was usually a quiet time. But not today, Fifi reflected as she hefted the tyre iron and prepared to repel boarders. When she heard what Elmyra wanted she sat back, dumbfounded for a minute.

"You are asking Moi, Fifi?" Fifi LaFume peeked out of the window of her Cadillac, peering through the one-inch gap at the Terror of Acme Acres. The doors were still securely locked and she held the truck tyre iron in one paw; next to her on the seat Rhubella had successfully pulled a Toon mallet out of Hammerspace for the first time. Panic fear was a great help when overcoming Perfecto inhibitions.

Elmyra nodded keenly. “I know you’re not as nice as a real kitty. But you still get all the handsome boys. I’ve seen you chasing dozens!”

Fifi blushed furiously, as behind her Rhubella tried hard to stifle a snort of laughter. “To chase, eet eez one thing ... to catch and keep - anotheid. And to make zem want to chase you - something else besides. You should ask Mary Melody, Babs or Shirley. Zey ‘ave what you are wanting, ze steady boyfriend.”

Elmyra shook her head stubbornly. “They’ve only got one. You’ve chased lots. You must be better.”

“I thought you and Mr. Maximilian were an item? To some extent?” Rhubella asked cautiously, recalling the dossiers on all the main players at Acme Looniversity.

Elmyra’s face fell. “All Monty loves now is money. And power. To make lots more money with.” Montana Max had grown from a small, ugly and mean-spirited brat to the same thing in a larger size, becoming so case-hardened that not even Elmyra’s uncritical love could reach him. The prospect of him being cleaned out irrevocably by the IRS would have nobody shedding a tear.

<Shall we help her?> Fifi asked in French, having found to her delight that Rhubella was quite fluent in her language though with an accent the equivalent of the North side of the Bronx. She knew her own English was still far from perfect - but Rhubella’s French, though perfectly workable, sounded far worse.

<I think we should. Though I’m not good at ... helping people yet. I need practice, I suppose.> Rhubella gave a shy smile.

<For most people I would say to them “*relax, just be yourself*” - but with Elmyra, that’s the whole problem.> Fifi’s tail drooped.

<If what she’s got isn’t what she needs or wants any more ... there’s a word in English for fixing that.> Rhubella’s chisel teeth showed in a sudden grin. Both furred toons burst out with it in the same instant.

“Makeover!”

Fifi Lafume was no stranger to the Duff house; she had been captured one holiday and held in the cages there for weeks as a pet to the younger Elmyra, who was convinced she was just a “stinky kitty who needs a good wash.” Scalding hot water, stiff floor brushes and industrial lye soap had been involved. Revenge, she reflected, was a dish best served cold. The best revenge of all was when the victim actually wanted what you were going to do to them anyway, albeit for very different reasons.

“So.” The scene was Elmyra’s bathroom, the only place there was a full-length mirror. Fifi looked around, determined to enjoy her Sunday. “Certainment, we must begin at ze beginnings. What ‘ave we ‘ere to work weeth? Ees nothing we ‘ave not already seen in ze Acme Looniversity sports showers.”

Even her worst enemies had to admit Elmyra had some strong points, and a single-minded determination was one of them. Inside a minute Fifi and Rhubella were judging the full extent of the problem.

“I ‘ad not expected you to take off ze wig as well - but, eet is ze blank canvas now to work with. Very blank.” Fifi looked at the human toon critically. “Hmm. Nature ‘as not been so generous, or so cruel either.” She cast a glance at the red wig on its stand and her ears went down; that gerbil skull ornament really deserved a decent burial. Presumably the rest of the gerbil was out in that backyard boneyard with hundreds more besides.

“From what I hear about you spending all your spare time chasing toons and wrestling them to subdue them ... it’s got you quite well toned. Without spending a cent on gym memberships, either.” Rhubella nodded. She winced slightly. “Still, I got teased enough in the first-year at Perfecto, and it’s just my tail that’s furless. I should be grateful.”

“Ah, but some ‘umans zey ‘ave not ze problems. Or some furred toons, zey say “*vive la difference!*” No, we ‘ave enough to build with ‘ere. Ze question is, what is ze blueprint?” Fifi’s tail waved, as she contemplated possibilities. Giving Elmyra a Red riding hood and pointing her back into the forest would not be a friendly thing to do: Red herself could cope with the wolves’ attentions but that sort of popularity was not what Elmyra seemed to need.

Elmyra giggled. “I’m hoping it’s something I can take to my Summer job. They want me chasing people down. And I even get paid for it!”

“I know. It’s in your dossier at Perfecto.” Rhubella’s tail twitched. “Three teams of bounty-hunters are bidding for you already. Could we - do something inspired by that idea?” The dossier had enclosed a film clip from a few years ago of Elmyra running down a grizzly bear, squeezing it

unconscious then happily dragging it back to her house to play “Teddy-bear’s Picnic” with and feed with low-calorie, mineral-rich mud pies.

Fifi snorted. “Ze spies and ze bounty-‘unters, zey try to look like anything but what zey are.” She paused, thinking. “Elmyra - zhere are a dozen ways we could go. What ees it that makes you - you? Zat you want to keep.” She recalled an unhappy “makeover” of her own in the second year, when she had joined Babs and Shirley in trying to upgrade to gatecrash the elegant, refined Perfecto graduate ball. It had not ended well for any of the Amazing Three. And even then, she had been light years ahead of where Elmyra now was. “Or shall we try to, throw away ze past and start from ze new beginning?”

“It’s Sunday. The Looniversity’s shut, isn’t it? I know you’ve a props and costumes department there. It’d be handy if it was open” Rhubella contemplated “If the Mall was open we could just look around to see if anything catches her eye.” Unlike Babs, Elmyra could not spin-change into new outfits.

Fifi’s eyes lit up. She had spotted the clothing supplement to the Acme catalogue in Elmyra’s bedroom; in an instant it was open in her paws. The section on hunting, shooting and fishing outfits was already creased and bookmarked, but the fashion pages quite unmarked.

“Ah! I knew I ‘ad seen zat somewhere. Zey are ‘aving ze “Sale or return” deal zis month - we can send for fifty outfits to try and only buy ze one she likes.” Fifi pulled her cellphone from somewhere not clearly defined and started to dial.

Rhubella scratched between her ears. “Fifty? That’ll take days, with delivery every time. It’d be quicker to wait till the mall opens tomorrow and ...”

Just at that moment there was a knock on the outside door. Fifi trotted out; there was a brief conversation, a “Meep meep” sound then the echo of shock waves rattling the windows as something departed at a considerable Mach number. Fifi returned with a dress box in her paws.

“Eh, zat Beeper e is one with ze words,” she smiled. “always ze smooth talker. And such ze flirt, no?”

“Ooooh...” Elmyra looked on with glee as if it was suddenly Christmas morning. “I get to play dress-up?”

“That’s one way of looking at it.” Rhubella investigated the package containing half a dozen wigs of various styles and colours. “Everyone knows you as a redhead. You’re not, really. There’s no reason you can’t be anything else ... let’s start with that.” She held up a long blonde wig, examining it speculatively.

<We’ll get sued by every real blonde on the planet if we make Elmyra one!> Fifi’s tail raised in alarm. <Suddenly all the jokes will actually be true - in her case.>

<We have to do something. And think of all the grateful redheads around the world when she’s not one any more> Rhubella looked round at her own naked tail, feeling it droop as she wondered if there were any tail wigs in the catalogue.

Elmyra’s eyes went wide. She had worn plenty of disguises before in her pursuit of bunnies, but it had finally trickled through to her that this was not the same thing. She had replaced her red wigs along with the rest of her outfits as they wore out over the years but always with the same model, and transferred the cute gerbil skull to the new wig as decoration. The change she was planning today could be her new real look - there would be someone else looking out of the mirror in the mornings.

<We’ll just be pushing the problem back one step no matter what she looks like.> Rhubella looked on critically as a blonde Elmyra posed in the mirror. <So she has some cute guy wanting to talk to her - then she opens her mouth. That giggle would be enough to put anybody off.>

<Too true. But, one thing at a time. Remember appearances go both ways. A toon is what she thinks she is - and that depends on what she looks like. The outside ... changes the inside. Look at Mrs. Penelope LePew!> Fifi’s eyes went wide.

<At Perfecto last year one of the boys was made to wear a toon girl costume for a month, for a bet. He didn’t know the zipper was glued shut.> Rhubella tried hard not to laugh; it had been screamingly funny amongst her and her friends at the time, though she was sure Fifi would not appreciate that kind of joke. <Those costumes have permanent effects if you wear them too long. We now have a tall new girl in the basketball team who’s learned what sort of bets you should stay clear of.>

<This is not Perfecto. I want to help Elmyra - despite everything she did to us all.> Fifi’s ears were down. For an instant she had a flash of insight that made her head spin - a toon gag was a living thing in its own right, and needed a home. The day she had stopped chasing boys, Elmyra had developed a new interest in them as if a meme had jumped from one host to the other.

<So. Whatever Elmyra looks like, she’s going to ruin it as soon as she opens her mouth. That’s nothing new. I’ve heard Hello Kitty swears like a trooper in sign language. Everyone who can’t read it

thinks she's sweet.> Rhubella suddenly smiled, and switched to English. "Elmyra ... if you change your looks enough, nobody will know who you are. We could give you something very useful for your Summer job. How about a remake as ... Rymela, International Toon of Mystery?"

<The mystery will last just as long as she keeps her mouth shut.> Fifi considered the idea.

<You have a better idea, Fifi?> Rhubella raised an eyebrow.

Fifi sighed. "Eh, let us get to work. One tres exotique International Toon of Mystery, coming up!"

An hour later, Rhubella was standing outside Elmyra's house signing for the costume they had decided to keep. She smiled, looking at the delivery toon; there was someone whose final exams would only be helped by spending time on weekend jobs requiring speed and stamina. "Thank you, Beeper - for coming out at short notice. On a Sunday, too."

"Meep meep!" Beeper nodded. His extra-compressed language held a thousand shades of nuance for those who had got used to it.

"Yes ... I think so too." Rhubella looked around at the house; she could see the empty cages still in the basement. "Elmyra never really made a friend of anyone, but she tried so hard. Too hard."

"Meep beep?" The road runner asked, head cocked to one side curiously.

"I know. She'll be left behind at Acme Loo with the junior classes after Fifi and the rest graduate next month. Fifi wants to do this for her while she can." She hesitated. "And the class she'll be spending next year in will be grateful if we can change her ways, I'll bet!"

"Meep beep!" Beeper agreed, picking up the parcel for return.

Rhubella laughed. "I think you're right." Her eyes turned wistful. "I hope we can leave some good behind us." She waved as the road runner honked a farewell and accelerated up the road, the supersonic flow and shockwaves raising a conical wake of dust along the roadside.

Just then there was a sound behind. Rhubella turned, to see an unfamiliar sight.

"Et voila ..." Fifi stood beside the transfigured toon "we 'ave - Ms Rymela - Toon of ze Mysteries!"

Rhubella's eyes went wide. Elmyra's usual dresses had done nothing for her figure, not even in the past year or two when there was anything to show. The ACME ex-Soviet woodland camouflage overall she had worn for hunting pets had been if anything an improvement.

The red wig was gone, replaced by a compact platinum blonde bob, braided at the sides in almost a helmet pattern and lacking any ribbons, flowing tresses or anything likely to get caught in a chase. "Rymela" was dressed in all black, with a tight polo-neck pullover and stretch slacks that showed the unexpectedly athletic frame underneath. The knee-length boots were elegant and slimline but still had a steel lining and an aggressively good grip on most surfaces.

"We tried ze spandex and ze black leather – too much of ze ... obvious," Fifi commented, standing back to admire her work. "We wanted ze outfit she can still get on ze bus with eef she must."

Rhubella's eyes widened. "I wouldn't have believed it." She looked hard at Elmyra's face – there was some confusion there but also the sort of steely determination she was infamous for using in all the wrong ways. "What do you think, Elmyra?"

"I feel - different." Elmyra said slowly. She usually talked of herself in the third person, as "Silly puppy-face" or similar. She clapped her hand over her mouth in shock. Her eyes widened. She turned experimentally, feeling how the costume moved with her. Suddenly she blinked. "Mister K, he's coming to meet me today! I forgot! I wonder if he'll recognise me?"

"Mister K?" Rhubella asked, intrigued.

"Oh. He's the chief of one of those agencies for chasing bad people down. We're going to talk about my Summer job." Elmyra sighed. "I hope he likes the new me. He'll be here in half an hour."

"Ze chief of ze professional bounty 'unters ? 'E must be ze toon good at seeing through ze disguises," Fifi grinned. "We shall wait for 'im - zis should be worth ze seeing."

After a toast to the new Elmyra in iced lemonade, Fifi and Rhubella took up position - Fifi hiding downwind of the main gate in the shrubbery, and Rhubella into the attic where she could see the front porch through a grating without being seen. Elmyra was mowing the lawn - an unusual thing for her in its own right, adding behaviour to her physical disguise.

There were few pedestrians on the street, and at the sound of footsteps at the appointed time Fifi ducked into the bushes out of sight. She heard a rich, cultured European voice talking with Elmyra - and suddenly there was a pause, and the bushes were parted above her.

"Miss Duff does seem to like her gardening." Fifi looked up to see who had spoken - and her

heart began to pound. Elmyra's visitor was a skunk male. Not just any skunk male - he was tall, broad at the shoulders and wore his musk like a regal cloak. Under his neatly groomed fur a long-healed scar could be seen on his cheek, adding an air of intrigue and danger. "She has such exquisite blooms here."

"Mistair K, I presume?" She stood up, brushing the leaves and twigs out of her tail.

The skunk clicked his heels together (a difficult trick considering he was as bare-pawed as Fifi) and bowed, taking her offered paw and kissing it formally. "Enchanted, mademoiselle. I am, indeed. Miss Duff is wise to take precautions, having friends around at such a meeting." His gaze flicked up towards the attic window. "Your friend up there can come down now." His accent was educated, aristocratic and vaguely Eastern European.

Elmyra giggled, but the sound was somewhat different to her usual tone. "He's good. How did you know?"

Mister K gave a brief flash of a smile. "The bushes are swaying in the wind - except where the charming lady was stopping them moving by just a little. The young lady in the attic - well, that's a professional secret. When you learn it, you won't want to tell just anyone how it's done, Miss Duff."

Elmyra's face fell. "And you knew who I was right away. Poo. I hoped you might think I was the gardener."

The tall skunk flashed a smile. "The hair and fur is the first thing fugitives change, apart from their clothes. It's the last thing we look at. But it's a good first attempt. By the end of Summer, if you work with us we'll have you spin-changing into disguises that can fool any non-professional."

"I can't spin-change." Elmyra scuffed her shoes together. "I get giddy and fall down."

"We know. But you will learn. You have a bright future, Miss Duff - and fugitives have a fearful one, even if they don't yet know it." He winked. "And now - let's get out of where the satellites can see us, and then we can discuss terms."

Rhubella came downstairs to see Elmyra talking animatedly with the distinguished skunk, and to see Fifi's distracted gaze focussing on his lustrous, gently swaying tail. She quietly stood at Fifi's side.

"Handsome, isn't he?" She whispered, giving Fifi's paw a gentle squeeze. "You should ask him if he's doing anything tonight."

Fifi's ears and tail drooped like wet towels. "Ruby! You are ze one for me."

Rhubella's nose twitched. "Your musk glands have their own opinions." She smiled. "They say love is where your happiness depends on the happiness of someone else. I want you to have fun, Fifi."

Fifi sat heavily on the garden bench. "Every 'andsome skunk-'unk ees 'eading Fifi's way since ze hour she stopped looking! And ... Ruby, should we two ever part... zen ze flood would dry up forevair, certaintment." She sighed, looking down at her paws. She had toes seven percent less adorable than Babs, but they had been attracting a lot of admiration recently.

Rhubella sat next to her and for a few minutes they sat pressed close, not saying a word. Snatches of conversation drifted in from the house; evidently Elmyra was driving a hard bargain.

"She 'as picked up a few things from Montana Max," Fifi murmured "eet is all in zat furless 'ead of 'ers, somewhere. She 'as never thought to apply eet before."

"That's not all she's thinking of applying," Rhubella stroked Fifi's luxuriant tail. "She'll turn a few heads, the way she looks now." She winced slightly. "It's the next step where things could go so very wrong. But there's not a lot we can help her with there. If some poor boy gets hugged to a pulp... it'll be a learning experience for him. It's a good thing we're toons."

Just then, Elmyra and Mister K reappeared. The skunk nodded pleasantly. "Ladies. How would you like to help your friend and make some money?"

Half an hour later, Rhubella was wishing she had put in more work at the Perfecto gym that semester. She was running flat out, already regretting having accepted the offer of a serious game of "hide and seek" with Elmyra chasing her and Fifi across town while Mister K kept up and made notes.

*We should have given her heavier boots,* Rhubella panted to herself as she caught sight of a black-clad figure some two hundred yards behind and closing rapidly. *That, or a costume that'd catch and snag in bushes...*

Just ahead of her, the junkyard fence that marked the finish line was in sight. Once there she was safe under the rules they had agreed, and a hundred dollars richer. Evidently Mister K put a high value on getting the best "operatives" for his team and wanted to be very sure of them before he hired. He had kept up with Elmyra almost effortlessly, hurdling obstacles like an Olympic champion and instinctively cutting every corner to close the gap.

*If I get the hundred dollars for this I'll have earned it ...* Rhubella dodged down an alleyway,

pulling a wheeled dustbin behind her to partly block it. The door to the junkyard was almost in sight - when a shadow fell on her. She looked up, and for an instant spotted Elmyra running along the top of the wall as sure-pawed as a mountain goat - before leaping off and flattening her to the tarmac.

“Silly skinny-tail mousie!” Elmyra giggled, squeezing the breath out of her. She held Rhubella in a crushing grip while Mister K came up to confirm the capture. “I’ve got you now.”

The tall skunk hardly seemed to be out of breath, despite the two miles of furious street chase. “Indeed you have, Miss Duff. Both fugitives, in record time.” Without seeming to move, a hundred dollar bill appeared in his paw. “This is for you, Miss Rat. A well-run race even if you did not get to the finish.”

“Thank you.” Rhubella gasped, her ribs aching as Elmyra released her. “She got Fifi as well?” For an instant she speculated on the air drag at high speed of a skunk tail the size of her fiancée’s - or was that fiancé?

“And very efficiently too.” He turned to Elmyra. “We look forward to having you with us, as soon as your classes finish.”

Fifi appeared around the corner, her elegant fur looking dusty and dishevelled. Evidently Elmyra had tackled her hard, “Eh, M’sieu, thank you for ze money - I weel need it for ze running repairs!” She winked at Rhubella. “Ees not zo far to go, at least.”

The four of them rounded the corner to the junkyard, Fifi looking around with a touch of sadness. It had been home for so long, and held many memories. She opened the door and hopped up onto the back seat, grabbing her fur brushes. “Eh, Ruby, you will lend ze paw?”

Rhubella’s tail twitched, and she nodded happily. Looking around as she closed the door, she noticed Mister K glance up at the office building across the road, tense up for a second then whisper something urgently to Elmyra. Both of them vanished over the road at high speed.

“It must be a bounty-hunter thing,” she commented as she combed the dust out of Fifi’s tail. She relaxed on the back seat, gently stroking for a minute the two-tone fur that comprised half of Fifi’s silhouette.

Suddenly a movement in the corner of her eye caught attention. There was a green blur dropping out of the skies - then with a metallic crash something like a meteor smashed into the piled debris in one corner of the junkyard.

“Mon Dieu!” Fifi’s ears went right up. “We are under ze artillery fire? Ze Perfectos, ‘zey must really ‘ave ze ‘atred for us!”

Rhubella gave a strange smile. “Funny you should say that. I recognised that green streak. He splashed down on that pile of old farm machinery in the corner. That was Danforth.”

Fifi’s jaw clenched, and she grabbed the truck tyre iron from under the seat. “Danforth? Landing zhere eez one ‘arrowing experience - and now ‘e will ‘ave anothair!”

By the time they arrived, Danforth was recovering from the classic Toon “Slice and dice” of falling through a rusty harrow at high speed. His chromoplasm had reassembled like a slime mold, and he was groping around in the rust and debris for his beak when Elmyra and Mister K joined Fifi and Rhubella.

Mister K nodded to an open window six storeys above. “He was spying on you. Most uncultured. And unwise – to point a large calibre tube on a tripod at Toons of a certain career background. We are... sensitive to such things.” He gave a brief flicker of a smile. Elmyra giggled.

“Danforth can fly – in theory. But he’s not done it for years. Why flap your arms when you can relax in First Class, is what we used to say.” Rhubella located the drake’s beak, and ‘accidentally’ dropped it in an oily puddle before handing it back. “Whoops.”

The drake reattached it, and glared at Rhubella, spitting and gagging at the taste in his mouth. “We’ll have the last laugh. Don’t think we don’t know about your big plan. Having a few cut-price extras along won’t fool us.” He nodded contemptuously at Fifi.

Fifi’s ears went right down, and she whispered in Elmyra’s ear.

Elmyra nodded gratefully. She gave a giggle in her old style that would send a Tokyo-trashing monster running back in terror to the relative safety of the atomic testing range. “Ooooh! A stinky ducky! We’re going to have fun with YOU at home, Mister Quacky. I’ve got a big new dry-cleaning machine in the basement that I’ve never tried on a live specimen – then when you’re all clean I’ll put you in the big chair and dress you up and feed you with worms and hug and cuddle you till you ...”

Danforth screamed in terror. A second later came a loud clang and a duck-shaped hole was punched in the corrugated iron of the junkyard fence.

Elmyra sighed. “I lose more duckies that way.” She looked around at Fifi and Rhubella. “Thank you for helping. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Fifi smiled. “In ze name of Toon ‘umanity – yes, zhere is.”

An hour later saw a crowd assemble at Elmyra’s house, the first time most of them had gone there willingly except on rescue missions. Fifi had phoned round and asked if anyone wanted to help dispose of the traps and cages; the new Elmyra admitted she would not be using them again.

Shirley looked on as the wire cages were hauled out of the cellar to be left for the council scrap wagon. “It’s like the end of an era,” she commented, a sad note in her voice.

Fifi snorted. “Zat ees an era best ovair. You were never captured by ze red-topped terror. ‘Ad you evair been in zat cellar you would not be sorry to see it all go.”

Shirley looked on speculatively as Plucky struggled up the stairs with a narrow chicken-wire cage. She winked at Fifi. “Feef? You know every now and then I have to, let Plucky use one of his ideas. Keeps the cosmic balance, or some junk. And I read what’s in his mind. Not just what he’s thinking, but all of it. If he was a house I’d be digging under the floorboards. All kinda stuff buried down there.”

Fifi shivered. “You are ze brave bird, to do zat. ‘Oo knows what you will find?”

Shirley shrugged. “Better know it than not, ‘kay? There’s stuff even Plucky doesn’t know is in there. I’ll show you.”

The loon walked over to where Plucky was standing on the sidewalk, panting for breath as he rested for another trip. She sat on the wire mesh cage, which was a bare inch or so wider than her. Shirley wriggled her white tail-feathers, flashing Plucky a coy glance as he put another scrap cage down next to it. “Battery hen,” she whispered seductively in his ear.

Fifi looked on, shaking her head as with a loud “Boink!” sound effect Plucky’s eyes popped out like inflated airbags in a Clampett #52 Wild Take, the mallard’s whole body going rigid as a statue as he keeled over. “And there is anotheir bad idea. Eet ees wrong in zo many ways.”

Shirley snickered. “Get crucial, Feef. Like I’d let something that happen for real. But I know the worst now.” She cocked her head to one side, a contemplative expression on her bill.

“Who knows what lurks in the hearts of men, or mallards? The Loon Shadow knows.” Babs spin-changed into a 1930’s trench-coat, greasy fedora and skimpy face mask, looking down at the fainted fowl. “I think you short-circuited him again, Shirley.” She waved her pink hand in front of Shirley’s face, seeing her friend going off into another trance. “Hello? Earth to Loon, are you receiving?”

Shirley’s expression suddenly changed; it was as if she had been having a nightmare and woken to find it was real. The colour drained from her face. “Babs...” she whispered “since I got my full powers I’ve been having like major scale flash-forwards - like tuning into next week’s news. You can’t look away. I just had one.”

“So what horse wins next week’s Acme Derby? I could use some extra folding green for my trousseau.” Evidently the trench-coat came with a reporter’s notebook as standard. Babs stood poised, pencil in paw and eager for the “scoop”.

“It’s not like that,” Shirley shook her head. “It wasn’t even on this timeline. It was like looking over the fence into the yard next door - imagine if you’d left the camp fire lit last year and burned down the state next door. And you knew it was your fault.”

Babs’ brow furrowed in thought. “This is a “*me and Plucky*” thing again, right?” She spin-changed back out of the trench-coat and hat, which was getting stifflingly hot in the late May sunshine. Besides, she was not going to be filing any reports on the only selfish deed she had ever known from Shirley, a girl voted “Miss Karmic Balance” four years in a row.

The Loon’s feathers drooped, somehow seeming soiled - not with any actual dust but as if a spiritual smog had settled over them. “I know why Mother told me not to look into my own future and change things to profit myself. I always knew. It’s a total abuse of my powers, mondo huge style. Grabbing Plucky away from Maria Mandarin at the last second when every other time-line had them getting together ... I knew it was wrong but I still took him away. I just found out what was meant to happen by now, on like fifty timelines. And I can’t fix it.” She whispered into Babs’ long pink ear.

Both of Babs ears went up in surprise. “Shirley you can’t be serious?”

Shirley bit off an angry reply - looked at Babs then sighed, seeming to visibly deflate. “Me and my aura have to make some like mondo serious back payments to the Cosmic balance - or it won’t be Plucky who comes back next incarnation as a diseased rutabaga.”

Pink fur shuddered. “You can look at futures – can’t you see some timeline where you can fix it?” Babs recalled the end of the Spring Break; Shirley had been about to drop her claim on the vain mallard, just before Plucky had made his own decision to stay. The difference was, Plucky could not see



future paths and know how things would and should have turned out. Babs suspected Shirley had somehow forgotten to tell him. He had once pestered her to channel the spirit of Albert Einstein into his psyche before a maths test – Shirley had eventually agreed, but “somehow” forgotten to tell Plucky of how the young Einstein had been surprisingly poor at arithmetic. That had been fair enough – the shock of failing the test had put Plucky off cheating for days. But this was something else.

“I could show you what I saw on all those timelines next door – but you’d like never talk to me again.” Shirley’s feathers drooped. “Maria Mandarin didn’t deserve for me to like take it all away from her – she doesn’t know what she’d have had, but I do.”

“Shirley! We’re friends. Did I say it was wrong at the time? You’ve got psychic radar, you used it to look ahead a bit, that’s what it’s meant for. So show me. What can be so wrong?” She looked down at Plucky, who was beginning to regain consciousness. “Better be quick, or green and gruesome will hear.”

Shirley winced. “Here goes. Like hold on tight Babs, this is going to be intense.” She pressed her finger-feathers to Babs’ pink forehead, and concentrated.

Babs’ pupils shrank down to pencil dots, then expanded to Anime size as the visions flooded her mind. She gasped, shaking her head and stepping back after a few seconds. “That was – intense. Like watching a month’s worth of fifty TV channels in one go.” She paused, digesting what she had seen. Even without spin-changing, her toon metabolism washed her pink and white form briefly with sickly green tones as if she was seasick.

“I’ve wrecked two lives, and I’m not counting mine,” Shirley looked her in the eyes. “And that’s just the start of the avalanche.”

It was Babs’ turn to wince. She took a deep breath. “You can count on me, Shirley. I don’t know how I can help stick duct tape over duck history - but whatever it takes - whatever help I can give, you’ve got it.”

Fifi and Rhubella struggled out of the cellar carrying the last cage, an extra-large one. As they dropped it on the lawn next to the others, Fifi noted in surprise Beeper delivering a set of Acme Moving Wheels to Shirley and Plucky, who fixed them to one of the smaller cages and pulled it away with them.

“Le shiver. Zat was one I was in. Zey are not just steel - zey are cold worked iron with ze anti-magic coating, according to ze label. Zat label was ze only thing I ‘ad to read for a month, I ‘ave not forgotten eet.” Fifi’s tail drooped. Since that time dozens of captives had worn the labels off.

“I expect Shirley wants to pound it to scrap herself - with a very large Toon mallet,” Rhubella said. “I know I would!”

Fifi cast her fiancé - or possibly fiancée - a smouldering look. “Eh, and I would ‘elp. But now - we must say adieu, et eez ze evening and you are for Perfecto and ze early night before ze studies - and I ‘ave my own, alas!”

Rhubella hugged her. “Three months ago if anyone had said we’d be engaged - you’d have skunk-sprayed them till their cel paint dissolved. Fifi LaFume, Miss Skunk-Hunk Interceptor Missile!”

“And ze Preppie Princess, ruling ze roost with zat Roderick - ze dark shadows of our Babs and Bustair,” Fifi gave a delicious shiver. “You would ‘ave sued zem for ze slander!”

“I would have, too.” Rhubella gave a sly smile. “If I wasn’t too helpless rolling around with laughter.”

“Ze law of ze conservation of ze comedy,” Fifi’s ears drooped slightly. “Gravity, we ‘ave ways of ignoring awhile, Professor Coyote ‘e ‘as given ze demonstrations. But ze other law - inescapable.”

“I’m glad.” Rhubella kissed the skunkette lovingly. “The day I leave Perfecto I’m getting a permanent dye back stripe like Mrs. Penelope Le Pew, and buying a big two-tone tail-wig to match. If that’s inescapable comedy - I’m all for it.”

They kissed goodnight and parted, Rhubella calling a taxi for Perfecto while Fifi walked slowly back to the scrap-yard, her head in a whirl at the day’s events. She had seen a new Elmyra, one whose skills might actually do the world some good - and she had seen Shirley entertaining ideas that were as improbable as ... well, as Fifi and Rhubella ever becoming a couple.

She unlocked the passenger door of her beloved Cadillac and slid gratefully onto the seat, her nose twitching deliciously at the traces of Rhubella’s musk. Looking around, she patted the worn back seat. “Some things zey change - but othairs, I can rely on always.”

Had Shirley then looked twelve hours into the future, she could have read that Fifi was about to spend her last ever night in her old home. But then, at the time she was very much ... distracted.

End Chapter 2

### Chapter Three

As the first-year classes taught at Perfecto Prep, it was not love but money that made the world go round. With enough money you could make it go round even if it started off square - just pay someone with power tools and heavy machinery to chip off those annoying corners. Still, love had its place - as Danforth Drake was appreciating at ten o'clock on a rainy Monday morning.

"I just love doing this!" He stood under an umbrella a liveried Perfecto "minder" held, busily taking photographs as a small army of hired wrecking and haulage vehicles blitzkrieged through the scrap-yard he had bought, "*with all debts and rights pertaining*", an hour before and the minute City Hall opened for business. He laughed wildly as a wrecking ball came down on the roof of Fifi's Cadillac, caving it in. "Everyone says we ought to recycle more - isn't that right, skunk?"

Fifi stood on the sidewalk with one hastily packed suitcase, sobbing as her tears blended in with the rain as she looked on helpless. If she put one paw back on the scrap-yard site Danforth and his minders would treat her as a trespasser, and there was nothing she could do about it. "Monstair! 'Ow could you do zis to moi? Zat 'as been my 'ome since ze day I came to ze Looniversity! 'Ow can you evict a toon like zis?"

"Oooh, I'm so very glad you just said that." Danforth smirked. "Did you hear that, Chemley?"

A sleek feline in a sharply tailored business suit nodded briskly. "Oh, yes, Sir! Verbal admission of residency. A great help to the case. We can evict because it is not a legally registered address under the City zoning laws, and residency laws do not apply. Miss LaFume has merely been trespassing on what is now your property." Evidently the lawyer had to carry his own umbrella, but any wear and tear would doubtless be put on the bill. "And since purchasing the site this morning you agreed to pay the City all due back taxes, your ownership becomes ... retrospective." A sharp feline tooth glistened in a hard smile. Since the original owner had declared bankruptcy and the property reverted to the City six years earlier, Acme Acres' City Hall had been trying to find a buyer and had jumped at Mr. Drake's offer.

Fifi moaned at the sight of her beloved home being fed into the hydraulic jaws of an ACME self-propelled car crusher; the grinding could have been the sound of a warm heart breaking. The first she had known about it was when the lawyer and demolition team had shown up half an hour ago - she had not even had time to grab her belongings from the trunk of the car.

"Well, that about wraps that up." Danforth rubbed his finger-feathers together. "That's my good deed for the day - all this unsightly scrap metal put back into the economy. Maybe I'll sell the site to a perfume shop when I've cleaned it up. Make a nice change from skunk stench." His heart raced at the sight of Fifi walking down the street in the rain, one forlorn suitcase in her paw. "Yes! That's a picture for the album."

Just then his telephone rang, and he answered it as he recognised Roderick's number.

"Have you gone nuts?" Roderick's voice came clearly to him. "I just heard about you turfing the skunk out. We agreed, right? Not to do this till we find out where she fits in Rhubella's plan!"

"Keep your fur on, Roddy," Danforth smiled, glad to have thought of the answer already.

Roderick was usually the one who gave the orders, but not today. "That was because we didn't want to lose track of her. We won't."

"Oh? You know how much private detectives cost. You're going to have them trail her for a month? Out of your own pocket, Danny-boy?" Roderick's naked tail swished audibly.

"I don't have to do that." Danforth nodded towards Chemley, the Perfecto class lawyer. "I bought the scrap-yard with all its debts, they're why nobody in five years wanted it. The skunk just admitted - in front of witnesses - she'd been living there all along. I'm going to have Chemley serve her a writ for back rent that'd make your eyes water. If she can't pay it ... you know Chemley's toon Shtick is to bear bad news, anywhere. He once served divorce papers to a nuclear sub crewman on a secret mission under the icecap, and nobody ever saw how. He can get Fifi when we need her."

"Hmph. Not so shabby, after all." Roderick considered the matter. "She can't skip town, she's got to stick around to finish at Acme Loo. And if she tries to cut and run after that ..."

"I know just where to find a bounty-hunter. Isn't it sweet when a plan comes together?" Danforth grinned, ending the call and looking out at the teeming wet streets as the sound of crushing metal and revving truck engines came as music to his ears. Nice weather for ducks, he told himself.

"Le boo-hoo! Le boo-hoo!" An hour later Fifi was sitting in Babs' kitchen; her soaked fur was swathed in hot towels and a steaming mug of carrot soup in her paw was becoming salty with her tears. "Zat duck! 'E 'as cost me my lovely 'ome!"

Babs' pink ears were right down; Fifi's Cadillac had been a fixture of her life as much as the Looniversity's tower; it was hard to believe it was suddenly gone. And that Perfecto were cheering made it worse - pushing on plain unbearable. "Fifi? You're welcome to stay here. I've asked Mother - she says we can burrow another room by tonight." It had been some years since the Bunny family had needed to make any additions to the burrow complex, but Babs recalled it had once felt like a monthly occurrence.

Fifi sniffed, hugging Babs with a damp embrace. "'Zank you. You are, ze finest of friends."

Babs nodded absently, her caffeine-fuelled brain working fast. "Now - revenge time. I'm usually the last toon in the world to ever say "self-control". I want to go out to Perfecto right now and make some pressed Chinese style crispy duck! I want to see Dizzy Devil chow down on a roast duck dinner!" She hesitated. "But we can't. Not right now. It's Monday morning with final exams coming up, we've got to be studying - and studying hard. Or Danforth will have another laugh on us when he gets out of hospital and hears how we flunked."

Fifi gritted her teeth. She took a deep breath, and nodded. "Tu as raison, Babs. Nothing will bring ze Cadillac back. I saved my Acme Loo notes - eet was mostly ze clothing zat was lost in ze trunk. Zat, I can do without." She smoothed the damp ribbon in her hair, grateful that unlike Rhubella she could walk around mostly in bare fur. "Eh, and Ruby, she 'as ze same shape legs as poor Fifi. Should I need ze stylish outfit, she 'as ze wardrobes full, she 'as outfits she 'as nevair worn." A small smile came to her purple muzzle. "Eet was fun playing ze dress-up with Elmyra yesterday. Nevair did I think I would need it for myself today."

Babs gave a crooked grin. "I'll lend you a ribbon any time you want, Feef."

There came the sound of bunny burrowing from across the hallway, as Mrs. Bunny directed a working squad of Babs' siblings to the task of carving out a fresh room. This was rather different than most, having a private link to the surface - something even Babs had never had. It was needed for ventilation at least - in a burrow the scent of a skunkette would tend to linger, and Fifi suddenly had two score close neighbours unlike in the scrap-yard.

Fifi gave a long sigh. Then she straightened her back, squared her shoulders and picked up the damp collection of Looniversity revision notes. "Today, ze *"Matched and unmatched comedy duos"*, Babs? We 'ave ze work to do."

Babs agreed, happily to see Fifi throwing herself into her work. There was no time for brooding, or plotting revenge just yet. It was Perfecto that awarded points in a Dirty Tricks class, not Acme Looniversity.

*Still, she filed the thought away to ferment to maturity in one corner of her overclocked Toon brain, we'll keep a lookout. A chance will turn up, like it always does - and that duck will be laughing the other side of his beak!*

The rain poured down most of the day, and not till the sun broke through at evening did Babs' oldest litter of siblings (Mortimer, Katy, Lenny and Benny) make their own breakthrough to link the otherwise finished new room to the surface.

"Well, here it is!" Babs popped out of the new entrance, a scent of fresh paint and setting tunnel shotcrete following her. It was a hundred yards from the main flower-ringed entrance shaft, and currently had a plain steel hatch that she handed Fifi the key to. All rabbit households kept spare doors stockpiled in the closet for repairs and short-notice expansions. "You can invite Rhubella over any time - just close the gas trap to seal it off from the rest of the burrow, 'kay? I know what you're like when you get - interested."

Fifi gave her first real smile of the day; they had been working hard for seven hours with only a short break for milk and carrot cookies. She could see herself having to get in some food stocks that were not carrot-based. "'Zank you. Eet ees zo good of you and ze family."

"Aww, that's what friends are for." Babs winked. "Next weekend - are you and Rhubella heading to the Giga Mall? That Wedding Peach place does good deals." She looked at the engagement ring on Fifi's purple paw.

Fifi blushed. "I weel 'ave to talk with Ruby about zat. We 'ave ze ... questions you and Bustair do not. Which one of us wears ze tux?"

Babs tried valiantly to contain a snort of laughter. "As long as you get enough festive respirators for the guests who aren't skunks ... it won't matter what you wear. When you kiss the bride they'd better open the windows first or you'll blow them clean out!" All her class had long experience with Fifi's enthusiastic musk glands.

Just then, Babs' phone rang with the sound of Tibetan temple bells. She had customised it to

recognise her friends' numbers. "That's Shirley, all right!" She answered the phone, and listened for a minute. "Shirl? Come over." Babs closed the call, a curious expression on her face. "One drama after another. If only they gave us marks for these in class!"

In ten minutes Shirley appeared, slowly walking through the damp Summer woods rather than levitating as she usually travelled. She looked down, puzzled and frowning as if the sensation of mud on her webbed golden-brown feet was unfamiliar.

"Uh-ohh..." Babs whispered to Fifi. "Looks like trouble. She looks like - remember when she lost her aura, back in Spring? I wonder what happened this time?"

Fifi's eyes went wide, as she remembered Elmyra's clearout. "Sacre bleu! I 'ope she 'as not done something - foolish."

"What, Shirley? Miss Astral Harmony? The sensible one?" Babs hesitated. True, Shirley had been far from her usual self the day before. "Well, here she is - we can ask her."

"Like, hello Babs, Fifi. Bummer about your house, Fifi. I heard." The loon was neatly groomed as ever, but her tone seemed somewhat flat.

Babs recognised the signs. "Shirley? What happened to your aura? I remember you looked this way before."

"You 'ave broken up zat cage with ze sledgehammers, I 'ope." Fifi raised an eyebrow.

Shirley's eyes flashed briefly. "You knew? Sure you're not turning psychic too, Feef?"

A two-tone tail twitched. "I do not need zat to put ze two and two togethair."

Shirley shrugged. "We flattened it as flat as Danforth left your Cadillac ... this morning."

"This morning, not last night? I think there's a "but" and a big "oh-ohhh" somewhere in here."

Babs whispered to Fifi.

Shirley's temper flashed. "A loon can make mistakes, 'kay? And I can't blame Plucky. He didn't do anything we hadn't, like, agreed to." Her fire faded. "It was me that saw that idea buried deep in him. If I hadn't disturbed it, it might never have surfaced - just gone back to mulch. My aura's gone, but not like it did last time. It's there, it's alive - somewhere. We last saw her heading for the astral horizon, totally and massively freaked out."

"I've not seen you both overload that way since ... that party at Perfecto in the second-year when you got the punch-bowl spilled all over you," Babs marvelled. "Heh. You certainly "brought the house down" then!" Shirley's psychic lightning display had almost flattened the building, and blacked out the electrical grid of half Acme Acres for an hour with the overload.

Shirley's eyes crossed slightly. "Imagine trying that - and finding out you're inside an unbreakable mirrored box. What sort of thing was Elmyra trying to trap with that?"

"You did not see ze label? Ze magic-proofed cold iron?" Despite herself, Fifi felt a chuckle building. It would have been such a perfect practical joke. "I am guessing, zat is proof against ze psychic energies as well." Plain conductive Faraday screens stopped radio but did nothing against psychic powers, although evidently there were orgone-draining materials that did.

"But you had a key? Surely you had a key." Babs' ears went right up.

Shirley snorted. "Yes. And mondo good that was. Like I could turn round and reach the lock? And it's the only place I've ever been I couldn't use telekinesis on the key?" She was silent a few seconds. Then a small smile appeared on her beak. "Once in a lifetime trip, Babs. I took a good look at Plucky's system afterwards, it's out of him for good. And when I protest about mondo cruel poultry farms now... I'll know fer sure what I'm talking about!"

Fifi let out her giggle. Her ears drooped a few seconds later. "But - your aura, she is over ze 'ills and far away?"

Shirley grimaced. "Like I could blame her. By now she's probably half way across the Elemental Plane of Air and still running, you know?" She drooped. "This time she might not come back."

"Maybe Plucky can send 'is aura out zhere to find her," Fifi's tail swished.

Shirley sat very still. An eyebrow slowly rose.

"Feef was only joking," Babs said hurriedly. "Plucky's aura? I know he's got one but it'd be like sending him to cross the Pacific with a bicycle inner tube! I mean, we've seen what happens. Pulling out his astral shape is like extracting blood from the poor boob - I mean bird. It doesn't want to go, and you don't expect it to do much on its own."

"I was theenking," Fifi said with dignity "of something Shirley once said. About ze giant duck ego - and zat being ze formidable powair supply. Maybe, ey, Shirley?"

The loon grabbed Fifi's paw like a drowning toon clutching a lifeline. "Maybe, Fifi - if my aura doesn't come back on her own... it's the best chance I've got!"

As it happened, Shirley had not been the only one taking advice from friends that morning. Buster was finishing his breakfast (carrots served in many strange and sinister ways) when the doorbell that came with his ACME Government-surplus “burrow door” rang.

“*We need the keys and authentication documents at this time. This is not a drill.*” The pre-recorded voice always made him jump.

Buster took a peek at the entry phone. “Plucky!” He turned the keys and entered the day’s security sequence; light flooded in as the reinforced steel slab yawned wide. “Come on down, Pluckster!” He put his hands to his ears as the klaxon sounded - the circuitry in the old silo door liked to be secure, and was paranoid about being vulnerably open to the air.

“Buster - haven’t you fixed that thing yet?” Plucky cast him annoyed look. “I keep wanting to duck and cover whenever I hear it.” The door shut above him with a mechanical sigh of relief.

Buster gave a wide grin. “Eeh, if it’s not Looniversity work or fun - right now it’s not priority. And I’ve not had much time for fun. I hate to say it but it looks like the sun’s gone down on my goofing-off days. Come over to work on our gag routines?”

The mallard snorted. “I’ve caught enough anvils for you. Anything else - since when does Mr. Popular need any rehearsal help that isn’t pink and long-eared? You and Babs are like two sides of the same coin - you couldn’t get out of sync any way they throw you.” He mimicked the cheerleaders of the junior year Buster Bunny Club. “*Buster, Buster, what a bunny! He’s so cool our brains go runny!*” Suddenly he slumped, and flopped into a handy chair. “It’s Shirley.”

Buster raised an eyebrow. “She’s put another billion psychic volts through you? You knew the job was dangerous when you took it on, Pluckster.”

Plucky cast him an annoyed glance. “I’ve cost Shirley her aura. Again. I keep costing her what she can’t afford to lose.”

“She got it back last time, double,” Buster pointed out. “This time - who knows? Anyway, she’s still your girl.” He paused. “Isn’t she?”

“Yeah, yeah. She’s keen on that. Though she won’t wear a ring. Ownership is so uncool, unquote.” Plucky stared at his webbed feet. “This whole thing isn’t turning out like I thought it would.”

“Life’s like that, Pluckster. What did you think, Shirley’s suddenly going to be some adoring princess looking up to her Action Hero? You know her. She knows you, down to your hollow bird bones.” Privately Buster had always thought that the avian’s biggest hollow bone was his skull - what he really wanted in a mate was a live-in fan club with free 24-hour ego-grooming service. Shirley McLoon was far more than that; not just a live wire, she was a chilled superconductor to the forces of the cosmos.

“You’ve got what you wanted - like always. That’s your trouble, Mr. Popular! You’ve never known failure. You and Babs have been written in the script together from Day One.” Plucky cast Buster a sour look.

“I should complain?” Buster queried.

Plucky hesitated. “No, dammit, you shouldn’t. You ought to be grateful you’re not dating a flaky power station.”

“Babs is pretty much of a power station already...” Buster mused. “And flaky? Only when she’s been eating carrot chips ....”

“Oh, funny ha ha. It is to laugh.” The mallard’s eyes were downcast. “Imagine you cost Babs her sense of humour and timing. Everything she depends on, and you broke it.” He sighed. “I’d never have believed I’d say this but - I’ll never be up to her level, in the things she does. And I don’t want to see her dragged down to mine.”

“Whoa!” Buster was impressed. “As Shirley might say, mondo negatory vibes, Plucky! But honest too.” His ears crossed in concentration. “You think you’re not good enough for her? This is Plucky Duck saying that? Remember this - she knows exactly what you’ve got. And she chose you.”

“You remember back at the beach in Spring Break? That big-shot stuffed shirt with the psychic powers, Major Trauma or whatever his name is?” Plucky’s tail feathers drooped.

“Colonel Fenix?” Buster suggested.

“Yeah, that big stiff.” There came a sigh. “Shirley’s better off with someone like that, someone who does the same stuff as her, someone she could look up to. All the power and the glory. Snazzy uniform, too.” Plucky’s eyes were still on his webbed toes. “Probably has the mystical super-power of being able to eat organic tofu and like it.”

Buster tsked, shaking his head. “Plucky, Plucky. Save the *“I wouldn’t join any club that’d have*

*me for a member*” for Professor Bugs’ wisecracks exam. If you can’t trust your own judgement - “(and let’s face it, he thought - *nobody else ever around here ever has*) “then trust Shirley’s. She needs you now, more than ever.”

“For someone who never has any troubles you’re plenty quick with the advice, mister unwed marriage guidance councillor,” Plucky snapped. He paused. “But it doesn’t mean you’re wrong, either.”

Buster stood, and slapped his friend on the back. “Atta-duck! Now get out there and swing for the bleachers. Make Shirley proud of you.”

Plucky nodded, squaring his shoulders as he stood up. “On my way, Buster. I just can’t shake this feeling that - somehow I’ve gotten into the wrong script. Like things were meant to be different.”

“Since when did we ever have script approval around here? Shoo. Shoo.” Buster turned the spring-loaded keys, holding them at full lock for five seconds as his front door slid open.

“Shoes? Don’t wear’ em.” Plucky quipped, a flash of his familiar grin reappearing.

“That’s more like it.” Buster nodded. “Now, git.”

Plucky got.

Over at Perfecto Prep, Rhubella was looking at the results of her weekend’s labours. She had been throwing herself into her work with Star School exercises, but when she was not fishing for marks ... she had left enough red herrings to distract her rivals.

“Whoops, guess I left my laptop turned on all weekend. Clumsy of me or what?” Rhubella snickered, checking the files. “Take a look at this, Margot, eighteen people have tried to get the details of my Master Plan.”

“Which probably isn’t even on that machine,” Margot Mallard nodded appreciatively. “I know you. But they pulled some data off.”

“So they think. A hundred gigs of totally encrypted data - or possibly a very big stream of random numbers. Who knows?” Rhubella checked the layers of security, the important ones being almost undetectable. “With a few significant key words scattered in the block to encourage them.”

“Can we say, “*honey-pot trap*”, toons?” Margot grinned. “They’ll be spending all their efforts trying to get data that’s not there. Costs you almost nothing, and costs them all their time. Just when they really can’t afford to waste any. And you can get the intelligence on who’s trying to get in there.”

“Hmm.” Rhubella nodded. “Roddy and Danforth have been trying hard ... then, they’re always trying. Very.”

Margot raised an eyebrow. “Watch that sense of humour, Rhubella. You’ve been spending too much time with your hired help from Acme Loo. It’s catching.”

Rhubella flashed her a glance, noting the mallard’s impeccable business suit top. “You’re dressed to the nines today, Margot. Anything planned?”

Margot nodded, studying her impeccably groomed finger-feathers. “I have a rendezvous with a possible future associate.” Graduates of Perfecto did nothing so mundane as get jobs, that was for car washers and soda jerkers. They joined with other business associates for mutually profitable ventures. “It’s a new startup company. They aim to invent, patent and market an entirely new form of vice.”

“Good luck!” Rhubella felt a sour taste growing in her mouth. Three months ago she would have been keen to get in on the profitable action. Living in Perfecto was to breathe in a constant spiritual smog bank; it was a mixed blessing that now she recognised the fact. She suppressed a shudder, imagining if this had happened to her a year earlier - keeping up the pretence would have been an unbearable strain. The school’s official Latin motto was “*Vae victis*”, or “Woe to the vanquished” – and she knew that Fifi had quite ruined her for her old life. Perversely, that was now a good feeling.

“So ... what are you planning, for next month?” Margot looked her associate up and down keenly. “I expect you’ll surprise us all yet.” She had signed a notarised non-aggression pact with Rhubella in their first year, which was about as friendly as any two Perfectos ever got.

Rhubella took a deep breath, and put her paw on the security scanner of her laptop before switching it to “Lie detect” mode. “I’m going to walk down the aisle with a girl from Acme Looniversity, and if I spend the rest of my life cooking meals and changing diapers for half-breed skunk cubs, so be it.” The screen flashed green for “Truth.”

“Whoa!” Margot was impressed. “You’ve learned to fool a lie detector! Let’s guess - you’re going to become a high-profile Expert Witness - if you can pull that stunt reliably in public trials, you’re made for life!”

Rhubella smiled. “That’s the Perfecto way. And I’ve got just one month to get it perfect.” Inwardly, she winced. *Only one month left. Which is just as well...*

Just then, Rhubella's telephone rang. She smiled, spotting Fifi's number. "Fifi!" Her heart pounded as she pressed it to her ear. A minute later her ears were right down and her smile was gone. "Danforth did WHAT? Bought the junkyard and threw you out?"

"I noticed he's been looking full of himself today," Margot mused, signalling to a passing servant for strong coffee. "Looks like you need this."

Rhubella automatically sipped the steaming brew - in accordance with Perfecto's principles it was all ethically FoulPlay coffee, extracted at gunpoint from peasant communities round the world. She winced, wondering what Fifi would say about that idea. It had never occurred to her before. "You're staying with Babs? I think I know where that is. Tomorrow then, I'll be over!" She closed the call, fuming. "That duck! He's gone too far. Margot, you don't mind if I ..."

Margot Mallard laughed, tossing her purple riot of head-feathers back. "What, take some hideous revenge on poor Danny-boy? You go right ahead. You know I'm into ... survival of the fittest."

"And any drake someone can pluck for a pillow and spit-roast for Chinese duck pancakes, wasn't good enough for you in the first place." Rhubella nodded. "Thanks, Margot." She thought hard for a minute, her tail swishing. "There'll be an angle on this, there always is. I bet Danforth hasn't thought enough about buying that scrap-yard. I'll have to look hard."

Margot snickered. "Go to it! I've got to be off to meet those venture capitalists." She shook her head wonderingly, a small smile on her bill. "Intriguing idea, don't you think? Inventing a totally new vice. I wonder what it'll be like."

"I'm sure they'll provide you with free samples." Rhubella nodded. Inwardly she felt a twinge, imagining slipping back into her old ways. One more time, she promised herself. Taking a suitable revenge on Danforth would be a Perfecto deed rather than something Fifi would think up, she knew. A naked tail twitched. *Fifi doesn't want any of that side of me, she told herself. Well, then. Before I walk down the aisle with her I have to ... get rid of the stockpile. And I know just who should have it all.*

As evening fell, Shirley made her way step by step down from her house to the wetlands outside Acme Acres. She frowned, looking at the swamp mud on her webbed feet. "Like, gross." She knew she was early, but she had been meditating and trying to find her centre for an hour before giving up in frustration. It was as pointless as trying to adjust a TV set in the middle of a power cut. "This totally lags. It'd be just my karma if the lights never came back on." Just to complete her misery, another line of heavy showers was sweeping in and this time the raindrops would hit her impeccably groomed plumage rather than be deflected by her orgone field. She had not had to trudge on foot with soaked plumage for years.

Shirley knocked at the driftwood door of the hut Plucky called home, her beak twitching slightly at the musty odour. A house made from bundles of reeds in the damp air of a swamp would slowly decay no matter what you did, she told herself firmly. In some ways Plucky's home was more ecological than her own. "Like, anyone home?" She called out and waited a few seconds, and found the door was unlocked. Looking around for signs of a mallard approaching, she stepped inside out of the suddenly torrential rain that was thrashing the surface of the swamp. Inside, Plucky had evidently left in a hurry. Seeing what was in there, for an instant Shirley's feathers bristled in annoyance and she was about to do some vigorous tidying and binning when she stopped, and sighed. Shirley McLoon changed her mind.

When Plucky returned laden with groceries half an hour later, he had something of a surprise. Shirley was waiting for him - sitting on the sofa reading not a Tibetan mystical scroll but one of the magazines he subscribed to.

"Uh, hi, Shirley," he blinked rapidly, shaking rainwater off his feathers. "I was going to tidy up. I thought you'd be here a lot later."

The loon smiled, putting down the copy of "*Survival and Fighting Sporks of the world's elite forces weekly*" that he would have certainly put away out of sight. "Like hi, Plucky. The door was open, I let myself in. It's wet out there."

"Yeah. But hey! We're waterfowl." Plucky's eyes roved around the room - there was a lot he would have tidied away given half a minute's warning. He winced slightly at the rented DVDs lying in plain sight on top of the player; the latest volumes of "Monster Truck Deathmatch" and "Cheerleader wardrobe Malfunctions (*"Catastrophic in-flight structural failure edition!"*)" were something he could guess Shirley's opinions about. He braced himself for her reaction.

Shirley patted the sofa seat next to her. "Sit down, Plucky. Put your wing around me." As a pleased and surprised mallard obeyed, she opened the magazine to where a toon in the uniform of the

**Bolivian Submariner Marines** was demonstrating the effectiveness of his Mk. 19 bis boarding spork against reactive armour. “This stuff isn’t like totally new to me. In one of my past lives I was a trooper in Genghis Khan’s hordes, you know? Cost me a lot of karma.” She paused, casting him a glance. “I know you care about this stuff. When I could read your mind I saw what you feel about all this... but I don’t know why. Take me through it.” A hint of a mischievous smile flickered on the corner of her bill. “Then I’d like you to play me some of those DVDs or some junk?”

As the moon rose on the swamp a few hours later, any late passers-by might have seen a pair of waterfowl paddling out through the mud and reed beds towards the deeper, more secluded islands far from any prying eyes. One was pale and one was darker, though colours were washed out in the moonlight and it was hard to be sure. Besides, it was a private waterfowl thing.

Fifi awoke the next morning, and for a second had a quick flash of panic at the darkness around her. Even in the darkest night in her Cadillac there had been the street lights shining from over the fence. She spotted the pale glow of the alarm clock, and relaxed. A rabbit’s burrow complex with the lights out was about as dark as it got.

“Allo, my new ‘ome. For ze while.” She yawned, stretched and her exploring paw found the light switch. Her room was more spacious than her Cadillac back seat - at least she could stand and wave her tail without it pressing the ceiling. She looked around - there were alcoves for storing clothes and such (her eyes flicked over to her one surviving ribbon hanging forlorn on the rack) but it looked like she had to share a bathroom with the rest of the Bunny siblings. Only Babs’ parents had a private one all their own. Taking a deep breath, she opened the airlock doors that sealed off her new private room - and gasped at the sight outside.

Babs’ burrow in the mornings was like a cross between a mad pinball game and an underground station at rush hour, with dozens of school-age bunnies of all colours (evidently the chromoplasm of a rabbit was far less fixed than that of a skunk) yelling and squabbling in all directions as they bounced off the walls and floor grabbing satchels, books, clothes and carrot-based lunches. Fifi blinked, taken aback by the noise and sudden whirl of chaotic action. She spotted a bunny emerging from a door down the corridor with towel and toothbrush in paw and immediately bounce away down the corridor like a power-ball down a drainpipe.

“Sacre Bleu! Eet eez like ze Paris Metro in ‘ere.” Fifi dodged the fast-moving lapin traffic and ducked into the bathroom, which she gratefully spotted had half a dozen shower stalls.

In three seconds she stopped, noting two things. Though the shelves were piled with each junior Bunny’s soaps and fur grooming kit, they were all clearly named. None of the names was female. But that was of little consequence; Babs’ family were all the kind of rabbit toon who could “conceal” and could walk around Acme Acres with as much fur - and nothing else - showing as Professor Bugs. Suddenly Fifi’s nose twitched at an unexpected scent, definitely not that of a rabbit buck - and then every strand of fur stood on end in shocked surprise.

Stepping out of the shower was a male skunk - about the same age as Mortimer who would be starting at Acme Looniversity in September. Fifi’s eyes crossed as she registered two things - he was a very handsome young skunk - and unlike her family or Professor Le Pew, he was definitely the kind who had to wear pants in public.

Their eyes met. With an “Eeep!” the stranger grabbed for a towel and jumped back into the shower stall, his eyes wide and startled. One second later Fifi was out in the corridor, pressed against the wall as she dodged the unending high-speed traffic, her heart pounding.

“Mrs. Bunny!” She spotted Babs’ mother making her way down the corridor. “You ‘ave ze othair ‘ouse guests? Ze skunk?”

Mrs. Bathsheba Bunny smiled, the orange-brown lepine nodding pleasantly. “Why, that’s right, dear. His name is Henri, he’s Mortimer’s penpal. He comes over every year from Toulouse about this time. He just arrived yesterday, staying for a month. Have you met him?”

“Oh oui,” Fifi felt her eyes starting to cross. “Certainment.” She shook her head savagely, trying to clear her mind of the sight. Toulouse was her home town and the rest of her family were still living there. “And - ze lady bunny’s bathroom? Where is eet please?”

“Just across the corridor. They’re not labelled, I’m afraid - we so rarely have guests.” Bathsheba Bunny pointed. Her nose twitched slightly. “It should be free by now.”

Fifi was naturally quite insensitive to her own scent, but she noticed with alarm that her tail was twitching involuntarily and beginning to fume. “Zank you! I weel need it!” She rushed into the room, spotted the pink décor and perfumes on the shelves, and sighed with relief. Half a minute later she



discovered that Babs' sisters had already used all the hot water.

"Still," she told herself, "Ze cold showairs. I weel be needing zis." She had never had the luxury of hot showers in the scrap-yard, having mostly sponged and groomed her fur clean in a tarpaulin full of rainwater. Then, she had never lived underground before with a burrow-full of non-skunks ... and a most unexpected neighbour who so very definitely was.

"Tuesday evening already!" Babs stretched her back, feeling a pleasant glow from the hard exercise of a day of spin-changing and slapstick routines. She was in Fifi's new room as it was the most uncluttered; they had been practicing hard since nine and by all accounts the rain had been hammering down outside all day. "Well, we've put in our hours for the day." She stretched out on the rug; there was a large and comfy bed but little other furniture as such. "Feef - I'm sorry about your Cadillac, really I am. But - it's fun having you move in next door."

Fifi smiled. "Zank you. Babs. You are ze life-saver."

"Hey! I look like a roll of candies?" Babs recoiled in mock indignation, but then giggled. "But just as sweet, I hope."

Fifi's tail twitched. "Theenking of sweet - you did not tell me about ze pen-pal of your brothair Mortimer."

"Oh, Henri." Babs waved dismissively. "I didn't think anything of it. He's always coming over. Every year since he was a cub." Suddenly she stopped, and a sly smile drifted across her face. "Why, Fifi. You've met him? He's awfully bashful."

Fifi shook her head slowly. "Mon Dieu. 'E 'as nothing to be shy about. I 'ad ze mix-up with ze showers zis morning. I saw."

Babs giggled. "Since you and Rhubella got engaged you've met one "skunk-hunk" after another - those French-Canadian athletes, that action hero bounty-hunter boss, and now the cutest, sweetest skunk-hunk on record. And yes, he does like girls. There's half a dozen of my sisters about to pull each other's fur out over him. If it was just two or three, one might get somewhere ... but six or ten get in each others' way. Kind of fun watching them trip each other up."

"Cute and sensitive and ze lady's man too," Fifi buried her head in her paws. "What are ze chances of zat?"

"It's all go around here, isn't it? Whatever next, inquiring minds want to know?" Babs spin-changed into a TV nature journalist complete with bush jacket, camera and microphone. "Here on "Skunk-watch" we're watching the seasonal migrations ... great roaming hordes of handsome male skunks passing through Acme Acres, as if drawn by some great unseen force of Nature..."

Fifi moaned. "Eet is certain zat I will find out. Ze rain of skunks affair zo many years. What did Fifi do, zat ze law of ze Conservation of Comedy 'ates her so?"

"Professor Coyote did say, gravity we can dodge sometimes but that law we can't." Babs' ears dipped slightly. "Cheer up! You've got Rhubella now, and for the rest - at least you can enjoy the scenery." Babs grinned manically. "And this view you won't mind even if it is in black and white."

Fifi threw a cushion at Babs, and a general pillow-fight ensued. Some things never changed.

Half an hour later, a purple and white skunkette and a pink and white bunny were lying flat out on Fifi's bed, worn out.

Fifi giggled. "Eet eez ze perfect way of working off ze tensions," she panted.

"If you don't have a Perfecto uniform to put on the drake-shaped punch-bag, that is." Babs contemplated her adorable toes. Her ears twitched. "We should get Shirley over, and maybe Mary if we can pry her off Jaggi with a crowbar. Now you've enough room - what about a sleepover?"

Fifi nodded vigorously; her Cadillac had never had enough room to sleep three in any comfort. "At ze weekend, oui - eet 'as been ages." She did not voice her thought that they might not have many more chances. In a few months their old life at Acme Acres would be over - Hollywood might beckon any of them, and there were independent studios springing up all around the continent that called them away. This might be the last month they even lived in the same state. "I will ask Rhubella - and we shall be on ze best behaviour."

Babs winked. "Oh, I don't know." She whispered something in Fifi's ear.

The skunkette went rigid for an instant, and her tail began to twitch. She swatted Babs lightly with the pillow. "Babs! You 'ave ze cleanest toes but ze dirty mind. Zat ees not ze kind of stage performance I am planning with my career!" She hesitated. "And Ruby, she might not like ze audience heckling and eating of ze popcorn."

“Awww. Spoilsport. A regular sleepover it is, then.” Babs was never one to wait around when she could do something immediately, and reached for the phone. Mobile phones did not work inside the burrow, but there was a wired handset in every room. Four minutes later she was done, having found everyone at home. “Right, that’s it - if you can call Rhubella in. Should be good. Not just like old times - but some of that too.”

“Rhubella she ‘as told me of ‘ow zey live in Perfecto. Ze sororities, ze exclusive cliques - ze running scores on ‘oo is in and ‘oo is out zis month.” Fifi shook her head. “Even the dining fraternities - Roderick is ze chief of ze gourmet dining club Eta Pi.”

Babs stifled a snort of laughter. “Eat-a Pie. Dining fraternity. What do you bet nobody in Perfecto ever spotted that one? They wouldn’t appreciate the humour if you hit them with a grand piano!”

Just then there came a knocking at the metal hatch twenty feet above them. “Maybe it’s Rhubella come on over already?” Babs suggested. “Not many toons know where you are.”

Before she had finished speaking, there was a purple streak heading up the ladder as Fifi slammed open her new front door. And stopped.

It was a visitor she recognised from Perfecto, but not Rhubella. Spotless in a charcoal grey business suit and protected from the rain by an oiled silk umbrella, the feline lawyer Chemley pressed a document into Fifi’s paw. “Your back rent bill, Ma’m, duly served. Five years late, but perfectly legal for all that. Due date is the end of the month.” With that he bowed and turned, walking away before Fifi could react.

From below, Babs saw her friend unroll the document and suddenly lose all her colour, as if the rain had turned to bleach. Fifi gave a quiet moan.

“Babs. Eet ees all ovaïr with moi. First zat Danforth ‘e ruins my poor ‘ome - zen ‘e ruins poor Fifi.” She pointed to the document with shaking paws. “Zat duck ‘e ‘as billed moi - for ze half a million dollairs!”

## Chapter Four

The week passed rapidly at both Acme Looniversity and Perfecto Prep; the sun came out and the junior years were revelling in the good weather with sports and outdoor trips. Actually the Perfecto team had a new footballer in from England who was teaching them the strategic uses of a professional foul - they were anything but unprofessional in that establishment.

“Aaah - a perfect day for goofing-off!” Buster Bunny contemplated the scenery as he re-emerged from his burrow after lunch. “Just the perfect day to cut classes and spend at the ol’ water hole.”

Plucky Duck looked up from the latest edition of *‘Starring in a Hollywood Blockbuster for Dummies’* he was trying to read. “Yeah. Right. Wasn’t it you who said if we didn’t get this revision done we could have all the goofing-off time we could use - unemployed?”

Buster cast him one of his trademarked rabbit grins. “Irony, Pluckster. It IS a perfect day to relax. Did I say we could afford to?” He stretched, his eyes going wide. “One more hour! We’ll start with wild takes and wisecracks - you need work on those.”

“Wisecracks. Humph. Any more cracks and I’ll fracture.” Plucky executed a perfect Freleng Fragmentation, his image shattering into pieces like a safety windscreen before reconstituting.

“Atta-duck! That’s the way. Can’t be a failure.” Buster wriggled a blue ear.

“Except structural.” Plucky managed a Stalling Slasher, dividing into six blocks as if Freddy Cougar had caught him with a paw swipe. He shivered as he reassembled; long practice had given the Acme Loo seniors a far greater resilience than the average toon, but it still smarted.

The afternoon wore on. In the end, even Buster called it a halt. “Don’t want to get stale,” he admitted, putting down the Pasadena Jones bullwhip he had used to combine Action Heroics and discouraging Plucky from slacking.

“Stale? Boy, do I know how a 1970’s bagel feels.” Plucky fired one last shot. He slumped to the ground, panting. “Tonight I just want to crawl into the pit and sleep.”

“The girls are all busy having a sleepover, I know. Fifi’s new place.” Buster raised an eyebrow. “How’s Shirley - adjusting?”

Plucky hesitated. He parked his green rump down on a tree stump. “I used to ask why she can’t be more like a normal girl. Me and my big beak.”

“Oh? Babs said she’d been staying over with you watching your Freddy Cougar DVDs - and everything else.” Buster shook his head. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

Plucky was silent - remembering the sight of waking up to Shirley in her head-feather curlers, her

white plumage in need of a morning shower. He had been quietly horrified at just how much hard work her toilette needed every day to get her into the spotlessly presented loon shape the Looniversity knew, having helped her with that chore. She also snored, though in a musical tone.

Plucky had not sat through years of Professor Porky's classes on story goals without being able to spot a plot problem when his beak was rubbed in it. Years ago he had fallen for a totally unattainable Loon, a brilliant rainbow on the horizon. Having got to that horizon he knew things would be different. "She's even given up trying to make me into a vegetarian. Still eats organic mung bean tofu and winces when I order the spicy meat feast pizza with triple sausage stuffed crust, though."

Buster sat down next to him. It was always hard to know with Plucky what advice he would take in, and what he would take in quite the wrong way. "If her aura never comes back – she's showing you what life's going to be like for you two." *This is me, she's saying – this is me, this is all I have, that I'm offering to you.* Buster's ears dipped. If Plucky had not worked that out, there would be little point in telling such a hopeless case.

"She's told me – it's too dangerous to go after it. She's guided me out there before, says I'd get lost on the astral plane. Forever. What, a mallard with no sense of direction?" Plucky snorted. "My ancestors found their way every Spring clear across the continent to one small pond in the Minnesota Ten Thousand Lakes – in the fog!"

Buster looked up innocently. Plucky had got lost before now in the Acme Giga-mall. "She knows her stuff, Pluckster. You've been carried as a first-class passenger out there. She ever let you fly solo?"

"Ha! What of it?" Plucky snapped his fingers derisively. "A duck afraid of flying? In three dimensions or ten, it should all be the same to "someone" with the record score in Mega Wing Commander 4! This isn't some shivering fledgling, you know. I am – Plucky Duck!" He struck a heroic pose.

Buster clapped slowly. "The one who didn't even believe in half of Shirley's world? Thought astral travel was a load of hooley?"

Plucky paused. "So I got educated a bit outside the classroom. Hey! Life isn't all Porky Pig's lame Props Class 101. Was Columbus qualified in Atlantic crossing until he went and did it? And he still discovered Atlantic City."

"If Shirley says it's too dangerous – she means it." Buster looked at his friend closely. "She doesn't lie or exaggerate – you know that."

"I'll be good." Plucky pressed his finger-feathers together piously. "But for now – I want a sleepover too." He winked. "Any sleep over twelve hours sounds good to me."

"Well, you'll probably need it," Buster nodded. The mallard had been working hard at slapstick gags and wild takes all day, and by all accounts Shirley had been keeping him very busy at home. "Lunch tomorrow at Weenie-Burger? I've not been there in weeks."

The mallard hesitated. "Sure, Buster. I'll see you there. There's no reason why I shouldn't be able to make it. No reason at all." He stood, and looked at Buster and his burrow searchingly as if fixing it in his memory. "Well, time to head back and hit the old hay."

Buster waved, his eyes fixed on the retreating mallard. "Hmm."

A few miles away in Perfecto Prep, Rhubella too was finishing a week of hard work. Most of her class were spending about a quarter of their energy on their classwork, and the rest on sabotaging each other. That was the Perfecto way.

The rat snickered, relaxing in her room as she looked at the collection of items she had ordered urgently, a delivery that a medium-hard search by her classmates would find. "An ice-hockey mask, a magic grimoire, a book on discredited styles of hypnosis, and a crate of over-ripe bananas. Let's see them work out how all that fits together." *Maskirovka*, she recalled the Russian word - *that's what our Dirty Tricks tutor Mrs. Tushenkov called it in the second-year – for every important plan, have a deception plan. Something to have them watching the chimney as you stroll straight in through the front door. Always make it cheap for you and dear for them.*

Having planted enough plot land-mines to cover her retreat, Rhubella smiled and turned her thoughts to the evening. *What will life be like, not having to do this all the time?* She wondered, being careful not to say it out loud. In Perfecto, walls had ears. Suddenly her T-pad vibrated as a Toonmail arrived. She looked down and nodded – her legal advisor was at work on ideas of how to make Danforth rue the day he threw Fifi out and billed her for the privilege of having "trespassed" on land he had retrospectively owned all the time. Toon law was a strange and confusing subject, but the owl Mr. Morgan was one of the best.

There came a knock on her door. She checked the door camera, and smiled as she opened it. It was not the kind of smile she gave to Fifi. “Well, Hello, Roddy.”

Roderick Rat stood at the doorway dressed in his most impeccable suit, his quiff of black head-fur neatly brushed and a bouquet of orchids in his paw. “Rhubella.” His voice was almost soft “I’m sorry for the way I treated you. It was just business, you know? Will you come back to me – if not now, then after we graduate? We make a great team. Remember all the things we’ve done.” He proffered the flowers. “I have a table for two reserved at L’Occasion, and the limo awaits.”

Rhubella raised an eyebrow. “Nice try. But you’re rather too late. I don’t need your money, and for the rest of you – I know exactly what you’ve got to offer. Remember? These days I’ve got someone waiting for whom it isn’t “just business.” It’s personal.”

Roderick snorted. “Rhubella ... what would your family say if they knew what you were doing with the hired help?”

Rhubella extended one finger – the one with her plain silver engagement ring. “They know. They aren’t too happy but – they’ll be at the wedding.”

“Oh, come on.” Roderick’s eyes narrowed. “A Perfecto graduation scheme is one thing but this is ridiculous. She’s an Acme Loo-ser! A hobo skunk! Where’s your self-respect?”

“Feeling a lot better than when I dated you.” Rhubella turned her nose up. She grinned, opening her laptop and putting her paw on the scanner as she launched the lie-detector. “Tonight I’m going to be spending the night with her and her friends. That’s exactly where I want to be.” She snickered mentally as the screen flashed green for truth and Roderick’s jaw hit the ground with a clang that would have earned points at an Acme Wild Takes class. “You’re outclassed and outnumbered, Roddy. Live with it. Or don’t.” With that she swept past him, her nose in the air.

Roderick stared after her for a minute. Then he opened his phone and dialed. “Danforth? I take it all back. You go after that skunk with everything you’ve got. Right now. And we may have to ... expand the target area a little.”

“It’s a nice place you’ve got here!” It was eight o’clock and Mary Melody was looking around Fifi’s new room – or burrow, to be exact. “I remember you saying your old car was starting to leak.”

Fifi gave a sad smile. “Mais oui. Eet would ‘ave been no problem for one more month in ze summertime, though. And though I would ‘ave said “au revoir” to eet forevair after ze month ... I did not want to see eet go ze way eet did.” Her tail and ears drooped.

Mary winced, not wanting to remind Fifi of that. “Don’t think of it as Perfecto one-nil. Remember you’ve got Rhubella now – she’s worth a thousand points on that scale – if anyone’s counting!”

“Not moi,” Fifi said hastily. But then a slow smile spread across her muzzle. “At Perfecto zey do. And zat will smart!”

“You mentioned smart? I’m here!” Babs bounced in from the family burrow, laden with snacks. “Carrot chips, carrot cakes, carrot cookies ...” she raised an eyebrow. “Hey! At “chez bunny” what did you expect?”

“They say flamingos are really white feathered, they get their pigment from eating pink shrimps,” Mary mused “I wonder if a carrot-free diet would get us a bleached Babs?”

Babs spin-changed into a dishevelled white lab coat. “Ve specialize in ze experiments ... ze hideous, forbidden experiments...” she intoned in her best Mad Scientist voice. “But not zat! Zhere are ze limits!”

Mary and Fifi snickered, accepting the vitamin-rich snacks as Babs spin-changed back. “It’s the only time we’ve got together all term. Next time we do this ... are you having a batchelorette party, Babs?” Mary asked.

Babs’ eyes went wide in shock. “What? Me? Painting the town red, leaving a trail of debauch and devastation clear across the state you could see from space? A whole evening of reckless abandonment before I slip into my lovely white bridal gown the next morning while they’re still hosing down the ruins of Acme Acres?” She paused, contemplating the idea. “Sounds good to me. Want to arrange it, Mary?”

Mary’s toon blush manifested two inches clear of her body in a rosy fog. “You haven’t named a day, officially? Just let me know.” She hesitated. “It might be a year or two for me and Jaggi, if you’d do the same for me. But if it’s sooner – that’s OK too.”

“What, in case something “develops” in the meantime?” Babs snickered, looking at Mary’s athletic figure.

“Le sigh.” Fifi’s tail drooped. “Zat ees something zat weel be – tres difficile for Ruby and moi. But we are trying!” She winced. “And – if Ruby cannot shake of zat Danforth and ‘is rent bill, we will be ze

**Bonny and Clyde on ze run from ze debt collectors. Paying ze ‘alf million dollairs – impossible!”**

**“She’ll find a way,” Babs predicted confidently. “Maybe I can’t use a crystal ball like Shirley could but hey! When have Perfecto ever finished up on top?” She giggled, her eyes glancing towards Fifi’s bed. “Not counting Rhubella and you.”**

**Fifi swatted her lightly with a cushion. “Babs! We will ‘ave to get you safe and married to Bustair before you become, ze public ‘azard to navigation.”**

**“Sorry! Sorry!” Babs’ grin was slightly manic. “It’s just ... I feel like the last carrot-cake on the shelf. Well, there’s still Elmyra – but she’s more like a poisoned saccharine cake. If it wasn’t for that white dress waiting at Wedding Peach with my name on it ...” she took a deep breath “you don’t know how tempted I’ve been to give Buster a “dress rehearsal” or two. Or fifty-two.”**

**“That sounds like a “bunny thing”, all right,” Mary allowed. “But instead you’re getting your work done. There’ll be time for you and Buster later. You’ve got all the rest of your lives.”**

**“And zey do not do ze re-sits for ze final Looniversity exams,” Fifi backed her up. “What ‘appens at ze end of ze month ees a one-shot thing. Now or nevail.”**

**“Yes, yes,” Babs sighed, throwing herself back down on the cushions. Where Oriental mystics might contemplate their navels, she contemplated her incredibly cute toes – admittedly Fifi had nothing to be ashamed of on those lines, but they both felt sorry for Mary. “Still. Me, Babs, the last in the queue! Who’d have believed it? And who’d ever have thought you, Mary, and Shirley of all people would be first? Plucky gets lucky? Not likely, ducky. But it happened.”**

**She spin-changed into a light 1960’s style suit, and packed her pink ears down into a slick Kennedy pompadour. “We choose to go to the loon.” She cast a confident eye at her audience, leaning over the cushion as if it was a podium. “We choose to go to the loon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard... but it will be done. And it will be done before the end of this decade.”**

**Fifi giggled. “You ‘ave eet, Babs! You ‘ave eet exact! Ze duck with ze ego ze size of Minnesota would not be content with less zan... ze ‘ighest prize of all.” Her ears drooped. “And now... she ‘as lost zat.”**

**Babs spin-changed back, and her long ears perked up at a sound from outside. “Speak of the loon – here she is, I bet.” She streaked up the ladder to the hatch, and popped it open. “Shirley the Loon! Rhubella the ... honorary skunkette! Come on down!”**

**“Like, hi Babs,” Shirley descended the ladder gingerly, where once she would have floated down buoyed in the planet’s energy field like a dandelion seed on the wind. “Hi, Mary, Fifi! It’s been like totally ages!”**

**“You seem in a good mood,” Mary looked up at her as the loon handed over a basket full of free-range humanely harvested organic salad. “Feeling happy with the exam work?”**

**Shirley shrugged. “It’s progressing towards oneness. Even without my powers – I can feel that.” She could evidently also feel Mary’s unspoken question. “When life hands you lemons – don’t get negatory about it, ‘kay? Start looking for lemon recipes. Lemonade, lemon squash, lemon meringue, lemon and chickpeas with couscous...”**

**“...Or some junk.” Babs finished for her, grinning. Suddenly her ears went down. “Seriously? How are you – coping? And Plucky?”**

**Shirley cast her a sad smile. “If I’d been way harmonious with Plucky for just another solstice, he might have picked up enough to stand a chance at going after my aura? But – a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Like, Mother wouldn’t let me read her grimoires till I was nearly ten, I mean! I told Plucky... him launching on the astral plane would be like tying a hundred helium balloons to a lawn chair and sailing off into the blue. He’d get somewhere – but where, and if he could ever get back – mondo bad news.” She sat down on the cushion that most resembled her futon, carefully arranging her well-groomed white tail feathers.**

**“Chasing after a spacecraft on a lawn chair blowing in the wind... eww. I get the picture.” Babs’ nose wrinkled. “But if you talked him out of going after your aura ... and if she never comes home on her own ...”**

**“Are we playing ze Truth or Dare?” Fifi asked brightly. She was relaxing on a royal-sized beanbag with Rhubella. Rhubella had insisted on getting her some more furniture – and Fifi had not wanted to argue. “Babs – you remember, in our first years ‘ere – we played eet all ze time.”**

**Rhubella looked on, her tail twitching. “At Perfecto ... that’s the kind of thing you just don’t dare to do. Ever. Letting information go for free – when you’d normally steal it and sell it.”**

**Fifi snorted. “We do not ‘ave zis as ze mutual blackmail club, Ruby.”**

Rhubella gave an embarrassed grin. “Sorry. Lifetime of conditioning. I was going to ask if you’ve checked the room for bugs ... but you’d just ask what your teacher Bugs would be doing here.” She brought out the backpack she had been carrying. “Oh, I almost forgot – before we get too comfortable. I brought a present.” Rhubella pulled out three bottles of wine. “This is rated three stars on the seniors’ wine list at Perfecto.”

“Your cafeteria has a wine list? And here’s the rest of us still making do with the Mystery Meat at the Looniversity” Mary mused.

Rhubella’s tail twitched. The Perfecto dossiers had the true solution to the Case of the Mystery Meat, but she sensed it would not be a friendly act to reveal its true nature to folk who had been eating it for years in the Looniversity cafeteria.

Babs’ nose wrinkled. “Rhubella! This isn’t that kind of a sleepover. Besides I don’t drink. I don’t think any of us do.”

Fifi shrugged. “I ‘ave ze wine at ‘ome in France with ze family meal. Eet is, not ze big deal.”

“Same here,” Mary nodded. “A glass or so at weekends with supper. And my parents are doctors, you know.”

Shirley raised an eyebrow. “So, Babs, you’re planning a totally trad wedding next month and not getting in any totally trad champagne?” She cast an eye over Babs’ food selection. “They do a sparkling carrot wine, too.”

“You’re old enough to get married, you’re old enough to enjoy a glass if you want to,” Rhubella shrugged. “Up to you. Otherwise – more for us!”

Babs spin-changed into a submariner’s costume and assumed an anguished expression. “Hull integrity failing... peer pressure exceeding safety design depth ...” she grinned. “Well, if it hasn’t turned you into staggering winos yet... I’ll get some glasses.” She vanished rapidly in the direction of the main burrow.

Half an hour later, all five were sitting comfortably with a glass of sparkling East Molvanian Riesling to hand (or paw). Mary spun the empty first bottle, which ended up pointing at Rhubella. “If it’s not a Perfecto top secret ... why were you always so – dead, as cheerleaders? You, Margot and Luanne Lecroy just used to show up and sit around. I’ve seen more animal magnetism in a vegetable patch.”

Rhubella giggled. “We had a two-hundred year history of unbroken sports wins, till Roddy blew it at the Acme Bowl. How much encouragement did we think our team needed? What was the point? We’re in it for the status.” She raised an eyebrow. “After that – we livened up. We had some Junior-year girls hiring in top professional trainers for themselves, we couldn’t let them upstage us.”

Mary nodded, handing the bottle over. “Fair enough. Your turn.”

Rhubella spun it and it pointed to Shirley. “While we’re still talking about shaking pom-poms – we could never work out why you were into that? Shaking your tail at the crowd didn’t fit with the rest of your character dossier.”

Shirley opened her bill and closed it, blushing with embarrassment. “Like, I thought it was you know, way degrading too? That was back when I started at Acme. But Babs started the team and – she asked me. So I helped her.” She paused. “Mother said I should take up one embarrassing sport to balance my chakras, and stop me getting way too self-centred.”

“Loon goes missing...” Mary pulled out her pocket reporter’s microphone and gestured dramatically. “Last seen vanishing up own navel!”

“That kinda thing.” Shirley took a sip of her wine, and relaxed. “And it goes way harmoniously with my yoga – more aerobic.” She took the bottle and spun it, the neck pointing straight at Babs. “Mondo hard to think of a question for you I don’t know the answer to by now, Babs. But – I can’t see the futures any more.” She paused. “So – are you planning on following the family tradition? I mean how many bunny kids has your mother got?”

Babs did a quick mental calculation. “Twenty-six. Mom says that’s enough for now.”

There was a quiet snickering from Fifi. “Eet took ‘er zat long to work zat out? Did ze ‘ouse seem too empty with only twenty?”

Shirley smiled serenely. “No surprises like that for me – I’ve always been you know, in total control of my life energies. I can divert bio-energies like, towards or away from where I want them.”

“Hey, it’s a bunny thing!” Babs shrugged. “It only suits some of us, or the world would already be up to its ears in incredibly cute and talented bunnies. I know one thing – I didn’t work my cute cotton-tail off at the Looniversity all this time to spend the next ten years filling baby bottles and wiping bunny drool off the floor. I got enough of that here with my siblings. Still. Someday... if I ever get tired of having the world of stage, screen and style adore me then Buster’s going to be kept very busy expanding the

Bunny burrow.” She paused, and winked. “And you can read that remark two ways.” She spun the bottle, which ended up pointing back at her own adorable toes. “Wah! Own goal!”

“What do you do when that happens?” Rhubella asked curiously. She had traded information value-for-value with Margot, Luanne and Giselle at times, but nothing like this free-for-all.

“Reveal one secret fact, or secret fear.” Babs’ ears drooped. She was silent for a few seconds. “I’m marrying Buster. Of course I am. And I want to! I’ve always wanted to. But – that’s just it. If I’d dated a dozen bucks before I could say, no to that one, that one’s better – then when I find the Number One, One Hundred Percent – I’d know for sure.” She bit her lip. “I think he’s perfect. Even the way he annoys me... nobody does it better. I can’t imagine anyone could be better. But it’s almost as if we were brought up together on a desert island or something. No competition.”

“And you wondair eef ‘e feels ze same way, deep down?” Fifi asked quietly.

Babs nodded. “He’s never dated other girls either. We’ve known each other all our lives.”

Shirley looked at her friend’s drooping pink ears. “Hey Babs, stay clear of that Elemental Plane of Angst! I can’t see auras now but – I did for years, you know? If any two were made for each other – I’m telling you, it’s you and Buster. And that script’s graven in stone, no rewrites.” She took the bottle, and gave it a hard spin. “And another own goal - for me! Just my bad karma.”

Babs sniffed, then a mischievous gleam reappeared in her eye. “You’ve seen the Secrets of the Cosmos – Shirley the Loon has known all, sees all – come on, tell ... well, some anyway.”

Shirley blinked. She had already told Babs about the way she had wrecked a dozen timelines by claiming Plucky the way she had. That would not qualify as a secret. “If my aura never comes home – I worry I might be totally tempted to find another way to do what it used to do for me.” She took a deep breath. “Babs, you’ve like seen what’s in Mother’s cellar?”

“She’s into drawing a lot of surprising geometry on the floor, and reads books that have to be chained down for the good of the Universe,” Babs explained to the rest. “Not your style though, Shirley? Drawing square circles, two-sided triangles and summoning things from, umm, way out of state?”

The loon shivered. “Dark sorcery. Bleah. Necromancy, pe-eww! Really not my style, no way. I’ve always thought it way grody to the max. Mother never tried to push me one way or another, but she always lets me know what she can do that way.”

“Ooh, spooky.” Babs spin-changed into a slinky sorceress. “I draw the circles, chant the spells and conjure the ghosts of re-runs past and pilot episodes yet to come!”

Shirley smiled. “It’s mondo dangerous stuff. You know, in one of my past lives I was like High Priestess of a volcano god? I got just one little thing wrong then I was starting my next incarnation real soon.”

“Mmm. Try and avoid that at Acme Acres – our student insurance runs out next month.” Babs relaxed, looking at the bottle. “Two own-goals in a row finishes the game, Rhubella.” She flashed the rat a glance, where she and Fifi were cuddling with Fifi’s tail wrapped around them both. “So, it’s not a question you have to answer but I’m curious – when you walk down the aisle, which one of you two ends up wearing the tux?”

Fifi blushed. “We ‘ave not decided. Eet ees Ruby ‘oo must wear some kind of ze costume or we would ‘ave just ze veils and bouquets. Zat Wedding Peach boutique ees so dear.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Rhubella assured her.

Fifi nodded, hugging. “But ze bride must arrange ‘er own dress! Eet is ze tradition.”

Mary Melody smiled. She pulled out her reporter’s microphone. “Acme Acres registry office reports they’re having to widen their doors. Why? Not just because the population is getting fatter – but two full lace and chiffon bridal gowns side by side won’t fit!”

“Le Mmmm...” Fifi frowned slightly. “Eet is zo big a thing, zat we ‘ave decided. Where shall ze ceremony be, mon amour? In zis state eet is possible – in France, no. But ze marriage licences from abroad zey are valid in France... we ‘ave ze planning to begin.”

“But not too much hard planning till your exams finish – I hope!” Mary cautioned. “Wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“She’s right,” Rhubella sighed. “But we can at least name a day – say the month after final exams? That’ll be three weeks after we get the results and after Babs and Buster get back. Enough time to arrange things.” She looked into the skunkette’s eyes. “The details aren’t important to me. The place, the rituals don’t really matter – all I want is you. I’d marry you by the roadside in the rain if I had to.”

“Aww.... that’s so sweet” Babs sighed, her eyes going heart-shaped as the two kissed. She finished her wine, and giggled. “This stuff goes to your head! It’s the bubbles!”

“You’re not used to it... better go carefully,” Mary cautioned. “Better not have too many –

bubbles.”

Babs snorted, throwing herself back on the pillow, pink bubbles manifesting from her ears. She looked at the alarm clock on Fifi’s bedside table. “An hour to midnight! Then anyone who’s been slacking on their diet ... turns into a pumpkin.”

“Pumpkin’s out of season now,” Mary Melody observed. “But I’m starving.” She smiled shyly. “I’ve been – keeping busy exercising.” She handed out the party food, and for half an hour they shared a companionable supper.

“Ooh. I am – ze stuffed skunkette.” Fifi was the first to finish. “No more or Ruby weel be marrying ze black and white pumpkin.”

Rhubella kissed her. “At Perfecto they say you can’t be too rich or too thin.” She looked at Fifi’s curves. “They’re wrong. At least I don’t need to smoke to stay thin ... though I used to think it was cool to try.”

Babs giggled; years ago she had worked hard on an Advanced Prankster project and forced Roderick and Rhubella to quit smoking, although their health had not been her motive. “Everyone learns and moves on. I used to think rap was cool – and so did Buster.” She made a gagging sound at the memory. “Even Elmyra’s moved on. I saw her this morning – till she opened her mouth I hardly knew her. Nice re-build, Fifi!”

Fifi shrugged. “Eet was time for ze change – and all ze big changes came together for ‘er. Ze new summair job, ze ‘ormones of une femme kicking in at last – and au revoir to ‘er old classmates. Ze style and costume zey are only a part of eet.”

“I’m zeying a new costume too – a real change.” Babs nodded. “Farewell old lilac skirt, you’ve served me well! Something I can wear to work starring in Hollywood.” She raised an eyebrow at her friends’ gaze. “Well, why not? Aim high. That’s the thing. Then if you don’t get all the way to start – you’re still way up there.”

“Ze updated Jessica Rabbit outfit, possible, non?” Fifi cast an appraising glance over her friend’s figure. “You can spin-change into any shape, certainment – but zis is ze one you wake up to in ze morning.”

“Along with brown eyes... I never could sleep in my violet contacts.” Babs stretched. “Thinking of sleep – it’s been a long week. It’s been great to do this again! I’ve missed it.”

The conversation carried on for awhile, fading slightly as one after another they let sleep claim them. Despite the wine Babs was the last one awake; in the dim burrow nightlight she looked around at her friends. Shirley was in her head-feather curlers, the loon’s tightly coiled quiff needing constant care to stay in shape, and from what she had let slip she was planning to spend the weekend with Plucky. Mary was sleeping the sleep of the just, though just what was hard to judge from the smile on her face. Stripes were probably involved somewhere. Fifi and Rhubella were curled companionably on Fifi’s bed, their tails entwined. Acme Acres’ unlikeliest couple were certainly a loving couple.

*We could do this again in say two weeks ... Babs’ thoughts held a quiet desperation Or ... maybe the day after our final exam? We’ll all still be here then. For awhile. Our very last days and hours before we go, one by one. Even if Hollywood and instant stardom beckoned, the idea of this being their last sleepover gave the pink and white bunny a painful twinge somewhere deep inside her. I can’t have everything... and every film however long or brilliant has a final scene. No matter how good the sequels are. With that she settled down to sleep, trying not to remind herself of the obvious next line. Compared with the original - how good are most sequels?*

The next day dawned bright and hot, and after a breakfast she approved of (organic vegan carrot muesli, made entirely from strictly vegan carrots humanely harvested) Shirley thanked Babs and Fifi for a fine evening and waved farewell.

“Give Plucky my – regards,” Babs winked. “And I hope he’s been resting up!”

“Fer sure, Babs,” Shirley preened herself in the Bunny family hall mirror, checking her plumage was immaculate. “I’ve got plans for us today. A long swim on Acme Lake should be totally harmonious.”

“You’re not taking your bathing costume?” Babs noted her friend’s lack of a sports bag.

Carrying wet costumes in Hammerspace made things in there go musty. Shirley could walk around in her bare feathers as modestly as Professor Daffy Duck, but putting on bathing costume was traditional for toons to swim or sunbathe in.

Shirley paused. “Something Plucky said really made sense.” She paused for Babs to marvel at the novelty, which she duly did. “*We are waterfowl*, he said. Like I mean that’s so totally obvious, but ...”

“I remember one Autumn he tried migrating South with the wild ducks, actually flying.” Babs



nodded. “The call of the wild. Didn’t get far on his own wings – but still.”

“More than I’ve ever done that way, Babs. Be true to your nature, or some junk? Except – it’s not junk.” Shirley cast a critical look at her neat pullover, and sighed. “All my powers went off with my Aura, and they’re not coming back. I’ll be true to my Waterfowl nature – if that’s all I’ve got left, that’s what I’m going to exercise.” She spotted Babs’ ears drooping. “Hey, remember? No negative thoughts, Babs, like we said? When life hands you lemons, make lemonade. Full of vitamins.” She paused. “And when you get handed guano – compost. That’s organic nutrients, for all our vegetable friends.”

Babs giggled. “That’s more like the loon we know. Go and sock ’em dead!”

Shirley made her way through the woods towards the wetlands, humming a tune that came into her head. She checked herself as she remembered just what it was; the opening song to “*Monster Truck Deathmatch*” she had watched with Plucky. The sport itself was one hideous mess of aggression and eco pollution that she shivered to think about its effect on her karma from just watching... but it was something that made her mallard happy, and that was something she was grimly determined to do. Shirley forced herself to carry on with the tune to its finale, though the sound effects of two fifty-tonne trucks in a head-on smash at ninety miles an hour were hard to hum.

Suddenly she smiled, thinking of the day she had planned. “A swim in Acme Lake... the way Nature intended two waterfowl. That’d be like harmonious at least.” She felt her mind wander, which was a rare thing. “Clean water. Sunshine. Soft mud on my webbed feet. Fresh delicious fish and shellfish ... say what? Whoa girl, you’re strict vegan!” She suddenly stood still, trembling, just where the forest came to an end. “Where did that, as in totally spring from? That is so not me.” There was a sudden pang of desire for the taste and feel of live fish wriggling in her beak, the feel of small fish bones digesting in her crop, and for the textured crunch of paper-thin shells of freshwater mussels, swallowed shell and all. Just as suddenly, every argument the loon could put against it failed to make headway against the hot core of instinct that had somehow appeared deep inside her.

Shirley shook her head ruefully. “This back to Nature thing can go way too far.” She told herself as she carried on, her heart soaring at the sight of Plucky’s reed hut at the water’s edge. She recalled Plucky there swallowing boiled clams like popcorn for supper the week before; the sight and scent of it had disgusted her then. “Maybe I’ve caught it off Plucky ... I’m the first ever victim of passive eating? Way gross.”

As she approached she felt her tail feathers starting to spread at the prospect of the day she had planned. *But no fish, no way, nohow...* she told herself firmly *they have a total right not to be eaten. I should know better by now than to even think of being some mondo gross carnivore.* Straining her eyes for the sight of mallard, she was surprised to see not green feathers but blue and white fur as Buster threw the door open, his fur bristling with alarm.

“Like, hi, Buster. Is Plucky in? We’re going out for a swim.” Shirley took in the buck’s shocked expression. “Why the bummer vibes? Buster – have you and Plucky been up all night again watching those zombie apocalypse movies?”

Buster swallowed. “You’d better come in. I just got here a couple of minutes ago. He’s in there... sort of.”

Shirley’s eyes went wide as she entered the hut. Plucky was lying on the bed, breathing but lying very still.

“We were going to meet for lunch ... but I had a feeling about this. I found a note.” Buster picked up a paper from the crate that served as a bedside table; Plucky’s usual scrawl was on it.

“*Buster... if you read this I may be late for weenie-burger. Tell Shirley I’ve gone loon fishing. I won’t come back without her.*” Shirley read, and the colour drained from her. “Oh wow. He’s gone and done it. I told him to absolutely not do this!”

“Yeah. But when did the Pluckster ever take good advice?” Buster looked down at the still figure. “Still – you’ve gone without your aura before – and yours has taken his for a walk in the woods a time or two. Did he have a lot of power that way to lose?”

Shirley shook her head, tears in her eyes. “It’s not like that. He’s, like, gone after me with everything he’s got. Everything! Maybe doubles his chances ... but only from maybe, from one to two percent? He’s thrown the whole stack of chips on the table... bet the farm, you know?”

Buster winced. “So if he loses that he won’t have astral cab fare home?”

Shirley knelt at the bedside, tears running down her bill and her finger-feathers pressed against the mallard’s. “Buster. His body can’t stay empty for long like this. Never mind cab fare home – if he doesn’t get back soon ... he’s not coming home.”

## Chapter Five

“This is not the relaxing Saturday lunchtime I had in mind.” Buster Bunny sat by the hospital bed where Plucky was plumbed to a life support machine. Babs was sitting next to him holding his paw tightly, while in the next room Professor Wile-E was talking urgently with the medical staff.

“I hope Shirley and her mother come up with something,” Babs looked down at the still form on the bed. “But some toons go into coma for years... until a new generation of fans discovers them and brings them back. Or sometimes toons find a way out themselves.” By the bedside Buster had brought in what the postman had delivered too late for Plucky to watch – the Director’s Uncensored Cut edition of *‘Extreme Celebrity Monster Truck Deathmatch’* including extra slow-motion footage and blooper reels. “Maybe if we play some of this he’ll hear it somehow? I saw it work on TV on some toon in a coma!”

“Ahem.” Professor Wile-E Coyote entered, carrying a sheaf of papers. “It is rather worse than that, Miss Bunny. And I fear time is running out fast.”

Babs glowed with automatic pride, looking down at her violet diamond engagement ring. *Miss Bunny ... that’s my name... wear it out if you want .... I won’t need that one much longer!* She shook her head, focussing on Plucky. “What’s so urgent? He’s being looked after.”

The Dean of Acme Looniversity’s School of Hard Knocks sighed. “If it was a coma ... his vital force would still be in there supporting his physical form. Comatose indeed, but ... present.” He paused. “You recall my lectures on Toon metabolism, I trust?”

Buster stood up, closed his eyes in concentration and began to recite. “Toons owe their resilience to their energy form giving shape to their material chromoplasm... this is how recovery from “Toon Takes”, spin changes and other gag effects works. In a healthy toon the chromoplasm is refreshed at twenty-four cycles a second – though some of the earliest toons have been measured at twenty. The material form may be flattened, cut up in any way or even ground to a powder... but as long as the energy form is there it will re-form, as from around a seed crystal.” His voice trailed off. “Oh.”

“Oh indeed. The concept, the very essence of Plucky Duck is no longer there. Without refreshing, his chromoplasm will begin to fade like any material pigment.” Professor Coyote cast Buster a sharp glance. “Question - if I make a hole through a mountainside with tunnel paint, how long will it remain navigable in bright sunlight?”

“Eeehh... about thirty hours.” Buster had not wasted the revision time since Spring Break. “Then – any toon abilities are lost and it reverts to normal matter.”

“If you can’t smell fresh paint, don’t try the tunnel,” Babs added “being half a mile underground in a tunnel that suddenly stops existing, hurts.”

Professor Coyote smiled sadly; he had written the textbook from personal experience. “Top marks for theory, Miss Bunny. I could wish the day’s – practical example – was something else.”

“So – he’s just going to dry up and vanish like a puddle on a sidewalk? Poor Plucky!” Babs’ eyes brimmed with tears. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“His physical needs are being met,” Professor Coyote nodded at the life-support machine. “But that is not the problem. Should his essence return to his body he will wake up – but the only known person qualified to bring him back is already out there. If he fails... he fades. At some point he will have gone too far.”

“Yeah. I was playing Mega Wing Commander 4 with Pluckster only last weekend,” Buster reminisced. “There’s one mission where you leave the carrier mid-ocean and look for land. If you don’t turn round before you’ve burned half your fuel you can’t get back... you have to keep going and hope you find somewhere before the fuel runs out. If not then you’re going down, game over.”

“Down to a dark and sunless sea.” Professor Coyote looked at the rabbits. “Please tell me you have no idea how to go after him.”

Buster and Babs looked at each other then back at him. “Not a clue.” They chorused.

The battle-scarred coyote sighed with relief. “That’s the one good piece of news I’ve heard all day.”

Back in the ancient Gothic house in the woods behind Acme Looniversity, Shirley McLoon was having a “like, totally inharmonious day” as she described it to her Mother after passing on the facts.

Melicent McLoon was usually a surprise to people who knew her daughter. She was a Loon of course, with the full adult black and white square plumage pattern on her back and extending over her shoulders like a wrapped shawl. Most folk who had heard of her interests expected to see a black-clad, sinister sorceress – or knowing Shirley’s tastes, someone hung down with mystic charms and amulets.

A 1950's beehive hairstyle, conservative lemon-coloured cardigan and spotless white kitchen apron hardly fitted either the style of Shirley's New Age or her mother's arcane contacts with the exceedingly Ancient Age.

"Sit down dear, and I'll make you a nice herbal tea." Melicent patted the Victorian couch in the living-room. "Your poor beau isn't going to have anything sudden happen to him – unless of course he does get back to his body. We need to talk."

Shirley sat down, her eyes downcast, for once forgetting to complain about it being a leather seat. "I'm like totally responsible... it's my aura he's gone after. If she wants to come home she can. And if they meet out there, she can bring Plucky home."

"Yes dear." An avian eyebrow rose. "But we both know that's not very likely to happen, don't we? And he's not likely to come back under his own power. Even if he could find the way. Plus, you and I know there are severe dangers out there just waiting to make a meal of an unshielded spirit."

Shirley drooped. "And I said Plucky was selfish. And cowardly."

"I remember. And it took this for you to find out you have a toon who's not only willing to die for you, but probably will." Melicent shook her head. "It's a good thing you made sure of his eggs while you could."

Shirley looked at her mother, her eyes and beak wide open in shock. A faint strangled squawk was her only sound.

Melicent looked back at her daughter fondly. "Now then, dear. This scene is usually played the other way around, hmmm? It's generally a daughter telling her shocked and disbelieving mother. What do you think it means when your body suddenly starts telling you it wants high grade protein and lots of calcium, and it needs it right now?" She smiled reminiscently. "When I carried your egg, it was shrimps I had a craving for. Raw shrimp, shells and all. You'd better put your diet principles to one side and give your body what it needs. If not for your sake, then for your eggs."

"Eggs? Like, no way!" Shirley blinked. "I'm in, total harmonic tune with my bio energies... I've been stopping eggs happening since April. Anyway I'd know!"

"You were in tune and control, dear." Melicent sat down next to her. "Not any more. You had no idea that anything was wrong with Plucky either until you found him – it was Buster Bunny not you who had the presentiment. You were full of plans for the two of you today, with not a cloud on the horizon as far as you could see."

Shirley swallowed, acknowledging the fact.

Melicent smiled sadly. "That part of you left in a huff after you decided to play battery hen. Well, battery hens lay eggs. My grand-children." She squeezed Shirley's wing-fingers gently. "I think we should look at every option of getting their father back, don't you?"

Shirley nodded. "There's only one person I've ever met who had enough astral power and control... and a way pivotal thing, he's met Plucky too." Her feathers drooped. "I've totally no idea how to find him."

"I know who you mean. And he's someone you might have to make the kind of deal with you never wanted to." Melicent put her wing around her daughter. "Colonel Hal Fenix, from that Hideously Unnatural Forces military unit you ran into on your Spring Break. Yes, you told me all about him. The total opposite to everything you've ever believed in."

"He's a good toon, even if he wears a way uncool military-aggressive uniform! I could read his aura – bits of it. He read me down to my basal charkas... I was like clear glass to him, he saw everything I'd got." Shirley paused. "He knew I wouldn't want to work for him – but he made the offer. In case I changed my mind. He really needs my talents." She shuddered. "If he can get Plucky back for me I'll do whatever I'm asked to ... even if it's spending the rest of my life being sent down sewers hunting down way unclean spirits."

"Wearing the uniform?" Melicent asked gently.

Shirley nodded, her eyes clenched shut. "Or in my bare feathers. Like, whatever. I'm only really useful to him with my aura working. But – if he gets Plucky back I'd do it anyway. With a shovel."

"Very well." Melicent considered the problem. "Now... as to contacting him in a hurry. A military unit that nobody admits exists, I don't think we'll find in the phone book. But we do know what he does." She gave one of her special smiles that made Elder Things uneasy. "If the fire brigade wasn't listed – how could you get to meet a fireman?"

"Go to a fire," Shirley replied promptly. "But he only gets called out to way special 'fires'. And there's not many of those around Acme Acres. When students are going like wild at MiskaToonic, maybe." Suddenly her eyes and beak went wide open in shock. "Mother! You're not going to..."

Melicent looked at her daughter. “You might want to start rehearsing what to say for when he turns up and isn’t happy with this.” She paused. “Unless you have a better idea? Your aura could have found his before wherever he is, but right now...” She cast a glance at the orrery that slowly rotated in the corner of the room; its mechanical dance of planets and moons as familiar to the McLoon family as other households had a hall clock. “I’d say the stars are about right. And there’s no time like the present.”

Two loons looked at each other. Shirley sighed. “I’ll help you unchain those books you borrowed from MiskaToonic University,” she said “I know they’re way heavy – in every way.”

The Acme Acres hospital had extensive gardens where recuperating toons and visitors could enjoy the fresh air and sunshine. Mid-afternoon saw a blue and a pink bunny sitting at a table in the shade, a plate of carrot chips untouched in front of them. Neither had any appetite.

“This isn’t something we can do,” Babs sighed, then looked around at the hospital building. “We’re not into spirit plane travel stuff. The trouble is – neither are the doctors.”

“Check. Can’t rabbit-tunnel through the aetheric plane! Remember we once took that “Fantastic Voyage” trip inside Plucky’s mind with Calamity’s micro-ship ... but that’s no use. We could go back in and find a “nobody home” sign maybe – but we can’t follow where he’s gone.” Buster’s ears twisted in concentration.

There was a silence. “I keep thinking it’s so brave and self-sacrificing of Plucky ... but the trouble is, that’s not the only explanation.” Babs’ ears drooped.

“I know what you mean. I’m Plucky’s best friend but I can’t shake that feeling either. He fell in love with Shirley, with all of her powers – and he doesn’t go for half measures.” Buster agreed. “There’s plenty of pretty “waterfowl next door” around Acme Acres – or is that “waterfowl next pond”? There was Maria Mandarin, I mean. I thought she liked him more than Shirley did.”

Babs turned pale. “Shirley thinks she stole him from her. She worries a lot about it. The trouble is ... I can’t help thinking she’s right.”

“Hmm. Maria’s been going around looking like someone stole all her lines from the script, since Spring Break,” Buster agreed. “And Plucky’s found out what Shirley without her powers is like. That’s not the loon he wanted all these years. She told him what the risks were going after her aura but he went anyway.”

“That’s the Plucky Duck we know and... some of us love, mile-high ego and all” Babs winced. “Like he says, “*made of pure Grade-A WIN!*” He can’t imagine not going for it.” She paused. “What was that dumb game show he and Dizzy went on in the second-year? He got hospitalised even though he is a toon.” A small smile crept over her face. “Oh, I remember now.”

“*That’s Incredibly Stupid!*” She and Buster chorused.

“Heh. They got that bit right.” Babs sat back, and looked up at the blue skies. She was silent for a minute. “Well, he’s somewhere out there now. Shirley says the astral plane looks like different things to different toons. It’s a kaleidoscope of harmonic colours to her – but to Plucky out on his own he’d see it differently.”

“I wouldn’t be amazed if to him it’s something like Mega Wing Commander. That’s what he’s good at,” Buster agreed “maybe right now he’s looking out for runaway loons on the radar horizon, web foot jammed on the throttle and the afterburner locked full on – and he’ll keep right on till the last drop of fuel runs out. That’s Plucky for you.” *If the fuel runs out ... will he know about it?* Buster’s ears dipped at the unwanted thought. *Or will he just keep going forever? Green ghost riders in the astral sky?*

“We’ve got to do something.” Babs fumed. “We can’t just sit here and watch him fade away like last month’s film posters.” Her ears twisted in concentration. “But we can’t go out to where he is. Shirley can’t. So, who can?”

Buster struck a special-effects electric arc between his ears. “I’ve got it!”

“Show-off.” Babs shielded her eyes from the blazing glare. “So, what’s the bright idea?”

Buster grinned. “I’ve read Plucky’s “Big Book of Conspiracy Theories” – remember that Colonel Fenix?”

“Of Unit Four Plus Two,” Babs mused. “Yes! Specialising in Unthinkable Events. Shirley said he was a top gun hot-shot astral plane pilot. The book doesn’t list his email, I take it.”

“No. He’s a very special kind of cop, even if he wears an army uniform. And how do you guarantee the cops will turn up?” Buster wriggled an eyebrow. “You rob a bank!”

“Hmm.” Babs considered the issue. “It’s direct, simple, and completely insane. I like it!”

“It’d have to be a very special kind of bank – in fact it won’t really be a bank at all. It has to ring

the right sort of alarms, though, to bring him and nobody else running” Buster cautioned. “And I have an idea of just how to go about it.”

From the hospital grounds to Acme Looniversity would have taken half an hour on the bus, but in twenty seconds Babs and Buster emerged from a fresh tunnel entrance behind the Senior Wing of their alma mater. Professor Coyote had often speculated that toon rabbit burrows intrinsically dipped through short cuts in Hammerspace, which could have exits anywhere.

“So, Blue-boy – here we are back at the Looniversity – on a Saturday. It’s all shut up! Nobody here!” Babs tapped sand out of her ears. “So what’s the plan?”

Buster grinned. “You remember Professor Bugs’ computer, down in the basement? I had a try or two on it before he caught me. I heard he stopped using it last year – too dangerous. But Pete Puma the janitor says it’s still there. He’s got the keys to the basement.”

“Oh brilliant, oh blue-sky-between-the ears,” Babs yawned. “The world’s already up to its ears in word processors. What’s so special about this one?”

“Because, Babs... it’s not a word processor. It’s a reality processor.” Buster wiggled his eyebrows in Groucho Marx style. “When I generated a dinosaur film – the dinosaur almost escaped out of the screen before I pulled the plug. And we’re not talking 3-D special effects, either.”

“Hmm.” Babs’ ears dipped slightly in concentration, then went right up. “You’re going to custom script a horror story and let it run loose on an unsuspecting Acme Acres? Buster, are you insane?”

“Well, like they say... round here we’re all a little loony,” Buster shrugged. “So let’s hear your brilliant plan.”

Babs hesitated, then nodded. “Hey! I guess if we destroy the Universe ... at least we won’t get in trouble for it.” She spin-changed into a 1950’s piano comedian and sang “*No-one will have the endurance/ to collect on his insurance / Lloyds of London will be loaded when they go!*”

“That’s my Babsette... always looking on the bright side,” Buster pointed towards the caretakers’ house off to one corner of the Looniversity grounds. “Let’s see if Pete’s home.”

Back at Babs’ house, after visiting Plucky at the hospital Fifi and Rhubella had volunteered to help Mrs. Bunny with the mammoth task of looking after the household. Fortunately, fine Saturdays saw the burrow empty as the junior rabbits all headed out from underfoot to carefully compulsory sports and clubs. “*When you’ve 5 in a litter – think five-a-side teams!*” Was how their mother had put it.

“Le phew!” Fifi staggered in with a pile of washing. “Twenty-six baby bunnies! And not-so baby zese days. Eet eez, ze ‘are raising experience!”

Rhubella smiled, opening the door to the industrial-sized washing machine. “Well, it’s different. This is something I should get used to.”

“You ‘ave nevair done ze laundry? I ‘ave mostly just ze ribbon to wash, but I ‘ad ozair dresses. Zey were in ze trunk of mon brave Cadillac.” Fifi’s ears drooped at the memory.

“We have people to do everything like that. And Perfecto teach you how to look after people.” Rhubella loaded up the drum and studied the instructions.

“Ah! You look aftair zem. Zat is good.” Fifi nodded, a little distracted as she pulled out a trolley of towels. All the Bunny family clothing was neatly embroidered with their names, which kept arguments to a minimum.

Unseen by her, Rhubella winced. “*Looking after*” menials meant very different things at Perfecto. She knew what Fifi would think about some of the teaching – how to get the maximum work out of some hard-working toon you were secretly planning to dismiss – and how to “*shed excess labour*” with no legal comeback. She closed the washing machine door and set the dial. “That’s full – the rest will have to wait.”

“Le sigh.” Fifi looked at her, her eyes dreamy. “We ‘ave named ze big day, we ‘ave ze rings... nothing will stop us now, mon amour.”

Rhubella kissed Fifi’s broad pink nose. She took a clean-looking towel from the pile and wrapped it around the skunkette’s head like a bridal veil. “You look good like this. This afternoon – the Giga Mall? Visit Wedding Peach for a dress or two? And ... I want to make an appointment at a fur grooming place. To have a white back stripe so permanent it shows up on my model sheet.”

Fifi’s eyes crossed, her nose twitching. As Rhubella held her, her striped tail began to fume and bend sideways. “Mon Dieu! ‘Zat idea ees ‘aving... ze effect!”

Rhubella hugged. “Well – we’d better not scent out the laundry room – I don’t think Mrs. Bunny would thank us for that. Not when we’ve a room of our own.”

Fifi gave an almost feline purr. She pulled the towel around her muzzle coyly. “Zat is ze invitation

**I weel nevair refuse.”**

Some hours later Fifi sat bolt upright on her bed as her keen ears spotted the commotion of the burrow outside filling up again with Babs’ siblings. “Mon dieu! Eet ees already three of ze clock! Eet ees too late for ze Giga-Mall today ... ze choosing of ze dresses ees not ze quick thing like ze Weenie-Burger.”

Rhubella smiled, stroking the skunkette’s lustrous expanse of tail. “We had much, much better things to do.” She traced the junction between the white and purple fur. “Heh. Babs took twice as long to choose her dress as she’ll probably ever wear it – and it’s still only a “definite maybe” she says.”

Fifi relaxed. “But we ‘ave promised Mrs. Bunny to ‘elp with ze laundry.” She unwound the towel, looking for the embroidered name. “Zis will need ze extra soaking now.”

“Better not tell the toons at Wedding Peach you look good enough for me in a towel,” Rhubella laughed. “It’d break their hearts!”

Fifi nodded, examining the towel more closely. “Tres strange. All ze Bunny family zey ‘ave ze name markings. ‘Zis one ‘e ‘as none.”

Rhubella raised an eyebrow. “They teach us about Evidence at Perfecto... mostly how to avoid leaving any.” She picked out a white and a long jet black strand of fur. “This isn’t from either of us... and I haven’t noticed any of Babs’ brothers and sisters with fur quite this shade or this long. They’re all short head-furred toons like Babs. Who have we met here who isn’t in the family, apart from us?”

“Mon Dieu,” Fifi dropped the towel, her eyes wide. “I ‘ave been breathing in ze male skunk pheromones all ze afternoon. And... eet ‘as ze effect.”

Rhubella gave a mock growl, cuddling her. “I noticed. I like the effect. It’s not your fault, Fifi. Nobody knew. I think Shirley would say it’s Karma.”

Fifi hid her head in her paws. “I ‘ave done eet again. My tail eet... ‘as a mind of its own. Ze sight or ze scent of un skunk-‘unk ... and eet goes its own way.”

Rhubella nodded. “I love your tail – I love both of you. I want both of you to be happy ... very happy. Whatever it takes, Fifi.” She cast an eye over the platoon-sized laundry basket. “If you want to break Mrs. Bunny’s record for filing a house with cubs... we’ll arrange it one way or another. I can afford to raise a football team or two.”

Fifi’s eyes went wide, looking up at Rhubella. She smiled... then with a feral purr, pounced on her. It looked as if the rest of the laundry was just going to have to wait.

Back at Acme Looniversity, Babs and Buster were in the echoing basement looking up at the impressive console of the Reality Processor. Babs ran a pink finger along the top of the keyboard, and looked critically at the dust on it. “Buster – are you sure this thing still works?”

Buster shrugged. “Pete said Professor Bugs told him he wouldn’t be using it any more – not that he couldn’t.” He paused. “There’s probably a good reason.”

“Hmm. There’s probably a few good jokes about too many Bugs in the system, but right now I can’t think of any.” Babs hopped up on the operator’s seat. “It’s a bit more involved than my games console.” She reached towards the big red power switch. “Still, let’s fire it up.”

“Whoa, Babs!” Buster’s ears went up in alarm. “We’ve got to script-write this properly! We’ve got to work it so we get Unit Four Plus Two called in – and that’s got to be something extreme. But if we go too far... instead they might decide to...”

Babs spin-changed without leaving her seat; a tricky manoeuvre that only a final-year comedy student could have achieved. She reappeared in a somewhat grimy set of space overalls. “Just dust off and nuke the place from orbit,” she rasped “It’s the only way to be sure.” Changing back, she gazed contemplatively into her buck’s eyes. “Hmm. You just might have a point there.”

Buster pulled out a notebook. “I know it’s a Saturday – but we’ve a plot and script writing exam, right here and now. And if we flunk this one – Plucky might not have time for us to rewrite it.”

Babs’ ears drooped for a second. But then she braced her shoulders, a look of steely determination coming to her violet eyes. “Gotcha. One brilliant, academy award quality Disaster/Horror coming right up!” A white cotton-tail wriggled, as a mischievous look grew on her face. “Just in case things do go too far or take too long – I mean Unit Four Plus Two might be busy in Alaska hunting Yukon Yetis for all we know... better not have this go down in our own backyard. Somewhere a bit nearer Perfecto, Buster?”

“I like the way you think, Babsette.” Buster kissed a pink nose. He picked up the pencil and began to write. “Act One, Scene one... summoned by the toxic aura of the place – a rift in space opens near Perfecto Prep... from somewhere the inhabitants do NOT have adorable toes.”

“Mmm. So how about them having ten-foot claws? Or tentacles?” Babs looked down admiringly at her clean white rabbit feet. “Oh, what the Hay’s Code. Let’s do both!”

“Witnesses to the start of the whole sinister thing are a pair of heroic hares,” Buster mused, as he scribbled notes. “Who the Authorities will certainly want to question.”

“Spot on there, Blue-Boy!” Babs spun-changed into her cheerleading outfit. “Go, go, go! Write, Team Poe!”

“The ground cracks... great claws reach up hungrily at the living .... and are conveniently filmed emerging, the footage going out instantly... to the Authorities,” Buster scribbled faster. “Passing Japanese tourist screams *“our weapons are useless against their arcane technology!”* Toons flee in terror before they are engulfed and devoured in new and indescribable ways far too terrible to storyboard.”

“Except for Danforth Drake, who is,” Babs inserted smoothly. “In 3-D, close-up slow-motion.”

“Except for D...” Buster broke off, and looked at her. “Babs!”

Babs grinned. “Sorreeee. Sometimes I just can’t help myself.”

Buster rolled his eyes in exasperation. “The crack in the film stabilises ... giving time for the world’s defenders to reply. But what will happen next? Only qualified service personnel may attempt to repair the break.” He put down the pen, satisfied.

Babs shook her head. “Have you ever tried calling out a plumber at weekends?”

“Relax, Babs. This time we’re writing the script. How bad can it be?” Buster paused, then his ears drooped. “On second thoughts, don’t answer that.”

Babs cast a critical eye over the notebook. “If you’ve always known this machine was here, why have we never used it before? We needed it a dozen times.”

“Eeeh ... *“With great power comes great responsibility”* – would you believe?” Buster quoted.

Babs shook her head. “Not for a second, Blue-boy.”

Buster shrugged. “Okay. Professor Bugs told me if he ever caught me messing with it again, he’s going to kick my cotton-tail clean out of Acme Loo. For keeps.”

“Hmm. Then you’d better sit back and let me drive. With great power comes – great potential for comedy.” Babs wriggled her eyebrows. “Anyway – if this goes wrong just think of the blooper reel.”

“Are you sure you’re qualified to operate heavy scripting machinery?” Buster looked up as Babs reached towards the power switch again. “Oh well. We know how the start of it goes.” He put his blue paw on top of Babs’ pink one on the switch, squeezing her fur gently.

“We’ll do it together.” Babs propped the script open on the console. “Act one, Scene One ... a blasted heath just outside Perfecto Prep.” She took a deep breath. “Let’s take it from the top.”

Two paws tensed, pulling the stiff red switch down with a heavy clank. Ancient radio valves began to glow deep in the heart of the machine, and mechanical relays clattered as the big screen lit up. The core of the computer retained its original World War Two technology, despite the flashy screen and go-faster stripes later generations had upgraded it with.

“It’s Alive!” Two voices rose blended in manic glee, breaking into high-pitched hysterical laughter “IT’S ALIVE!!!”

Just at that moment, Shirley and Melicent McLoon were standing on a hilltop about a mile from their house, surrounded by arcane equipment. By a staggering coincidence, the baroque towers of Perfecto Prep rose against the skyline not far in the distance.

“First, dear, we must prepare and put ourselves in the right frame of mind.” Melicent opened a sinister-looking casket, from which she unrolled a big tablecloth and the makings of a picnic. “This could take all day. Maybe all night too. We’d better not be distracted by hunger.” She brushed her beehive hairstyle; mother and daughter had quite different styles, but both were fond of what Babs’ fashion magazines called *“The Big Hair Look.”*

Shirley looked at the gothic mahogany picnic hamper. “As in, I could eat a bite knowing poor Plucky’s back there in the hospital with tubes going in him?” Embarrassingly, her stomach rumbled loudly, and a pang of acute hunger stabbed through her. “I totally hate this not being in charge of my own energies, deal.”

“Welcome to the rest of the world, dear.” Melicent raised an eyebrow. “And thinking of which – we have your favourite azuki bean tofu, yes. But you need something else.”

Shirley’s eyes went wide in horror at the sight of a large bowl of live freshwater clams. “Like, gah!”

Melicent sighed. She sat down in front of her daughter, and took both Shirley’s feather-hands in

her own, looking searchingly into Shirley's face. "If you were craving organic seaweed then that's what your body would be telling you it needs. And needs urgently. But you're not. Are you?"

Shirley winced. She recalled how watching Plucky eat a similar meal had turned her stomach not so long ago. The idea was still disgusting, but her stomach had changed its opinion. "That'd make such a mess of my Karma I'd come back myself next time as an oyster – settled next to a sewer outfall! How could I ever clean that off my record?"

"Shirley McLoon," Melicent said firmly, not relaxing her hold on her daughter's hands "I know you could do something a lot worse." She took a deep breath. "Your and Plucky's eggs need the calcium. In six weeks or so you'll be ready to lay your clutch. When they're ready, they'll let you know, believe me. What will happen if the shells are too thin? Think about it. A lot."

Shirley's pupils contracted to pinpricks. "Like, ultimate nightmare," she whispered, and every vestige of colour drained from her already pale form. Briefly her stomach did revolt, but not at the thought or scent of the meal.

Melicent nodded. "And if you could have avoided that and still let it happen – how many incarnations would it take to clean that off your karma? Eat the clams, dear. Think of it as releasing them from their earthly bodies in a good cause, speeding up their progress to a higher form. Acme Lake is quite unpolluted, so I'm sure they were good pure-living molluscs." She released her daughter's hands, and winked. "I have a confession to make. I've always cooked tofu for you because you wanted it, but I hate the stuff. I'll eat this anyway." She emptied the entire bowl of organic azuki bean tofu onto her plate. "Now we shall both eat what we'd rather not."

Shirley sighed, and nodded. She picked up the bowl of living creatures, wondering what her aura would think of it. *If she were here to ask, I'd still be in total control of my bio energies... and this wouldn't be happening to me.* She grimaced, her biologically hard-to-explain teeth manifesting. *If she comes back to a totally carnivorous body and hates it like I would – that'd be cosmic justice.* She braced herself, closed her eyes and swallowed the first small clam whole, feeling it starting to fizz as the shell dissolved in her stomach acids like a shaken-up Weenie Cola. "Eaten alive! Mega gross!"

"All natural, unprocessed and totally fresh whole food," Melicent told her firmly. "In tune with your body's innermost harmonic needs. Think of it that way."

Shirley had never yet won an argument with her mother, and would have been the very last toon to ever suggest trying to win one with one's own natural processes. She shut up and ate, still disturbed beyond measure at how her metabolism craved animal flesh and shell – and at how good it tasted.

Half an hour later, both loons finished up with uncontroversial free-range fruit grown in their organically gardened back yard, and relaxed. Eventually Melicent stood and stretched. "Time to get to work, dear. Hook up the electric pentacle and we'll make a start." She nodded at the high-tension line that crossed the clearing. "You didn't ask why I chose this spot, hmm?"

"Because it's like, some sacred site of totally harmonious ley line earth energies?" Shirley was still trying to salvage some shred of her old balance and certainties.

Her mother laughed. "Ley lines? No – but we've got a two hundred kilovolt main line going overhead and we're going to need to pull a lot of power out of it before anyone stops us!" She winked. "Sling this lead over the cable to the left, and jump over the insulators into the pentacle with me." She opened up one of the books borrowed from the restricted section of the MiskaToonic University.

Shirley could have levitated up as smoothly as an elevator the week before – but she had toned her throwing arm and eye with years of playing basketball and baseball at Acme Loo, and hooked the jumper lead on the cable second try. Leaping over the suddenly incandescent electric wardings of the pentacle, she stood next to her mother who immediately began to chant from the ancient texts.

Inside a minute, Melicent's expression altered. She shut the book, her eyes wide. "I've started opening the Pathways to Outside... but it's like they're opening themselves! As if someone else was doing the same thing right now focussed right on this spot!"

"That's mondo unlikely..." Shirley looked around, her eyes going wide as Toon space began to buckle. "What's the chance of that happening at the same place we're working that kind of spell? Right here, right now? It's like millions to one!"

Mother and daughter loons looked at each other. Both had years of training in Toon physics. There were special QuanToon Physics probability laws governing millions-to-one odds and how very often such odds were beaten. Their voices spoke as one, as a plot hole tore across the landscape far bigger and faster than anyone had planned.

"Uh-ohh..."



## Chapter Six

Colonel Hal Felix had already had a busy day by the time he got back to his office. The tall avian yawned, almost too tired to levitate his cap off his head across to the coat rack. “Fleet-admiral Tarfu just keeps running into things he shouldn’t. He’s been around the Pacific since World War Two – you’d think he’d have learned to stay clear of islands that mysteriously appear like that. Especially if you can see they’re covered in impossibly ancient architecture where the angles don’t add up the way you’d expect.”

“Ummm... yessir!” Schultz, his adjutant, nodded keenly. The small vulture came of a military family where being able to pull a snappy salute was about the limit of their strategic thinking. “Sir – the big red blinky thing is ...” he scratched his head with a feather-hand. “Doing that thing it does.”

“Blinking?” Hal squared his shoulders and crossed to the next room. Unit Four Plus Two was a special unit in many ways. It handled the kind of threat that never showed up on radar screens – in fact most of the entities it encountered did not show up on normal film, which was generally just as well. Putting imaginative, intelligent troops up against such things would just be like throwing them straight into the padded cell and slamming the door; the hideous revelations of the true nature of Toon space and time would do to their minds exactly what a sabot round from a 125mm tank gun did to a Faberge egg at under 90 metres range. Exhaustive and expensive testing had calibrated this to three decimal places.

“Yessir!” Schultz saluted again. His training sergeant had spent three years and the last of his sanity teaching him to get that right, and impressed on him the importance of making the most of it.

In the next room was a rack of equipment wired to racks of arcane equipment that detected trouble of a very specific kind. Exactly how it worked was a secret so highly classified that there was no toon left still serving who had the security clearance to open the lid and look. Next to it was another rack of shielded buttons with the clear warning in faded 1950’s style lettering – “*Do not touch under any circumstances whatsoever*” which Hal had often thought as a fairly pointless thing to have. The detectors were certainly showing a Continuity Break in toon space and time – a Plot Hole that could potentially spread with results far too hideous to ever comprehend.

“Hmm. “*PLODET Confirmed*” it says – Plot Device surface level detonation, continental USA. Azimuth, declination... what’s that direction?” Hal looked at the high-tech display screen – shook his head and pulled out a compass, a road atlas and a piece of string which he lined up squinting out of the window. “Well, what do you know – general location, Acme Acres. actually a few miles past there towards the Looniversity.” His eyebrow rose. “Mayhem and hilarity by tradition, but not mad science. It’s not the MiskaToonic.”

“Nossir!” Schultz took half a minute at full mental throttle trying to decide whether to salute again or not. A plume of steam rose from his feathered head as his brain was stressed to its limit.

Hal stood up, squaring his shoulders. “We’d better take a look. We’ll take Corporal Kaolin and Montmorill, they can push Pvs. Clark and Harris. It’d be good for them to get some action. And better unlock Macree – we might need him.”

“Sir!” Schultz caught the strait-jacket key and headed down towards the basement. He paused, scratching his head. “But sir – he eats people.”

Hal smiled distantly. “Only when ordered. He just thinks of it as whole-food. Besides – have you tasted the official rations they’ve been giving us lately?”

Just as Unit Four Plus Two piled into their top-secret Government helicopters (bright orange and conspicuously labelled “*Oodles of Poodles!*” *Emergency Poodle Express delivery service to the stars!*) Babs and Buster cautiously surveyed the results of their experiment with the Reality Processor.

“Eeehh ... there could be a reason Professor Bugs didn’t want anyone messing with the ol’ keyboard back there.” Buster looked across the valley to where the scenery was getting increasingly ... distorted. The effect was as if space was being crumpled and bent, and at its heart was a terrifying rip in reality that swayed and bobbed like a whirlwind anchored on one spot. There was motion dimly visible through the tear, as if something beyond was looking through into EinsToonian Space with interest.

“A reason. Who knew? Modern keyboards have backspace and delete keys on them.” Babs shaded her eyes at the effect, although it was a mile and a half away. “That thing is giving me a headache just looking at it.”

Buster leafed through the script. “I don’t think we’ll be able to just yell “cut” and end this scene. Better take another look at the Reality Processor – before Professor Bugs works out who done it.”

“Check.” Babs followed him as they crash-tunnelled back towards the Looniversity. “Buster – do we have a plan? Or are we just going to hit buttons randomly and hope it improves the situation?”

“We have a plan!” Buster struck a heroic pose, then scuffed his large rabbit foot in the dust in embarrassment.

“We do? Nice to hear, blue-boy.” Babs looked at Buster’s sweating face. “And that is?”

“Umm – hate to say it, but the plan is the “press random buttons” one.” Buster favoured her with an embarrassed grin.

A pink bunny cocked her head to one side. “Works for me.” Babs shrugged. “What’s the worst that can go wrong?”

“The total, absolute worst?” Buster queried, seeing Babs nod. “We could end up rupturing reality and all be cast out forever into the abyssal void beyond the script.”

“Hmmm.” Babs considered the matter. “But on the bright side – if that happens Professor Bugs wouldn’t have the chance to expel us!”

Buster scratched his head. “They say the end of the Universe is never having to say you’re sorry. Works for me too!” He opened the Looniversity basement door. “And now – let’s start pressing some of those buttons.”

Over in Perfecto Prep, panic reigned. The plot disruption was only four hundred yards from their estate boundary, and it towered over the buildings like a black flame. Students were piling into stretch limos shouting instructions to get out of town, diving into the basements or calling their lawyers to complain.

In the senior student lounge, there was a terrifyingly clear view through the panoramic windows looking out towards Acme Looniversity. One group had not run or hidden – they were dressed in their hastily donned ceremonial robes and stood around a small, solid-looking white marble table.

“We agree, then?” Roderick Rat’s voice seethed in a cold fury. “We know who did this – the Acme Loo-sers. Caught on camera.” The Perfecto security cameras included some with ten centimetre lenses; they had spotted motion nearby and zoomed in on Shirley and her mother hastily dismantling the Electric Pentacle, slinging sinister tomes into their packs and making a rapid exit.

“When we took these Seniors rings last year – I never expected to need these keys and the codes. They’ve never been used before.” Margot Mallard looked at one of the large signet rings they all wore – there were only six in existence, and were handed to the ruling clique of each senior year. Margot, Roderick, Danforth, Hans and Luanne wore theirs – Rhubella had the other, but the system had been designed to function allowing for one casualty or traitor in the group. “Wouldn’t it have been a better deterrent if we’d told the world we can do this?”

“Margot. Honestly.” Danforth’s beak curled as if the word had a bitter taste. “The Perfecto Storm I sent after them at Spring Break was the least of what we can do. There was nothing that could officially come back and bite me.” He unconsciously rubbed his feathered rump; Babs and Buster had punted him on a sub-orbital flight while a Government agent who should have been hauling them off, stood by and grinned. “What we’re going to let loose could ruin us if anyone traces it back – but it’s too late for that.”

“Revenge shot.” Hans von Haflinger snarled. “Like a trapped submarine – we’re not going down with our weapons unfired. We’ll get them even if it takes us out with it. Nuclear round at point-blank range.”

Margot rolled her eyes. “Oh please. You’ve been reading way too many Cold War thrillers. We’re going to fire lies and lawsuits, not torpedoes.” She wished Rhubella was around to give her side of the story – it certainly looked as if she had gone over to Acme Loo wholeheartedly and wanted to eliminate their competition. With a twinge she remembered what Rhubella had told her about falling for the skunk girl. She had laughed it off as “Maskirovka”, the sort of deliberate misinformation they were taught in Dirty Tricks class; for every real Perfecto project there were half a dozen decoys set in motion. Could it possibly be the truth?

“We can still ruin them, whether or not we’re around to see it. Vengeance!” Roderick pressed his ring into a carving on the rim of the white table. “Margot? Are you with us? We need five keys.”

Margot hesitated. But then she cast a glimpse at what was outside. It certainly looked as if Rhubella really had a secret plan – and looking at the results, Margot could understand why the rat had kept it secret from her. Erasing Perfecto from the map before she graduated was a whole different story. “I’m in.” With that she pressed her ring against the slot in the table, where the other four had already put theirs.

As its staff and students constantly reassured each other, at Perfecto they had style. The white marble tabletop had appeared solid, but as five Senior’s rings engaged the centre smoothly rose to

reveal a control panel.

Roderick glanced out of the window at the flickering rent in Toon space. “Hans is right, Margot. It’s time to throw everything we’ve got at them and run. Target, Looniversity – committing!” His paws flew over the keys as a virtual paintbrush made Acme Looniversity look like a place the pirates of Old Tortuga would have turned their noses up from in disgust. “There! Everything uploaded to servers in KazhaksToon and Outer Hinterland – whatever happens to this place now, it can’t stop our revenge. Now – as those Acme low-lives over there would say, let’s make like a banana and split!”

The Seniors headed down to the basement, but not to cower in any shelter. There were a pair of one-way Toon Holes that linked Perfecto with a site on the far side of the world in Eastern Molvania – handy for smuggling and as a last ditch bolt-hole it provided an instant getaway that was hard to beat. In the last emergency holes could be inactivated to prevent anything following them through the rift, in the same way they always had to be rolled up for transport. Whatever toons said about the Perfecto students, they were never accused of doing things by halves.

Several miles past the Looniversity and out of sight of the alarming developments at Perfecto, the city of Acme Acres was going about its regular business. No calls of alarm were heard on the streets or by its media; although Perfecto was evacuating they would not be spreading panic which might clog up the streets, airport or their other getaway routes.

The Freleng Memorial Hospital was a tall grey stone and concrete building on the banks of the river, usually concerned with heads stuck in cooking pans, prising bear traps off hikers or retrieving bowling balls accidentally swallowed by hungry toons mistaking them for very hard watermelons. Though various laws of physics and biology protected most citizens from permanent harm in the cause of comic duty, accidents could happen. A toon who could walk away dazed from a ten tonne safe falling on them was still prone to non-comic injuries. And while sending out your astral form on a rescue mission with no regard for keeping your body ticking over was ironic, it was rarely regarded as funny.

On the top floor, Mary Melody was just leaving Plucky’s hospital ward where she had spent the past two hours keeping vigil on the mallard’s unoccupied body with Jaggi beside her. She paused, a worried expression sweeping over her. “Jaggi – did you think Plucky was looking – a bit well, faded? Especially just before we left?”

The tall zebra thought hard, then sighed. “I think he is. They warned us this might happen. When he went after Shirley’s aura out there, he took every drop of fuel with him. Not even enough left behind to run a pilot light.”

“Or burn a candle in the window to guide him home again.” Mary did not have a tail or ears that could droop, but her expression gave the same effect. “I hope Shirley and her mother can come up with something – because he’s running out of time.”

Behind them was a gasp. They turned – Jaggi’s ears were sharp as befitted an Action Adventure Toon, but someone had been keeping extremely still.

Maria Mandarin was a waterfowl like Shirley in that they both had golden-yellow head feathers, but there the resemblance ended. Her main feathers were a delicate light green, and her figure spoke of mammal relatives somewhere in her recent ancestry. Neither did she have Shirley’s flashing gaze or haughty self-confidence – right now Maria’s eyes were red-rimmed with tears.

“It’s true? I’d heard the doctors can’t do anything but watch him fade out.” Maria looked towards the closed ward door. “Do you think they’d let me sit with him?”

“I think so. My parents work here. They’ve told me it can help a comatose Toon – though that’s not what’s wrong with Plucky.” Mary remembered a scene from just before their Spring Break, with Maria and Plucky sitting outside the Looniversity cafeteria sharing a picnic on the sunlit grass. She remembered hearing Maria laugh at one of Plucky’s jokes, and tried hard to recall if Shirley had ever done that in all their years at Looniversity. She did recall the few occasions where Shirley had worn formal gowns, they had been discreetly padded to hint at a shape the loon would never have. Pure-strain avians often got upset when that subject was raised, let alone the other very basic features they had inherited from reptile ancestors.

“I know it’s not really him in there – just his flesh and feathers.” Maria closed her eyes. “And I know he’s gone out to try and bring Miss McLoon’s powers back – even when he knew his chances of ever getting back weren’t good. That’s just like Plucky.”

Mary and Jaggi exchanged glances. The pair had no trace of psychic ability, but they had come to know each other’s thoughts quite well regardless. The thought they were sharing was something on the lines of *Plucky always wanted a girl to hero-worship him. He found one after all these years – just in*

*time for Shirley to take him away...*

Mary cleared her throat. “I know everyone’s doing all they can. But going after Plucky out there is something only a very few Toons can do – and none around here.”

Maria squared her shoulders. “He gave me my self-confidence – he showed me there was nothing I couldn’t try for. He even taught me to clog-dance! I haven’t Miss McLoon’s powers, but somewhere out there are toons who have. And the one thing I have is money.” Her shoulders drooped. “I never told Plucky how much. I was afraid it might... put him off.”

Mary and Jaggi exchanged another glance. Fate had meant these two green fowl to be together. Maria had the looks a pure-strain avian such as Shirley never would, she had the kind of wealth Plucky hungered after and although she had no unworldly powers, she would not have used them to scorch Plucky’s tail feathers even if she had.

Maria took a deep breath. “I’ll be in there by his side if they’ll let me in – but I’ll be busy phoning people who know people,” she said “There are talented toons out there. If anyone can bring him home, the money won’t matter.” She hesitated. “I know he’s not coming back for me. But as long as he comes back – that’s all that matters.”

Mary and Jaggi watched as she entered the ward and started to talk with the nursing staff, before heading out. As the lift door closed leaving them alone, Mary let out the breath she had been holding.

“When Shirley said her karma was at an all-time low for taking Plucky away from Maria – even though she knew what destiny had saved up for those two...” Mary pulled a face. “I know Shirley doesn’t lie. But I thought she had to be exaggerating.”

“She wasn’t.” Jaggi’s ears were down as they walked out of the building hand in hoof. “But I don’t see what we can do about it. If there’s a jungle to be hacked through or a chandelier to be swung from, I’m up for that. Shoji anime plotlines aren’t my thing.”

“Me neither.” Mary shook her head. “Apart from Shirley – trying to find a psychic explorer in Acme Acres feels like looking for a computer hacker in an Amish village.” Reminded by that idea, she touched her cap and the teleprompter display swung down as she linked to the news channels. Suddenly she stopped. “Jaggi! There’s something happening out Eastwards – past the Looniversity. Some kind of unearthly storm. People are phoning the Acme Gazette about it.”

“They’re not the only folk looking that way.” For the past half minute Jaggi had heard the sound of helicopters. He pointed up to the four large orange painted transport helicopters that had emerged from behind the buildings. “It looks like a very well-equipped commercial company, this ‘*Oodles of Poodles*’, if that’s who they really are.” He paused, contemplating. In a Toon California, it was not impossible that film studios would suddenly need hundreds of poodles delivered to remote shooting locations with impossibly tight deadlines. “Hold on. I know that model of helicopter. Those are WhirlyBurd SK3s – the SK2 model is on sale to the civilian market but the SK3 isn’t!”

“There goes the cavalry, then?” Mary blinked.

“I bet. But they’re not going in waving the flags. This is someone smart and discreet – you can’t hide up there but a dull enough cover story and people won’t look twice at you.” Jaggi shaded his eyes, his gaze following the formation.

“I think you’re ready for the Action Toon Props 701 exam already.” Mary hugged her mate fiercely, looking up at the helicopters. “They’re heading that way, all right. Let’s see what all the fuss is about.”

“The last time anything went so out of control, it ended up sending property values plummeting across the whole of Atlantis,” Melicent McLoon did not seem particularly alarmed as she sat on a knoll half a mile away from the rupture she had helped form. “And a little later, Atlantis went plummeting down to join them.”

Shirley was looking on in horror, her feathers ruffled. Right now she was glad to be without her aura; if the “totally heavy vibes” had been a sound they would be rattling her wishbone without needing her ears. She was sure that her aura could have seen far too much of what seemed to be clawing at the rupture from the other side. “Like, gah? What have we done?”

“Hmm.” Melicent leafed through one of the ancient books. Any practitioner of high-energy sorcery who was easily rattled was soon an ex-practitioner, and probably a snack for something nineteen percent too indescribable to storyboard. “That’s puzzling. We didn’t do all that. Some of those effects aren’t even in the book. It looks like something more high-tech is involved. If we knew who, it might help.”

“And here’s some more mondo eco-unfriendly high tech, noise and air pollution fer sure.”

Shirley pointed towards four bright orange helicopters that were heading straight towards them from the West. Her feathers drooped. “I don’t need my aura to predict that’s Unit Four Plus Two arriving – and they are going to be like major un-harmonious when they find out what we’ve done to call them.”

“Brace up, dear – because I can tell someone isn’t going to wait for them to land to have a word with us about that.” Melicent stood up, smoothing her feathers and brushing the dust off.

Precisely on cue, the air shimmered and the imposing golden aura of Hal Fenix stood before them. He raised an ethereal eyebrow, looking at the mother and daughter loons and then at the towering split in Toon space and time. Both loons felt themselves being discreetly scanned, then heard his thought in their heads.

*Miss McLoon – and Miss McLoon senior – I would normally say it’s a pleasure to see you. But first – is there something you want to tell me about our little problem here?*

Shirley gulped. She stood up straight, and looked up at the phoenix. “This totally wasn’t the way I’d planned it. It started like this ...”

By the time Jaggi drove up in the Most\_terrain Vehicle he had borrowed from the Action Adventure props department, four helicopters had landed and their occupants were getting busy deploying mobile equipment. Unlike Acme Looniversity, it seemed that Unit Four Plus Two had the budget to run genuine All-terrain vehicles.

“Hmm.” Jaggi handed Mary Melody the binoculars as their advanced tricycle halted in cover, handlebars-down behind a convenient ridge two hundred yards away. “Who do we know who’s tall, imposing, feathered and has a squad of buzzard troopers who’d have Concord Condor as their Intelligence Officer?”

“Colonel Fenix! We only met him once – but Babs and Shirley told me all about him.” Mary shuddered as she looked towards the rift, then switched her gaze back to the tall phoenix who was animatedly talking with Shirley and her mother. “He’s like a hospital consultant – they only call him in on special cases. Do you know what that – rip is?”

The zebra’s darker parts went briefly pale. “I know the kind of thing. In Action Adventure class, when we see that kind of event we’re given two options. Call in someone professional with fancy robes and high-power artefacts to look at it – or run.”

“How far? We’ve plenty of fuel in the tank still.” In her journalism classes Mary had often been told that a bold reporter was a successful one – but one who never survived to hand in her copy was not.

Jaggi’s ears went down. “To safety? We’d need enough to take us to orbit. And with something like that we’re recommended to head for orbit of a different planet entirely.”

Mary took a deep breath. “Then we’ve nothing to lose in heading down and seeing if we can help. I expect the professionals’ fancy robes have evolved into uniforms these days. The artefacts they’d bring along to tackle something like this – should be worth seeing in action.”

“Right-o. Hang on.” Jaggi fired up the engine of the Most\_terrain Vehicle, and they rolled over the ridgeline. In a minute they were making their re-introductions to Colonel Fenix,

“Well, now.” Hal Fenix had joined his aura form, and was studying some instruments so Classified that they appeared as large blacked-out squares of film to the other toons. “Introductions are in order. That rift doesn’t seem to be growing – and we won’t need to call Immigration unless some of the folk from the far side come over to party.” His beak flashed in an unexpected grin; like most toon birds he both had teeth and not, in a Schrodinger’s Cat styled paradox. Whenever anyone actually looked for them, he had only a plain avian beak. He indicated two vacant-looking buzzards. “Corporals Kaolin and Montmorill, Miss Shirley met them at the coast I recall. This is Schultz, my adjutant – he makes the best cup of coffee in the entire Abnatural Forces unit.”

The vulture nodded enthusiastically. “Umm, yessir! They didn’t give me these fourth Lieutenant’s bars for nuthin’ !”

“Fourth Lieutenant? Is there such a rank?” Mary blinked, whispering to Jaggi “Isn’t that about the level of second assistant dog-catcher in a one-horse town with no dog?”

“And this is Macree. I hope you’ll excuse his lack of conversation – he has to stay focussed.” Hal gestured towards a tall mink who was staring off into the distance, teeth bared and an expression of stark rage locked on his features. “Don’t worry if he laughs or screams a bit. It’s entirely normal for him. And he never does it when we need to keep quiet. The other two, Pvs. Clark and Harris – their bodies can stay in the heli. No point in bringing them out.”

“Bodies?” Jaggi queried “You’ve taken casualties already?”

Hal raised an eyebrow, and gave an equivocal gesture with his feather-hand. “Yes and no. Their injuries happened quite awhile ago. They’re still active team members, in their way.”

“There are two presences here you might not see.” Melicent McLoon put in, “their bodies are alive, but shut down. Perhaps permanently.” She closed her eyes and spoke a word that was ancient when Gertie the trained dinosaur was a young toon, and two glowing figures materialised. One was a long-furred hound of the retriever type, and the other a wild goose. Both seemed slightly embarrassed at being rendered visible, as if caught in the shower unexpectedly.

“You mean they’re – like Plucky is now?” Mary queried.

“In a way. If they headed out too far away from their bodies they would be, soon enough. Which is why we have to bring them along.” Hal nodded towards the helicopters. “Pvs. Isn’t short for “Privates”, by the way.”

“I know what it stands for.” Mary Melody would have had great difficulty turning pale, but she tried. “Permanent Vegetative State. My parents are in the medical profession.”

The glowing goose shape held up a sign in neon ectoplasm reading “*being declared brain-dead won’t get you out of this unit!*” His translucent feathers ruffled as he pointed at the two buzzards, before the sign updated to “*And they’re corporals! They got promoted. We didn’t.*”

Hal looked slightly embarrassed. “Private Clark has a point, I’m afraid. I’ve put him in for promotion twice a year, but Army regulations say he has to sign the papers to get any. That’s red tape for you. He was a psychic when he joined, and since the accident – he’s got far more powerful. It’s like a blind toon developing better hearing.”

“Or one born with no morals, having to go into politics.” Mary nodded.

“Sad but true. The one psychic talent he hasn’t got yet is telekinesis, or he could sign the forms even the way he is. And now – let’s cut to the chase. Clark! Harris! You get on the other etheric trail of what caused this – the one that doesn’t lead to the McLoon family. We’ll need all the threads if we’re going to untangle this.” Hal waved the slaving mink forwards. “Macree! You follow on the ground. Find and hold, like last time. But this time, don’t eat anyone. Got that?”

The mink saluted smartly, threw his head back and howled with peals of manic laughter, before heading off at a lope over the horizon following the two glowing shapes.

“Don’t be alarmed. It’s just something he does.” Hal winked.

“I think the phrase is “*thank god he’s on our side*”” Jaggi lowered an ear.

“Like, the only deity you’d thank for that one is Kali, destroyer of worlds.” Shirley shivered. “Or one of those way uncool Aztec ones that like toon sacrifices for lunch. Mondo bad vibes!”

Hal studied his finger-feathers. “Thinking of which – you made a fair stab at the Kali profession yourself. Now, I know why you did it but – I’ve been up thirty hours already and I could have done without this right now!”

Shirley looked abashed, a rare sight on the loon. “I’m like totally sorry. But – can you help? You’re like our last hope?”

“Hers and Plucky’s both.” Mary put in. “He’s fading out.”

“And I can tell from here why that’s even more important than it might be. Congratulations on the happy news, Miss Shirley.” Hal nodded towards her. “Nobody should have to sit on a clutch of eggs all on her own. We’ll do what we can to bring Mister Plucky Duck back for you.”

“But if you don’t get Plucky back there won’t be any eggs to...” Mary broke off, seeing Shirley’s furious blush, her finger-hands instinctively lowered protectively to her midriff. “Shirley? You’re ...”

The loon nodded, for a few seconds embarrassed beyond words. “Umm, I’ll just say it was karma, and it was meant to be, ‘kay?”

“That and the fact that when my daughter lost her powers, controlling her biological energies went too.” Melicent winked. “And – getting four hot meals of duck a day, is sure to spoil anyone’s girlish figure.”

“Mother!” Shirley’s beak opened wide in outrage.

“And soon-to-be grandmother, thanks to you.” Melicent looked quite pleased at the prospect.

“Now - I believe you had a proposition that might make the good Colonel here a little less annoyed?”

“The younger Miss McLoon is thinking that today is really not her day.” Hal looked up at the sky innocently. “Yes, if she regains her powers, after graduation I’d be pleased to offer her a job. And no, ten weeks of boot-camp, pack-drill and parades will not be required before starting with us. For which I don’t need to scan her again to know she’s supremely grateful.”

“I couldn’t see Shirley in the uniform, myself,” Jaggi commented, trying to keep a straight face. “I suppose you could do a natural fabric tie-dye in earth tones and call it camouflage, though.”

Mary frowned. “Remember when we met on Spring Break? Plucky was plain dead against the idea of Shirley joining up. But if this doesn’t work then he’ll be ... plain dead.”

Shirley’s already pale form turned even paler. “I’ve never, like, begged anyone for anything, ‘kay? My aura is totally against me writing spiritual blank cheques. Bring him home and you’ve totally got mine.” She bowed her head.

Hal gestured towards the flickering rift in reality. “We’ll see what the bill for fixing that is, before I take that cheque.” The phoenix gave a brief burst of a grin. “But then I’ll go and look for two lost auras. After all – it’s no good getting the computer and not the power supply it likes to plug into.”

“Yes, my daughter found out just this year just how to extract psychic energies,” Melicent’s eyes sparkled with mischievous light. “As a friend of hers said, “it takes two to tantric.””

“Mother!” Shirley squawked in outrage.

“I see why Shirley never talked much about her mother,” Mary whispered.